A Happier Year (Near About)

by Kimbeen

Summary

THE THRILLING CONCLUSION! aka Chapter-fic sequel to the canon book, or previous Alec fic, all from Maurice PoV this time. Just cries out for a speculative continuation does it not?
Parenthesised addition, or qualifier, really, was Alec's idea – as unconventional and extraneous ideas tend to be – and when I registered my objection, not least that it negated the punchiness of the title, and moreover was verging on untruth – wouldn't he agree, please, that it was a happier year? And Alec allowed that it was, much happier, the happiest: but also that it wasn't quite a year. The interim fell short of the twelvemonth; though we weren't to realize exactly that at the time. 'War' is a certainty; 'when' is not.

It occurs however that Alec was just trying – and, as usual, succeeding – to get the last word in. I could have argued that it mattered not which of us had the final say, words-wise, because this isn't my story, it's ours – and so Alec would rejoin, if it doesn't matter, then it might as well be him, mightn't it? Here I admit defeat – the sweetest, most winning defeat there can be, hardly one at all. I live life now with my woes in miniature. So it's no great trial to remember how this wonderment came about: I'd remember it carefully daily if I wasn't so busy still living it. But I do want to account for everything, dream-like and barely believable, because if I don't, obstinate Alec is sure to recall things with deliberate dissemblance.

Penge Estate, Wiltshire, Aug 30 1913

Beside the lake beneath the trees, we two stood studying the bobbing row-boat we had just clumsily disembarked. Arms aching and clothes slightly damp, we had made it to the far eastern shore and now were left in something of a quandary over the boat, the rope of which Alec was holding with nothing to tie it to, for we had missed the promised wooden landing dock by some several yards; enough to make it indiscernible in the lightening dawn, at any rate. For all we had broken ties with Society, the Establishment, and most certainly Clive Durham: it still seemed wrong, somehow, and difficult, to let the boat drift away over the water. Ridiculous – yes! But something we were of one mind about. That in itself enshrined its importance.

“It's not exactly illegal, borrowing a boat, and – and using it.” Alec drew the rope as the rower was starting to drift away, and he tugged it back like the bridle of a prancing horse.

“It's not exactly borrowing if we don't return it,” I observed, all the same thinking, with a wan smile, that we were hardly the most predisposed pair to be embarking upon the wild and shameless life of outlaws, if we could hardly bring ourselves to abandon a boat that was barely used and that we
would not in any case be keeping for our own capital gain.

“We could just sort of – kick it – thrust it back from whence it came, out onto the water, like a Viking Funeral,” I suggested. Alec was derisive. His snort said so.

“Nah.. we should leav' it here, really, someone'll come across it eventual’... look there, we'll tie it to that tree – here take the rope, I'll pull her over .” And he proceeded down into the muddy shore and began dragging the boat over to a blackthorn, rather pitiably small, but still, some effort is half the achievement – or some such. For my part I picked my way over to the tree, as Alec huffed and puffed and sloshed, tossing his head at me: “Phew – tie her up now, that'll do it.”

“Alright.” This I felt I could manage, and was rather laboriously winding the rope around the trunk of the tree, bent awkwardly, when Alec poked his head down beside mine, his hands on his knees.

“What's that you're doing? Don't yer know any proper sailing knots?”

“No...”

“And yer a rower.”

I displayed my own affront. “Well, I was never responsible for docking the dashed thing – look it's fine! It'll stay... Damnation!!”

“Here,” said trusty old Alec. “Lemme – pass us the far end -” Wrapping and winding and looping and tightening, he produced what looked like a passably strong knot. How could I judge?!

How heroic he was. I said: “Aren't you worldly”, warmly.

Standing, satisfied, Alec was flippant. “Learned it in't scouts – well, from the old Scout Periodical that were kep' at school. None of us were actually part of them, couldn't afford the subs..”

I cracked a knuckle. Alec turned from the lake and beckoned me with a nod again, and I followed him like a puppy. To say my world was upside down would be inaccurate. I was no longer in my world at all but a brand new one; the chilly morning air fresh and foreign. In this circumstance it was
a blessed relief to have someone else, someone benevolent and bright, to lead the way.

Walking through the woods, Alec knew exactly where to go, where to pass through easiest, sanguine and sensible, pointing out various trees to me and I received the information enthusiastically, giddily, repeating the names, vowing to remember. I took his arm and asked about this and that, oh by now I was utterly besotted – with him, with the woods, the sky the air the nature the world.

Leaves crunched underfoot; then we'd tiptoe carefully through mud.

“Hadn't you want to tuck in your slacks.. they's'll get right filthy,” said Alec, as he tried to guide me over a shallow stream. It's always been my habit, much to my mother's ire, and to the annoyance of anyone I happen to walk with, really, to pay absolutely no attention to puddles and to splash clumsily straight through them. Here I slipped and slid on the stepping stones carelessly, laughing, and Alec, holding my arm, grunted but said nothing – oh, well he said plenty, but in terms of criticism he held his tongue.

“Isn't it beautiful out here!” I said, meaning it as I took in the vast vista of swaying branches and fluttering leaves and dripping rainwater and clumps of bushes and reeds, and breathing deeply the lily scented air, at least it might have been lilies, flowers in any case and immeasurably sweet.

Alec shrugged. “Yeh,” he acknowledged, without looking. Clearly the outdoors did not mystify him – it being his natural environment. How enchanting.

Outdoors... is it this I have been in love with, of a fashion, all along? I remembered George, the organic innocence; I thought of Clive, and our day out on the motor-bike, how the scenery and the grass, the river, the shadows and the peace were more than just a background but somehow a third lover in our company.

Plunging my foot down an unseen rabbit-hole I pitched forward, swore and steadied myself on Alec, who turned and held my arm, “Alright?”

“Ee-yes, perfectly, just owch -” for I had twisted my ankle rather, and affected a smile of bravery although it was a trifle painful as I hobbled onward.

“They's a bleddy nuisance ain’t they – rabbits. No redeeming qualities – I tell you they can't do anything but it's wrong,” said Alec, and he stood close. “Ere, lean on me, so, that's the way...” And we continued. Even the pain was less than it might have been. I felt as if I was constantly in a warm
Quite a walk to the next village though – ten mile’, Alec told me, and wondered if I wanted to rest a while? What with my foot...

“No! No, I'm tiptop. Absolutely. Can't feel a thing. Let's carry on... Ten miles, that's not at all far.” Easy for me to say of course as I leaned heavily on his shoulder, but he didn't appear to mind. Truthfully I was terrified of the slightest hitch or problem manifesting, as if the tiniest inclination would cause Alec to startle and take off like a bird from a garden. He came into my life so suddenly, he could leave it just as easily! Taking my heart – ripping it out warm and wet and fleshful – along with him!

As I stared at the short, dark hair at the back of his neck, I thought I must have been dreaming.

Alec himself was quiet. Regret? Escaping me? Who knew what thoughts occupied him.. He was always very forthcoming on what he was thinking though. I sought assurance.

“Are you quite alright?” At this he turned, smiled: “Oh... yeh! Bloomin’!”

Hm, maybe a more leading question... “What are you thinking?”

He bit a red, ravished thumbnail. “More'n thinking. Planning – or, trying to. I thinks you's most probably dreaming -” He tapped a finger on my chest. “But you said it thysel', didn't you? 'We must make plans.'”

When did I say that? I wondered – oh! In the hotel room, that morning, wonderful, awful morning. How I tried to instigate our grasping, together, the opportunity afforded to us, the life we were meant to live, and Alec tried to destroy it with good sense. More so than I! It was fear, not sense, that had sent me fleeing from those letters of his.

“We must indeed! So what are our plans?” I asked.

“Foremost, git out of this here demesne. I'll not relax we're still in Durham country.”
That hadn't occurred to me... by now we'd been walking companionably for two hours or more, and were still on Clive's property? Looking around, I felt as detached from it – and from him – as Alec must. All this land – quite a spread. And yet Clive was in dire straights? Land isn't lucrative as it used to be I suppose, what with feudalism being dead. Please don't tell me Clive was so keen on his governmental position, not for power, or social comfort, but for money!

My foot improving by degrees – the old 'walk it off' maxim proving true – I ran to follow Alec; not easy when he was beating a path!

Panting, I replied. “I told you – there's no panic on that front – legal repercussions, that sort of thing..” Yet.

“I'm not particular' worried about that; it's what if Old Durham realizes I'm stealing away his lover, he's liable to send out a posse.”

I reddened for several reasons.

“Everyone's arter me!” Alec complained. He stopped and whirled and stood close to me, and I travelled further along the spectrum to crimson. He went on, “Though confessionally, that's me -” - he tapped his head - “own bleddy imagination. For all I know, Ma, Da, Fred and any other Scudder has shrugged off my dodging the boat as just another of my hare-brained stunts.”

“Clive described my running off into the sunset with you in similar terms.”

Alec's disarming, crooked, gap-toothed smile. “T'isn't. Lookee. It's sun-rise, now; so he's wrong.” All wrong Alec, all wrong for me just as you are all right!

He added as we strode onwards and upwards: “Though it'll be wigs on the green if we ever come across him again!”

Legs wet and sodden, I still struggled to keep up with Alec, even although he was walking carefully just ahead of me, picking his steps and pushing back briars until I passed. Perhaps his nimbleness was just due to his complete and clear acclimatization to this environment – the heavily wooded acreage, with trees, I learned, of all makes and sizes, and the shadowy, rough, untended undergrowth. Only signs of civilization was the odd ivy-clad, clearly out-of-use low stone wall, or pillar, possibly from the times of the Romans, one should think, if one was given over to romantic (!) fancy, which one was.
Alec, I was sure, couldn't possibly know simply every nook and cranny of the estate? Yet he knew just where to lead us, his haversack over his shoulder and gun over an elbow; my coat tucked under my arm. Loafers were by now a write-off, but all I was concerned with was them lasting the journey, keeping pace with him.

Coming to a high, wild-looking hedgerow, which I hoped heralded a road on the other side, and the end of our walking journey, Alec meanwhile located a stile, beat back a tangle of nettles and briars, before hopping across it smartly and turning to extend his hand to me.

Well! Of course I could have crossed it easily on my own, if I had to, but it was a lot nicer, having a strong sturdy arm to brace onto, and I did in fact, stumble on a cursed rusted iron bracket as I descended, but Alec – anticipating my ineptitude, rather – hung onto me and tugged me leftwards. “Better get a wriggle on, looks like rain.” It did indeed and the trees themselves dripped down more leftover rainwater onto us, circling into puddles on the – mercy! - path.

Still holding hands, even without the need or subterfuge of physical assistance, Alec waved his left one towards a dung-heap we were passing on the right. “How’d I know we were heading to a nice walkable bit? See – there’s where they congregate, and – well, everything.”

“They?” I said.

“This is a deer path – fair few of ’em loping round the woods. Handy; the deers will always take the comfy route!”

Looking down, I rather marvelled. “The deer make their own path?!”

Alec smiled. “Ee.. not with a shovel and pick-axe, love. Just from use, like. Beat a path. They wend they’s way about the place, taking the same way ever’ time, ground gits wore down.” He indicated. “Bunny paths too – see? Daft buggers, don’t they realize they's leading you right to their front door!”

... Even the habits of rabbits took on a romantic hue, listening to Alec yammering on, tripping over his words as he recommended the correct bullets for the smaller game, and gear to be wearing, (fundamentally, not the clothes I had been wearing when out with Archie London that rainy day after my birthday), and differentiating between the equipment necessary for fresh versus salt-water fishing.

Damp air felt so sweet and delicious on one's face, nose, rustling hair.. Alec's hand was damp too,
whether from exertion or the rain I knew not. As we walked, well, squished really, along the edge of the deer-park with the overgrown hedge to our left now, I ghosted the free fingers of my right hand along the damp, puffy moss on the tree-trunks we were passing. Alec on one hand, soft wet moss on the other, the sweet fragrant meadow of dawn and dew… I inhaled mightily, I was compelled to react to Nature. Perhaps I could have unfiled a quotation, some Wordsworth, or even more fanciful Blake… Clive would know. But would he have felt to know? Yes – but he’d not let on. Anyhow that’s all in the past – now I felt like I was finally in the present.

“Marvellous, it is, just perfectly marvellous..”

Alec looked over. “Eh?”

I continued my appraisal. “The – trees, the air, the outdoors.. Wouldn't it be an absolute pip if we could stay here, undisturbed, just us, forever?”

Alec laughed. “Indeed it would but it'd be a mighty short-ish 'forever' wi'no means nor food nor place to kip... You's quite the dream-boat, h'ain't you? Right given over to speculating – hey?”

“Well I know how to do so with money, but not – something important, like – like us, what we are now.” Was there a word for what we were now? The Most Reverend would have plenty of them. Or Mother. Or Dr. Barry...

“Keep them ideas floating,” said Alec. “Happen we'll have to make many's the plan and just pick the best of a bad bunch.” Squeezed my hand as he said so, take the sting out. He needn't have. I knew that anyway, any where we ended up couldn't possibly be bad, with us there together. But I did give myself over to fancy, now that I had him, Alec, my friend, all to myself to drink in thoroughly, water the desert of the last twenty-four years, live with him and for him, only him. A blessed relief, given the way my life had lately been stagnating, I was eager as could be to escape into the country, leave my old life wholly behind, it was no sacrifice at all really. I'd inherited the earth – what had brought me thus? Hardly meekness but maybe – a chastised and repressed soul harkens a kind of reticence. God knows, that certainly characterized Clive and I's relationship!

Watching Alec carefully – he's not how Blake would have described his Angels. Not the most refined-looking earthly lover you could imagine; rugged yes, and yet not careworn – tangled, unkempt hair, dull-coloured, patched and in places threadbare clothes, and yet deep dark eyes, rich in majesty, a crooked grin so charming and disarming, warm hands, weepingly strong and desirable body.

And here – and here he'd come out of nowhere, and saved me. Why? Troubled, I just couldn't
conjure up a reason so I deliberately walked too near to him, to jog his shoulder and get his attention. “Hoi! Watch it!”

“Is it possible, do you think, Alec? Making a life, living independently, outside Society, in the Greenwood?”

“Anything’s possible.. apparently,” he said, with a pointed look at our joined hands. I swung them and continued on my theme. “Joking apart.. how does one live off the land? What’s the – what’s the industrial impetus?”

“Out in the woods?”

“But of course! You're right. Wood. It would be lumber, of course. Forestry. Production.” Casting my gaze at the expanse of trees around us, I wondered about reconciling the beauty and poetry of Nature with the altogether more pragmatic business of living – that is, staying alive.

“Thinking of setting up shop?” Alec asked.

“It was a wild notion I had.” That had seemed so attainable – until push had so suddenly come to shove...”

“As good an idea as any... You'd not need to don the bowler ever' morn anyroad!”

I pressed. “Wouldn't it be quite wonderfully peaceful? Out in the midst of nature, the most basic fundamentals and functions of true life?”

“It'd be ruddy cold, is what.”

I let it drop; wasn't getting any more traction with my silly dreams with Alec than I had with Lasker-Jones. Alec noticed this, perhaps: “Still! 'Tis no harm at all to be mulling these things over – eh? Man needs means, don't he? Enough to be getting along with, anyway...” He reached over and snapped a twig off of a passing tree. “Just so happens I did woodwork at school – actually.”

This seemed to me so fortuitous, so loaded with fate and again I was struck with amazement, the way
all my longings and dreams and wild plans – once I had tried to force them on the unwilling persona
of Clive – were brimming forth naturally, casually from Alec. Could I have wished him into
existence?? He's real enough, so real, achingly so... his warm flesh, so imperative to my fantasies.

Alec looked up at the sun, then the ground, then around. “Alright.. I think we're coming to the end of
the – ah, yeh – there it be – see? Main road. Well, less rough, anyway. If we're quiet, we can slip
through the village – if you could call it that! Makes old Osmington look bustlin' – and make for the
train station well in time for the earliest.”

“Oh – the train?”

“Well, fer the city. London. You need to go home, I'm guessing? You weren't as aware and prepare'
as I – I’ve got my essentials,” and he patted his shoulder bag, the contents of which I was painfully
privy to – little more than tobacco, handkerchiefs, cartridges, empty chocolate wrappers, and, in the
spirit of some irony, his ticket to the Argentine, lately expired.

A trifle flustered was I, seeing as – here I was, in the forest with the rustling leaves and still steady
rain drips, with this wonderful expectant man – man!! - and I had to make an effort to reconcile this
incredible new reality with the place I left behind forever yesterday morning, though I wasn't quite to
know at the time, as I put on my leisure-gear and pulled the door smartly behind me and strode
briskly off to get a cab to the docks. Did I know?

Alec was right, of course; if we were to make a clean break from our old lives in order to forge a
mutual one anew, it was necessary for me to take whatever I needed with me at this early stage so I
need never go back, look back.

“Ah, yes indeed,” I said, “London. Must wrap up all the loose ends..” Alec smiled and squeezed my
hand; meanwhile the recently slumbering sensible part of my brain awoke and screamed Fool!!
Sweet naivety! Are you quite out of your mind?? My life entire – a series of loose ends? Yes, that
needed to be neatly snipped, not tied.
road up to the minuscule 'train station' – really a mere platform appearing briefly along the tracks. It might well have given Goldsmith pause, and reconsider was his abandoned Auburn really such a tragedy or a natural development in human habitation! Here in 'Rathborne-in-Clanberry' there were grass fronds blowing gently out of broken windowpanes.

“There's life,” said Alec, “So let's be stealthy.” Stopping, turning, smiling, and continuing, “Not that anyone here is likely to share a knitting circle wiv' anyone in your ha-quaintance.. although -” and thoughtful: “I think I've a second cousin here somewhere..”

“Isn't that – listen! The train! Jolly good, we're early.”

Alec cocked his right ear round clumsily. “Aye! Yeh, we've bags of time – no wait, oh, shit, nearer than I thought – come on!!” Most agreeably grabbing my hand again, we raced to the platform where Alec actually had to flag down the train, it for all the world a cab. “OR,” * pant * * pant * “ - it'd run straight on..” Unsurprising. Yet there we were! On time! Every random unrelated circumstance and occurrence were contriving to unravel the perfect life before us, like a red carpet unrolling and beckoning.

Steam engulfed us as we slowed down our racing, coughing; Alec grabbed a door (there was no porter) and stepped back to hold it open for me. So for the first time on our journey I led the way – only because Alec directed me to do so. So I'll not admit to feeling too big-headed.

In the corridor I panted for breath, then nearly leaped out of my skin when Alec touched me gently on the backside, telling me to find us a spot; a feat which proved surprisingly difficult, seeing as one could only assume that the train, in making for the Metrop, had began its pre-dawn journey deep in the Wiltshire wilderness. But there was a fair smattering of people spread out, one to every carriage almost, we might have to share but I was damned if I'd be separated from Alec now.. I turned to tell him so but he wasn't there.

“Hullo, Alec..?” The train lurched into moving and my stomach lurched also with (Irrational! Impossible!) fear that I’d been abandoned, he’d scarpered, planted me kindly on the way back home where I belonged, and then disappeared.. I fought down panic, which was physically attempting to eject itself from my body via my throat; I opened a window and stuck out my head; was that a figure on the platform, in the thick grey eye-stinging smoke -

“There's a space,” and there he was, tickets in hand, nodding towards a booth, re-appeared again, like a ghost or an imp, in fact there's always been something not strictly human about him; I called it an angelic purity, but now – I wouldn't quite write that in ink!
Agreeing with my eyes, I followed him to a couple of seats across from a gentleman and a lady, both asleep but carefully leaning away from each other so clearly not a couple. Alec let me have the window seat, then sat down much, much closer to me than was acceptable.

It wasn't as though we had heaps of luggage, or a crowded compartment to justify this intimate proximity; but there is an air of drowsy unreality to the wee small hours of the morning, especially when travelling, where one really shouldn't be awake, where rules are lax and oddities can be attributed to the realm of dreaming.

My coat, that I'd been carrying through the woods I spread over both of our sets of knees as a makeshift travelling-rug and with the railway tracks clanging rhythmically underneath, we squirmed against each other for a while, thrilling to one another's warmth. Just look at how sure I was – and am – of Alec's devotion, a mirror to mine! He's no actor – never had cause to be. Those beautiful big brown eyes could kill with one scornful flash – but they couldn't lie.

I could. I can. I'd been doing so for years – since school. Close and all as Clive and I managed to get eventually, it was always and ever at arm's length. I almost began to disbelieve there could be more between a chap and his fellow – even though that 'more' was ever my fiercest desire.

I grew sleepy, melancholy. Wanted to whisper, and hear whispers back.

“...at the docks. Yesterday. It was so difficult to let you go. or rather, to know you were going no matter what I could do, what.. rabbit I could pull out of the hat.”

Creaks issued from the seat as he shifted. “I'd never have gone and left you. Not really.”

“Surely you.. how do you know that? When did you decide?”

Alec scratched his head, under his cap. “Well, I don't rightly know, sir.” My temple throbbed and I rubbed it in agitation.

“Sorry! Maurice. Must be just us bein' out here in the public eye, like. S'pose it's no harm, if we're to blend in.”

“It's every harm. You must address me according to how you feel on me.”
Our eyes met and all the 'Sir' melted out of that manly heart.

Undercoat, my hand was pressed between two warm others. My ear was even luckier, a low: “As you wish my love.”

Sent straight to sixes and sevens, still I tried to recommence. “A-anyway, as I was saying. I was so distraught at the idea of losing you, I – well, I understand what compelled you to send me those wires, write me those – lovely letters. I wrote one myself.”

“Oh, yeh?”

“Yes, yesterday. You so entranced me, Alec, all other things that usually occupy my time – such as they are – seemed ridiculous, diminished in their irrelevancy. I longed for you. I longed to hold you, but even more than that, to talk with you, listen to your news and stories and secrets, and to tell you mine, and to not have to hold my tongue, watch what I say, but pour everything out of myself and into you but you were gone and so – and so – my only means were pen and ink.

“I could see – or I thought – that there was no point whatsoever in begging you to stay, or demanding an audience, and how dare I demand such a sacrifice from you anyway, so... I decided I'd write down the truth and – give it to you, to take to the Argentine, for you to have, at least. In case it meant anything at all to you, that you had my heart, all of it, forever.”

Alec remained silent, mouth set, though his eyes were bright and glassy with compassion.

I resumed once more, truth being not a pleasantry but a necessity. “So I – yes. God, I was willing to dispense entirely with the social canon. I was going to – to get your new address off – off Reverend Borenius. Pretend I wanted to send you books, in a fit of charity. Or – or make my way to your parents, affect that I wanted to send you good-will money from the – the Mission? Or – or, dash-it, I would have rushed Clive's office – yes, even his public one – told him I was in love with his gamekeeper and demanded to be told his new whereabouts.” I couldn't even bear to look at Alec as I humiliated myself thus.

His voice floated over. “That'd soften his cough, surely.”

I smiled wanly. It did.
“You came to see me off yesterday morn. On the docks, Southampton,” said Alec tenderly.

“Yes. It did occur to me, perhaps my final chance to see you, to tell you: I wouldn’t have created a scene, no, not even with my heart breaking! But I should have wished you well, a safe journey, slipped you the – this letter. I suppose you would have thanked me, for coming, that I needn’t have, and tipped your hat adieu.”

Alec looked cold and sick and fearful and I knew what he was thinking for I was too: *It might have been.*

He took up the speculation. “So you come all the way to see us off, and we just shake hands and you step back and watch as I grab my bag, say me good-byes and boards that ship?”

I closed my eyes and bowed my head to touch my lips to his coated shoulder, the other carriage occupants still slumbering.

“Maurice, how could I? How could you?!”

“I don’t know! Already I felt I had reached the ultimate limit of torment. At least I’d have one more memory of you.”

Alec said, “And I’d have a letter. Cold comfort.”

Rooting around in my coat, I unearthed the letter. “Here.” Alec looked, but took. In a low, doubtful voice, he commenced.

“Dearest Alec.

I write to wish you well on your new life in Argentina. Hoping this letter finds you well. Having looked up the various industries in this particular part of the Empire, it seems to be a leader in the field of food exporting and therefore well moneyed. It pleased me to find you chose well for your career, in the current economic climate and that if you’re clever, which you are, your prospects are excellent. Please find, for your fortunes, an enclosed sum with my sincerest congratulations. Finally this letter behoves me to take the opportunity to tell you that you breathed new life into me this past
fortnight and without you now I shall be bereft of any joy or comfort or light. Though I fade from your memory you shall never leave mine. I will never stop loving you, it's on me, I know that now. Thank you for your generosity.

Your,

Maurice C. Hall..."

We were both silent after this outpouring; his voice and my feelings. Railway tracks clattered and clanged. Alec was pensive.

Lifting the letter again, he repeated: "... 'You breathed new life... and without you I shall be bereft of any joy'..." I looked out the window at the trees flashing by.

“But Maurice. First bit may be the case... I woken up summat in you, you'd never done a'fore, but – lookit. Now you realized what two fellows could have together – that they could share that way and Hell wonnot crack open underfoot – well, there's lots of fellows, this way leanin', out there – lasses too, shouldn't wonder, takes all sorts so it does!”

Unwilling – unable to agree to this, I stared stubbornly out at the landscape and the brightening sky.

Matter-of-factually, Alec pursued. “Natural to be all do-lally and dreamy about your first-love.. But there again...” - and his face displayed dawning realization - “You've already had your first-love, hasn't you?”

Eyes bright and desperate, I whispered tightly: “I... I couldn't endure it again.. to love and lose.”

“Oh...” Alec's own eyes showed longing, and I knew how frustrated he was that he couldn't kiss, or caress, or even drop his voice down to an intimate, breathy timbre. So he pushed his knee against mine and moved his right hand over my left to interlace our fingers for a moment – underneath the coat.

That done, he folded the letter and tucked it safely in the inside pocket of the jacket he was wearing. I thought of another fool in love, pinning a perfectly innocent missive to his pyjamas...

“You wonnot – you wonnot lose. Not again, not this time,” said Alec assuredly. “I'll stay right here with you always – you see if I don't. And – and I'll kiss you when we get there. Where-ever it is exactly we're going.”

The name meant nothing to Alec and I was happy it was thus; he seemed about to ask a question but decided to keep mum – copying me, he stared out the window for a while which was, to relief, supremely relaxing.
A Spot of the Life-Giving

Clouds looming overhead greeted our disembarking London, adding a dark aspect to the city streets though it was still only mid afternoon. Heading into winter, September made its recent arrival wind-sweepingly, leaf crunchingly, known. Something of a nip in the air too – even here in the heaving crowds. With Alec bundled up in my coat (although this time not underneath naked – though it was early in the day yet!), he was so vulnerable in the midst of the people who bashed him about like a football as he lacked the experience required – or indeed the natural bullishness – to one needs to summon daily in order to barrel one's way mightily through the human deluge.

Throwing caution to the wind – caution and I were on perilous terms as of late, having reached a parting of the ways I feared we would soon sever forever – I put my arm around Alec to 'lead the way' – and to protect him from the crushing masses. Instinctively, he squirmed close; I was thankful he kept his hands to himself however. We weren't invisible – even if Society refused to recognize us.

“It's so blessed busy,” he said, barely able to pick out a passing face before it was gone.

“Time of day,” I replied, “People on their way home from the daily slog. Not us though, aren't we lucky!” I tried to introduce an air of festivity to our circumstance, even though Alec was crashing heavily after the climactic, heavenly heights of our joyful reunion. What was wrong with him? Second thoughts? Third? More? Already?

“Christ, I could eat a horse I'm that starved.”


“So could I,” I said, “but indeed for you it's been even longer since your last proper partaking, with only that chocolate, and ah, that fruit..”

Alec scowled and growled. “Don't talk on it, Maurice, eh? God!!” Immediately, he touched my elbow. “Sorry – sorry. I don't half get narky when I'm hungry – a right terrible trait of mine. I'd bite the head off me own mother.”

“It's because you were waiting for me! All those hours. Don't worry, we'll call in somewhere, get you some breakfast – well – lunch.. dinner... in a twinkling.”

But where? That was the rub. It wasn't as if I was heart-set on Afternoon Tea at the Savoy; all the same it was just as infeasible to bring Alec to any of my usual haunts – imagine my calling into the Club with Alec in tow; it would be the making of the new century, in terms of gossip.

And even someplace where I wouldn't be quite a regular – for example, the Hotel I dined at those several months ago after the Opera – I was conscious of how, well, different Alec and I looked, being honest; I glanced nervously at his frayed shirt-collar, rather tight-fitting waistcoat, and yet over-
large donkey jacket (under mine – the layered effect only adding to his somewhat clown-like ad hoc appearance.)

Not to mention his rough working-boots, his neatly mended trousers, his cap. Need he present himself as being so very of the people? I fought an urge, a rogue thought from Satan to release Alec, step away from him sharply, for sincere fear of being recognized alongside him by an acquaintance or even squinted at judgementally by a stranger.

Instead I squeezed his shoulder and even risked running my hand up and down his arm once only; I was rewarded with a flash of those big brown eyes and a crooked smile. There are many men within me. I did hope that the one who loved would win.

“Wish’t I could find the place where I ’et before, when I come up to London to see you at that Museum.... grand place, did a grouse greasy fry. Good ale too!”

“I’m sure it did!” I said. “But – that could describe any number of venues, in a – certain district..”

Alec nodded. “Aye, and I’ve not the foggiest where I were at the time. Couldn’t find the place agin if’n I wandered the City the rest of my natural! Just – spied it an’ in I went – hai, how abou’ that place?”

A place called 'Hovis's' – no further details – was the evident end point of Alec's finger and upon closer inspection was a purveyor of meat pies, mashed potatoes and, unless mine eyes deceived, everything was doused liberally with some kind of searingly green sauce. Alec watched a jolly couple entering the shop, he holding he door open for he-he-ing she. “I could murder me a steak and kiddley.”

Evasive action. Dragging the protesting boy onwards, with him craning backwards and whining, I bargained: “How about somewhere more spacious? You’re famished. And need a sit-down too.”

“Yeh - and all this walking ain't helping!” He struggled more against me, which I liked rather; he wasn't actually attempting to get away, merely registering his vexation.

“Allright!” I said then, “This – isn’t a problem, we shall just – ah!” For a reliable Lyon's Tea Shop had miraculously materialized, as is their tendency, reassuringly common and familiar. Why, I must have passed the white and gold façade, with its boxes of tea and cakes and delicates brazen in the window, simply hundreds of times and it had never occurred to me to enter. Now, however, it was just the ticket.

“How about here. Ripping – what? Smell that Alec, fresh bread! And look – jam tarts.” Alec continued to grumble, as a matter of routine. Honestly. I knew he was a moaner, but to object when his basic physical essence was crying out for nourishment?

“I s'pose it looks alright...” He was eyeing a blancmange or some such in the window, in much the same way he had gazed at me in the boathouse.

“Only alright? Well, I’m going to eat even if you aren't,” though even as I said this I approached the door and held it open for him; his fingers had flexed instinctively for the handle but I beat him to the punch. This happened a lot in the early days.

I added: “You can just watch.”

“No bloody fear!!” A smile finally split his face and made the most of his features, and I felt more confident in the face of: a chaotic counter with a menu printed over it, a scattering of long tables, at less than even angles, with diners of various – walks – munching talking, relaxing, - glancing.
Despite the cheap lino floor, I whipped Alec's cap off and hung it up with my own hat on the wall hook. I left my jacket on him as it did lend a bit of the establishment to his appearance; on a basic practical level it hid the dirt and dried leaves and animal hairs covering his own effort. He was indifferent to this, his eyes following the movements of every forkful of food in our periphery.

Eager to prove myself – in London – my milieu – the woods might have fresh, urgent air, and butterflies, and dewy grass blades, but what of the smells of coffee, and sweet buttery pastry, and strong tobacco, not to mention indoor heating, lights above, comfortable (somewhat worn) chairs, two of which I directed us into now, Alec having waited for my say-so.

The tables were long, long to facilitate many patrons in an (I imagine) canteen-like atmosphere, and though I would prefer somewhere more private, it might be for the best, I thought, as Alec said earlier, to check our intimacy. But I couldn't resist some measure of affection. I'd been resisting for five difficult years – maybe for twenty-four of them! So I hung on to Alec's unobjecting elbow as we seated ourselves.

On relaxing, I rather liked the place; true, we were sat across from and rather close to a pair of young men but they were so dedicated to their eggs and bacon and discussion of football results that I felt safe enough turning my chair just so many degrees towards Alec's as we sat side by side.

What was more, a gaggle of women in smart but inexpensive outfits – secretaries, clerks, teachers, most likely – in fact, in this spirit I ran my eyes over their faces with a small measure of anxiety to ascertain whether one or more of them worked at Hill & Hall's or one of our contemporaries. The women flocked to our table, grabbing extra chairs and obliging Alec to inch his chair closer to mine, with an entirely redundant grunted apology.

To my surprise, then, far from imbuing me with irritation and outright fear, the noisy, sweaty crowd I suddenly loved, for it made Alec and I, out here in public, visible and unabashed, protected by our knowing, all the more united. Owing to the size of our table, the menus were hot property indeed and Alec seized one with a nod to the lads opposite, who nodded back, mouthful.

“Order whatever you like, Alec,” I said grandly. “I don't see that horse you were envisioning earlier. Ha! Ha!” Alec smiled again briefly – patiently, one might say, his eyes roving over the long and – I do apologize, but – uninspiring tariff.

“Take your order, gents?” said the owner of a jovial voice – a waitress squeezed cheerfully between the back of Alec’s chair and the occupant of the one at the next table parallel.

“Ah -” I was a little disconcerted, and my initial impulse was to say no, we were not yet ready, and to please bring the aperitifs and send her on her way for five or better still ten minutes but no more until we were good and ready! But Alec was slumped, ravenous, and though it was true that we were both now home free, time was not quite a totally luxury, not while we – well, I – had London bridges yet to burn.

So I took charge. “Eer – ah, yes, thank you, we'll have a pot of tea please.”

Scribbling. “Naturally!”

“And – and Alec? See, there's your pies..” Either Alec wasn't accustomed to dining out, (even someplace like this), or he was well used to it and giving the matter due consideration. Frowning at the menu, held up by his right hand, my left, he finally: “Erm.” Ah – it was the former.

“Alec, why not the – this – mutton and carrot pie?” It was the nearest I could see to his 'favourite' lamb stew he had described earlier, at the boathouse after we had made passionate love in front of the
mantel.

At this moment, he nodded. “Aye. Grand.”

“Lovely!” said the waitress with patience. “And for yourself?” No sirs here I suppose. “I'll have the plaice.”

“Hot. Oh – and potatoes.”

“Aye. Grand.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Good man – a fair extra dollop you'll get.” Alec perked up at last and mirrored her gap-toothed grin with his own.

Coughing, I was about to say something inane to recapture his attention when I marked that he wasn't staring after the waitress especially, but the room entire, the dozens of people crammed at the tables with more streaming in, the bang and clatter of the crockery, the engines humming outside, the cacophony of voices.

“How many's people here? Only, feels right different to a packed pub, like.”

“Many? Hm, oh, a couple of hundred I should think. At least it means the food is more likely to be fresh, what with the turnover.”

“Fresh don't bother me, s'long's it's soon,” and with that last word he collapsed theatrically on the tablecloth, earning a glance and giggle from one or other of the secretary squad.

“Not very patient, are you?” I observed.

“Not when I'm very hungry. Ain't you?”

“Oh rather! I should think so, the night we had.” Babbling voices all around us covered up our conversation from pricked ears, although Alec's wicked glint couldn't be disguised when he promptly shot back: “Oh yeh... you were the one – physical, like. Bringing it -” Curling his hands into fists he was on the cusp of making a particularly lewd gesticulation but to my eternal relief he stopped just short. He dropped his hands into his lap, and leaned over till our shoulders knocked in order to confide: “Though truthing, it's main – wearying – bein' on the gettin' end an' all – it's no loungin’."

Air was a sudden struggle. “No, I – um – got that impression.”

“Aye, too much for you, am I? Too late now to escape.” And I knew he wanted to grab my hand
again, which would have felt nice, and that was the main thing.

“But we are escaping,” I said. “The both of us.” My turn to lean forward confidentially, and dear Alec turned his right ear, his good ear, somewhat awkwardly to me. “I just need to settle my affairs here in the City, wrap it all up and tie off any loose ends. For good.”

“Chucking in your job for definite then?”

“Yes.”

Alec leaned back in his chair. “Drastic.”

“A rash decision, do you mean?”

Alec nodded: “I bet it's a good'un, your position.”

Not to be outdone, I countered: “Wasn't yours?” I knew it was side-stepping the issue – and maybe struggling for comparisons – but I couldn't help seeking out and eagerly underlining the (so very few) similarities between us; in this instance our both having – or about to have - “chucked” our careers in the river for the sake of one another. A risk, certainly, and I should know: still, at least it was a shared one.

Alec didn't agree; I was soon to discover with equal parts exasperation and amusement that he rarely did!

He grumbled. “It were a bit of cash in hand but not much, and nowt in the way of – aspiration, like. How much longer could I be under-gamekeeper 'afore it started to look – well, a bit sad, at my age? Nowt but a dogsbody, really. It's a laddie's job.” I drank this in.

Alec went on, even as he leaned to the side to allow the waitress to clank down our tray of tea: “What were – oh, ta, love – what were I s'pose to do, wait for old Ayres to croak and then inherit his line, wi'me own best years behind us? Nah mate – nothin' doin. Just weren't an attractive nor a practical prospect. Old Penge – sure, a grand place to cut yer teeth, but when it comes to makin' summat of thyself...”

I said, “You'd move on.”

Alec nodded.

“Emigrate,” I said.

“Well, not necessarily. Obviously!” Blushing thus, he looked like he was cooking up more thoughts to express and I was eager to hear them – starved I was of real, warm, affecting, coal-and-ice human expression: most of I had hitherto discussed with friends and acquaintances focussed on shares and stock prices, local politics (hullo Clive), vague social issues, the News.

I fed on Alec's forthright self-honesty and generosity with it as much as I did on his lovemaking. Here he was, boldly and blithely telling me about his deep-seated insecurities! As he did before in London, after the Museum, just before he truly won me over; it was then that he began to appear to me as less mythical, more fallible and I was all the more fixated on him for it. If I dug back in my memory I could hear, faintly, young Clive Durham confiding in me, his Christmastime familial troubles owing to his catastrophic rejection of humdrum faith. How he left me quite bewildered and breathless, for multiple reasons! With Alec it was easier, lower, realer. Here, finally, it could be, another one of me.
Before he could continue, however, we were nudged apart again by the waitress, this time with our food; rather too quickly, I thought, for it to have been prepared fresh from scratch but at least the copious steam issuing indicated piping heat – or re-heat.

“Cor! That were quick! Thanks love.” And Alec descended. In all honesty – and I may as well be here, mayn’t I? - I rather anticipated – braced myself, if you will – for Alec, owing only in part to his hunger, to shovel his dinner down with the same robust spirit as he would dig holes around Penge, or chop down trees, or skin rabbits, or knock back ales. And yet actually, and despite all, his table-manners were, if not beautiful, then at least – seemly. While he was indeed eating quickly, he did cut up his pie, and swallowed each bite so fast that his cheeks didn’t get a chance to bulge! And when he got crumbs on his face and stubble he wiped them off neatly with his handkerchief.

Here was an example of the awful snobbery, which I was well aware of and in my shiny new circumstances determined to vanquish... Alec meanwhile vanquished roughly a third of his pie before pausing for air: “Ah.. now that's some absolute top nosh!” Was he making fun of me?

Now that his stomach was sated he was back to his old cheerful self. “That's prime mutton, that is – prime. Ay-ged just the right amount of weeks.. you'se want it tender but – mm, chewy, y'know? In your mouthful. Knife should go through it bu – not a fork -” As he chattered, he took a spoon to the plate of mashed potatoes that sat billowing heat between us, and he began doling out heaps onto my plate, then his own. Even this, even this, the dividing out of food, the sharing of the commonplace – thrilled me just as much as Alec combing my hair or stroking me intimately. Food hadn’t interested me much – not so much as alcohol, of late, at any rate. Meal-times at home, in the City, at the Club, for business, ran from the mundane to the excruciating, and were hardly more jovial and congenial than the meals I took on my own, which were a matter of strict re-fuelling.

Yet here was Alec, patting my potatoes carefully into neat mounds. “Mm – try it! Lovely; bit dry though, hang about -” Always eyes wide open, he cast around the table at large, spying a silver jug in the centre. “Pardon me ladies, is that there communist gravy? For all of us to share 'tween us?” My hand covered my mortified smile of its own accord; while the ‘ladies’ did not share my reservation and tittered and laughed with abandon, one or two nodding and waving.

“Grouse!” said the little scamp, and in his eagerness he knocked over the menu with is fingers, and the salt cellar with the foolishly flapping cuff of my coat, though his quest for the gravy-boat remained single-minded.

“Mmm, lumpy. Just how I likes it! Have some?” And without further ado, he slopped the gravy unchecked all over my potatoes and fish. All of the above has taken place within the space of about a minute; was I truly living before??

“Thank you,” I said, though I really should have said, 'when -!

What it lacked in basic presentability, the plaice compensated in flavour – tasted as though it had lately leaped straight from the sea. Alec said, “How's the fish?”

“Oh – excellent. Though maybe it's the company.”

“Ha! You'll find me in top form s'long as I've a plate of meat in front of me!”

“I shall make a note of it,” I said. At this Alec affected to scribble a note and slipped 'it' into my breast pocket.

Exaggerated humour – as well as expressing a general bonhomie with the suddenly sunny world – was our initial method of expressing affection in those blessed early days – early hours. As was to
become my wont, I copied Alec; if not exactly bolting the food like Oliver Twist then at least enjoying it with verve. Alas it would be some time before I came around to the practice of mashing the last few bites of my meal into gravy mush. And eating it with a spoon.

Despite our lack of lingering over the meal, I wanted in actuality to prolong this situation, this feeling – our escape, together, our new beginning, our childish delight in each other. Pessimist – realist? - that I am – was – oh dear – my joy and relief in finding Alec, in having him, was chilled somewhat by the premonition that rosy as things were at this point, we had difficult times ahead. And not too far ahead, what was more.

In this rather crazed spirit I was driven myself to excess. “And what will you have for pudding, Alec? Name it. Look – sorry, excuse me – thank you – let's see... oh – marmalade pudding! That sounds – appetizing! Or ah – treacle tart, that used to be my favourite at school. Or you could have currant pudding and custard.”

Alec wasn't even looking at the menu, but using his tongue to dislodge food from his teeth. During an interval: “Blimey, love, I'll be fat as a piglet in no time square the way you'se tempting me constant!”

“Nonsense,” I replied. “I'll take you down the boxing gym, you'll sweat it all off.”

Alec grinned. “Now, where I come from, you don't need to train how to fight, it just comes natural after a pint or three ...”

“Ah, but to do it properly, there is an art to it.”

“Rules you mean. When really, winner oughter be determined simple be which feller ends up flat on his – ah! Hello again! Yeh, yeh, finished, it were lovely, ta.”

“Marvellous, thank you.” Even I allowed.

“Anything for pudding?” asked the jolly girl. “Go on – little treat.”

Alec said, “Well, we are celebrating.” My eyes widened.

“Oh yeh? What's the occasion?” asked the waitress.

“Ah – new position,” - and he winked at me. “I'll have the plum tart and junket, ta.”

I opted for the fruit and meringue and cream; it was the closest I could see to the Eton Mess we used to get every Sunday at school and I was feeling increasingly and dizzyingly younger with every hour in Alec's warm company.

Alec asked. Was I often on this street? Was it on my way to work? Did I walk often, or get the tram? Had I used the Underground? Was I aware of the deafening, constant roar of engines and talk and footsteps and doors slamming and bells and whistles outside? Had I a headache? (For he did, but not a debilitating one.)

Flustered and flattered was I by all this attention – I'd not had so much personal inquiry since Lasker-Jones, and I'd been paying him to take an affected interest in me. Whereas Alec was sacrificing his earning ability, future prospects, and most probably all of his savings just to sit here with me, forking warm, buttery crumbly pastry into his mouth, his eyes squinting shut in pleasure. Giving into one's base desires is all very well – in fact it's very very well, indeed... Where was I?

Alec said, “I like me tea strong but,” - peering inside the pot - “this is turning into molasses.”
“Oh – it has gone brown, rather. Shall we order more?”

Alec leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands over his belly, and I bit my sugary lip to consider how I might be following their path later tonight. No, no ‘might’ – certainly I would. That’s - the case when you’re in a couple, correct? Assurance that you’ll be loved nightly, or near nightly, or at least always sometime in the future? I didn't know but I was sure to discover.

“Nah – tell the truth, I'm full to the gills. Mighty feed.” Stretching ostentatiously, drawing more amused glances, until his back actually snapped – I winced – he went on: “'N'fact, a stretch o'the legs is what's in order now. I'll just settle...” And he hopped up out of his seat and to my horror started to make his way to the tills, inching politely around staff and diners.

“Al – Alec,” but I only whisper-yelled it, as I scrambled after him, bungling with my hat and Alec's scarf and his hold-all (complete with gun!) that he’d slung on the back of his chair; two expectant patrons were already lining up for our spaces. Christ!!

To hail him down verbally was out of the question, loathe as I was to draw undue attention to our strange affiliation even in a place like this were I was very unlikely to be recognized by anyone of importance and where Alec was a veritable nonentity – a feature I assumed to his entire association with London – only to be somewhat disproven, much later.

At this moment, however, he was sauntering between the tables – has anyone, before or since, ever swaggered, hands in pockets and legs swinging forwards, not stepping, moving swiftly - with a confidence quite like young Alec Scudder? Acts, wherever he goes, after five mere minutes, like he owns the place. And why should this surprise: didn't he size me up at Penge, then pluck me like the apple from the tree once he decided he liked the look of me?

Unapologetic confidence hummed about him; never more so than when he completely ignored my cries and joined the queue at the till and nonetheless turned his head to give me a small smile, that may have seemed opaque and harmless to the casual observer, but which hit me right between the legs, the palms, the neck.. all the pulse points. I wondered if the time would come where I could ever be around him without being in a fluctuating but constant state of arousal. Until I could, the balance of power lay in his favour, and I was more than happy – I was delirious – to have it thus.

Dangerous, was this: I was so glad to be sharing my life, quite suddenly, with someone at last that I was losing my grip on myself – my stoic masculinity, maybe. I joined the line and grabbed his elbow and hissed: "What are you planning? I'll pay, of course," as was only natural. We must all adhere to our strengths, and London, and the associated cost of living there, was mine.

“Nah, it's grand Maurice, I have it.. What does it matter which of us pays the tariff? We're together,” and the smile again.

“Don't be ridiculous!” exited my mouth before I could apply some sensitivity to my consternation.

“Tch,” said Alec, as the line moved before him and we moved closer; he fumbled in his pocket and actually began to extract coins.

“Put it away!” I practically snarled, probably cutting a figure of total absurdity, with my hat and Alec's bag and arm clutched in my hands.

He shot me a look of annoyance. “What ails you? You're carrying on like as if I've whipped me nob out, Christ sake!”

“I'd rather you had!” I said.
Alec laughed, blind-siding me, and made a sudden jerk for the teller, but I gripped his hand, closing it firmly round his money, rather too firmly in fact; he: “Aaaa! Fuuu – football!” with his face red in pain and anger. I did appreciate his efforts in refraining from swearing loudly in public, although it might not have been as inappropriate for him to do so here it would be in, for example, the British Museum. But still, dash-it, there were ladies present! Women, anyway!

In a fresh attempt to harness our inexplicable but as yet unmitigated brand of wordless communication (as opposed to our rather chaotic interactions via letters and museum-housed rows), I hoped he would understand my meaning unequivocally: Let me pay; it's not an order, it's a plea. And how do you react to my pleas, Alec?

“Oh alright,” he said. “If you must, get on with you – I'll not insist.” Still he gave me a knowing look as I nodded and flushed past him. As I busied myself with the payment, Alec resumed fiddling in his pockets – he carried around so many things there that it was a wonder he needed his satchel, or even his Argentine trunk! - eventually extracting his tobacco and wandering off. How is it, that for some people, decisions and changes make barely a dent to their psyche; life just flows around them so easily! It was a mystery to me; I doubted Alec had even heard of psychiatry.

I vowed that some of his breezy, easygoing nature should rub off on me: for a long time, practically for all of my living memory, the practice of waking up each morning and confronting the fourteen or so hours I had to live through was an exercise in endurance and unavoidable, never-ending anxiety. Even when things were going swimmingly with Clive – and they were, once – there was nonetheless a tension between us, always the threat of going too far, of my doing something wrong as I bumbled around ineptly trying to match him.

Funnily enough there was a tension between between Alec and I also, but it was one that would find explosive relief, not in breaking but in bonding. I warmed, to be thinking, planning, predicting, and I paid up at the café with a giddy fit of joy to be actually providing for someone else, not just financially like at home but to someone's immediate needs, a beloved who was not only receptive to but enthusiastic about my devotion; I pointed out a few extra things to ring up and bring back to the flat.

Yes, the flat, Clive's and mine – of a fashion; his really but I had more or less taken it over in terms of the usage and correspondingly, the entire rent; Clive had little need nor inclination for it since he got engaged, and certainly married, what with attaching himself so resolutely not only to Anne but to Penge, Westminster, and his potential position there.

City life never really became him, though he seems rather jumped-up in the pastoral setting also – poor wretch, adrift between realms, homes! That was I, once. I knew now what I'd only suspected – one needs not a place, but a person, to have a home.

It was in this spirit that I formulated the idea of bringing Alec back to the flat. A hotel was an option, of course, as was making directly back to the countryside – the Greenwood – which I’d not brought up with him yet but still planned to – but just at this moment, I wanted him with me and around me, power of exorcism, in a familiar but hitherto lonely setting – like Alec's boathouse. Not as whimsically romantic, perhaps, but a place of our own, alone, undisturbed – for now.

And most importantly – adjacent. Near. Quick to get to.

Out on the footpath Alec was waiting. “All settled up? Let's take a round-about, I'm that stuffed - need to walk it off. Hain't there a park or nothing local?” Food had made him even more agreeable than usual, and me too, it seemed.

“But of course! Smashing idea – look the sun's out; perhaps we'll get that Indian Summer they're
promising after all.”

Alec said, “Ah – now I do reckon that'll be so. Rain we've had! Oh! Pah! Sure we'd no summer at all. But – we'll get a bit of heat now and that's great for the growin' -” here he gestured with his hand grass or crops growing up, up, up, and flowing in the breeze. I began to feel more optimistic about my mad scheme of forging a life and a living in the forest – Alec would be all for it, wouldn't he? Out of the country he came to me, to rescue me take me by the hand, and pull me back into those trees, flowers, rivers, lakes, hills and valleys, down into the damp rich earth, his world, and wrap me up safe and protect me, clinging, air cold and breathable at long long last.

Everything would be perfection – back to the Garden.

“Hall!!” Turning, instinctively, and immediately removing my hand from where it had been hovering a few inches behind Alec's back, gently leading him in the general direction of the Heath, my mouth dropped open in abject horror as I regarded Chapman hurrying towards us through the crowds, briefcase swinging and a genial, conversational look upon his round, red, face!

“Jesus, Christ, and Christmas,” I'm very much afraid I undertoned then; Alec spluttered with laughter but as Chapman buzzed ever closer Alec froze, and quite immediately adopted a stance of respectful diffidence and deference – so different to his general attitude – he hunched his shoulders, and dropped his head so that the peak of his cap hid his eyes. Lightning might just then have stuck Chapman from existence but alas, the sky was cloudless.

Things fell apart so quickly I was left reeling. Emotions are bally enough to carry around with one, trying to control, at the best of times; when they keep sea-changing so rapidly it's enough to make the head rocket.

“What-ho, Hall! Fancy us both happening by at this time of day!” spewed Chapman, stopping and rolling robustly on his heels before my distinctly pained and unwelcoming face. At the same time, Alec muttered: “Yes sir, right away sir”, tipped his hat at me to put the final touches to my outrage and leapt smartly into the heaving crowd and was gone. All in the space of time it took Chapman to greet me. Aghast, I looked at the spot where Alec had disappeared and Chapman was obliged to poke me with his umbrella. “Alright, chum?”

Finally I resigned and re-gathered myself; my hands were shaking. “Hullo, Arthur. How's ... how are ...” I couldn't even formulate a coherent inquiry.

It didn't matter. “Good to see you old boy, and to see you looking good! Ada will pleased, indeed she will most pleased.”

“I'm.. glad she'll be pleased.”

“You'll have had it all from Durham, I suppose?”

“...Erm – All, sorry?” Shit!!

Chapman smiled and shook the onion; he was attempting to fall into step with me, that is, for us to walk together as the people around us did jog and jostle. But I stood rooted. How could Alec find me again if I moved? Would he come and find me? Sweat prickled under my boater.

“You know – I say, are you alright? Look a bit peaky. What – that is, whom I refer to is the new Mrs.!” said Chapman.

“Oh yes – Anne.”
“Yes – that’s it!” Encouraged by my meagre input, he took my elbow and I could think of no acceptable reason not to walk alongside. Perhaps I could have invented a flawless set of circumstances that explained why I simply had to remain in that busy spot in front of the pavilion, and why Chapman must abscond immediately. Impulsivity was never my strong suit however. I am well aware of the dullness of my mind.

Chapman, undeterred: “Ah but of course! You’ll have seen the Happy Couple for yourself – you were up at Penge only lately, weren’t you?”

Fear seized me about the throat, dashed inconvenient place for it in the middle of a conversation, but I managed to choke out, “H-how did you know?”

“Archie London.”

I: “Ah.”

“Quite a family affair, the lot of us, what! Terribly sweet isn't it, everyone pairing up so. Well, does the little woman pass muster? I know Clive would want your approval. Thick as thieves, the two of you, always have been!”

Once, maybe. And maybe still we were both thieves, criminals: I stealing away into hopeful obscurity, and Clive, seemingly straight and honest, in reality denying, hiding, blind-siding.

Not a little haughtily, I replied: “She seems a good sort. She'll suit Clive's requirements, in any case.”

Chapman laughed. “Not exactly bowled over, were you?” At this I merely smiled and shrugged – a new gesture, common but one that spoke.

But, dash-it, this dismissal didn't really reflect my feelings on the subject of the Squire and Mrs. Durham, now did it? I was not dispassionate. As an image of Alec's warm brown eyes visited me, as so often it still does, I felt cocooned and – generous; safe in the knowledge that I had someone who loved me eagerly, even if he was momentarily and maddeningly in absentia!

With a firm turn in Chapman's direction, I stopped to address the matter properly. Alec's heart-breakingly worn and patched hold-all was still gripped in my possession so I swung my arms behind my back and clasped them for its concealment and his protection – a well-worn gesture on my part anyway.

“That's just it, Chappie,” I said. “Exactly it. Perhaps she's not a bowler-over – nor tries to be – but is it not the main thing that they suit each other well and are happy. I'm certainly happy for them.” If this wasn't true, then at least it wasn't far from it; now that Alec had made me feel like a whole person, a finished man, I was able to be charitable. And it wouldn't do for it to get back to Clive that I was bitter – especially when I wasn't.

Chapman was almost disappointed by my speech. He said, “Well – as am I! Though any marriage where there's a particular political bent will have an easy run-through. Most likely he'll be away on business and meetings and greasing up and what-not – much like ourselves, eh?”

I was on the brink of giving all that up so felt especially fine in saying, “Yes, oh, yes.. We're the work-horses down here in the City!”

We were stood now at the corner of the street by the beginning of the banking district. However was I going to shake him?! I just knew I was about to get an invitation to lunch, and how would I then explain that I had in fact just eaten, heartily and noisily, at this absurd hour!
Patting my shoulder, Chapman began the process, “How lucky we bumped into each other. I simply must pump you for more! I say, how about we – oh!”

For Alec was, quite at an instant, again at my elbow. How that boy does it I don't know; his propensity towards disappearing and reappearing like a dervish was to my mind so disconcerting and yet, at later junctures, would prove quite the useful skill.

“Sir, here you are, sir,” he said, and he thrust a number of items clumsily into my arms, deftly slipping his own bag from my fingers into his own possession as he did so, even as I tried to keep a hold of it, he pried it from my grip. I wanted it, as insurance, in case he tried to slip away again.

Wrenched away successfully, the bag was swung over Alec's shoulder, leaving him free to whip off his cap and stand to attention before me – upright and respectful, not a bit like the slouch he tended to adopt whenever we had stood conversing before. Even previous to the Russet Room.

Jarring. Down in my arms, I saw a jumble of groceries: sugar, cocoa, a pineapple, a jar of pickled onions, a box of starch, a newspaper (not the Times), and most ostentatiously, a thick bunch of garish flowers – orange – marigolds if memory serves.

Memory was not all that served. I dared to look up from my – purchases? - to Alec's sweet expectant face. With Chapman hovering, clearly also waiting for the expected social ritual to be executed, I was forced into my own pocket and produce some coins – how much? I don't know how much, in this ludicrous situation! Though Alec was now actively seeking my gaze, subtly but keenly, I kept my eyes averted as I handed him his tip: “Wh-whizzer! Awfully good of you. Here you are,” and I turned away from him, confoundedly hurt and unsure and ... incorrigible little brat!

I felt, with my shoulders as much as my ears, him hesitate, then pull his cap back on, a soft “Sir” and away back into the crowd. He needn't have bothered with the furtivity; Chapman gave Alec no more attention than he did the odd pigeon pecking around us.

I clutched my – I suppose my – belongings to my chest; there was no point at this point in trying to conceal them.

Chapman was delighted with this whole spectacle. “Oo! I do say! Have you a lady tucked away yourself, Hall? We surmised – we all hoped! Do tell!” And he poked the flowers.

I opened my mouth and tried to create a reason that wouldn't lead me tumbling into further subterfuge and humiliation – I debated explaining with a degree of sharp imperiousness that I was on my way to visit the grave of a loved one – only, what loved one? And why all the groceries, food – was I going to make a sacred offering to the gods? And why did my dress so clash with such an errand? And why was I thus halfway between King's Cross and the business district?

Again all this overthinking was unnecessary. Chapman said, “No – don't tell me now. I'll contact your office to arrange dinner at the weekend – it'll be jolly, Ada loves to play the hostess already! Only then may you reveal all!” As he spoke he himself was melding into the constant stream of people hurrying by.

I shook my head, smiled and shrugged; I called “Cheerio!” because I'd never see him again.

A beat.

And Alec again, like a robin landing on a tree branch. “Wot an old duffer.”

Stiffly, I: “Thanks for the flowers. What fun.”
Alec: “Fun it is! Awe, Maurice, I run off so as to protect we, you, and the flowers – I were only having a laugh!”

“I'm not laughing.”

“Mebbes I am. Mebbes I needed cheering up after members of your exclusive set come a-hailin' and I know there's no place for me.”

I waved the flowers. “But you made sure to make your presence known!”

Alec was annoyed. “I said, didn't I? Strictly a joke. God, am I goin' to have to police ever' little thing I say and do, see if'n it please the court?!”

“Alec... of course not.”

He still looked dark.

I sighed. “My brother-in-law..”

“Yeh? I can see the family resemblance.”

Daggers and grins.

I rustled the bunch. “Bloody Chapman... assumed I had a lady-friend..”

At this Alec looked sideways at the flowers, and then up at me with something approaching worry.

Grunting, I hoisted the slipping provisions further up my chest – really, it was a large unwieldy tin of cocoa!

“Not that that will gain any traction,” I said. “Just a tease, I'm sure... Anyway, I'm far too boring to be of any real fodder for the rumour mill.”

“I don't think you're boring.” Out of all the loving endearments, the things he'd whispered, written, giggled and gasped, that was probably the nicest thing he – or anyone - had ever said to me.

It still seemed incredible, downright impossible, that someone like Alec – so woodsy and worldly and open and organic – would not merely find me attractive sexually, but – as a person too, as a friend. It was all I'd ever wanted and here he was, larger than life, trotting beside me with my coat over-large on him and the shoulders folding improperly, the sleeves heedlessly rolled up to allow his hands into his pockets, cheerfully carrying out all his promises to me.

“Thank you,” I said then. Alec closed his eyes and nodded stoutly in welcome. “For the flowers,” I added, and his eyes flashed open.

“I told yer – it were a joke! I wanted to show you up but you just can't shake that – that dignity, can you?”

Looking closer, I went on, “And thanks for the cocoa, and – ah! Cornflour...”

Unexpectedly, Alec replied, “Main useful for cookin', that. See? I weren't just larking. Them's provisions, them.” Pulling his hand from his trouser-pocket, he slid his eyes up to my face. “Should I even try and -?” The tip.

“You even try and reject it this time and I'll toss you into the Thames.” I was insistent, this time.

“This time...? OH,” and remembering, he blushed – as well he might! - and to cover his
embarrassment – I know the practice well! - said, “Here – lemme -” and he tried to wrestle the heavy groceries out of my arms. Antlers cracked. In fact he kept up with his tries to prise all the way to the corner of Sloane where we mercifully managed a hansom and the war of masculine endeavour briefly ended: I paid the driver while Alec was struggling with his cap pulled down over his face.
On the Street Where You Lived

Is it at all surprising to confess that even as I was pleased, and jubilant, and satisfied beyond all previous conception to have Alec with me forever at last, and we equal and in love, devoted, each other's true champion – all the same – when I arrived at the pristine and ornate façade of my flat building, far from even the somewhat acceptable eccentricities of the gentry of rural Wiltshire, and I raised my legs for my familiar brisk walk up the steps, I felt a jolt of fear and longing for my former lonely but simple and safe life. And as I climbed towards the large, gold-and-glass front door and felt Alec – so earthy and strong and yet here at my digs (well) – so frightfully evident, looming behind me like a shadow, I was briefly but intensely struck by the urge to race on ahead of him, slam the door in his face, escape and part, accuse and deny... Love comes so naturally but loyalty takes work.

Dear Alec wasn't helping matters. Oscillation, I was to discover, was a central trait of his; hardly surprising to me even then I suppose, given that he had been to me, by turns, over the course of our young affair: deferential, cautious, outraged, threatening, loving and gentle, icy, wholly and fully acquiescent. (My cheeks burned again remembering that last one.)

So his moodiness didn't shock but it did throw. Still, as wiser than I say, “half a beast is the great god Pan”, true now I saw it finally: I would have to learn to adapt, and control myself more as I couldn't control him, no, only charm. No lasting power in that, I thought, then.

At this moment, Alec, who had been hitherto so careful, had so showily but sensibly absented himself from Chapman, and cuddled with me on the train but subtly, under the rug, and sneaked us out of Penge far off the beaten track, now seemed to have exhausted his daily supply of artfulness; even as my own paranoia mounted he looked boldly into the face of everyone we passed on the steps, the foyer. He re-adopted his shambling walk, swung his haversack, followed me so close that his chin knocked my shoulder. If he had reached out to squeeze my behind I shouldn't have been much surprized though I would have hit the ceiling.

Mercifully missing Mrs. Lemon, the maid-of-all who came twice weekly – more often, when I was actually staying, we arrived at the flat where I unlocked the door and let Alec in ahead of me, trembling with nerves as the woman who lives next door, a Mrs. George Blythe, exited her flat and – I was certain – made a very particular note of Mr. Hall's exotic house-guest. A neighbourly smile – perhaps in reality, an unattractive grimace – was my gift to her before hurrying inside and slamming the door. Life is a series of dangerous missions from one safe house to the next. I bolted.

“There we are! Safe and sound!” How I trilled, lately!

Only I, it would appear. “Do make yourself at home, Alec.”
Hard to say if he did obey. He wandered round the living room, nudging coffee tables with his foot, squinting at paintings, finger-tipping the tassels on velvet lampshades.

I tried again. “Alone at last!”

I had meant to sound jolly, perhaps even – provocative, but it only drew attention to the mutual responsibilities of our new intimacy – no distractions, no world, pressing, to war against. Truthfully, I had thought that as soon as we entered the flat we might irresistibly revel in our privacy: clothes discarded, hair pulled, walls pushed against, furniture knocked over.

Certainly I'd fantasized of as much, here, in these very rooms. Yet I was glad, somehow, that we hadn't, that we were, yes, in the agonies of necessary awkwardness and adjustment – I hovering at the door, foolishly holding the groceries and the bag from the café still, watching Alec proceed with caution all through the bookcases and writing desk and footstools and tables, all the while carefully avoiding my eye.

Red patches on his cheeks communicated however – of course, he was a little discomfited and ill at ease now that he was so far from home, the countryside, the clear and familiar. I hoped this lack of confidence was temporary because God knew I needed his strength, his bravery, his assuredness. Don't let me down, darling.

Noticing the doorway to the far left of the room, Alec walked over and poked his head through – not brazen enough to just stride through lordily.

“Which one is yours?” He nodded to the two adjoining bedrooms, Clive's and mine. Well – both mine, seeing as how Clive had all but abandoned the flat, and all our old London haunts, since throwing himself so boisterously into his political career, and Anne. Far from relevant, now.

“The one on the left,” and Alec, without questioning why where were two bedrooms – perhaps he guessed – or even knew – after all he had, in his letters, purported to be pretty well-informed on the peculiar relationship I had had with Clive - well, Alec went into the room and laid his haversack, still bulging with the corners of his gun, down beside my bed, just in front of the right locker. If he had grabbed me by the elbows as he'd done in the fragrant night-time shrubbery, swung me round and flung me on the bed and climbed on top of me, I couldn't have gone weaker of the knee.

Belongings homed thus, he regained his swagger and returned to the living room. I quickly deposited the rag-tag bag of shopping in the kitchenette and hurried to try and salvage my duties as host.
“Good Lord! Thoughtless of me.. leaving you wandering about. Let me make some tea.” Absurd, me jumping to conform to social niceties even in a context that Society itself would abhor: two men, unabashedly, lovingly locked.

“You're alright, sure we've not long had! Besides, wouldn't you want a fire to get the kettle to steaming.. dearie me..” Here Alec approached the hearth, dropped down to his hunkers and examined the grate, disturbing the small piles of ashes that were coned within. Clanks issued from the large gold chest to the right of the fireplace as he rooted around inside, and extracted a small shovel and brush.

“Is there kindlin' here too? Ah, yeh *snap * ee... that's grand and dry, soon have this cracklin'!”

I did not like the visual of Alec scrabbling about on his knees, his hands steadily getting dirtier as he worked, swiftly sweeping and arranging and rummaging around in the filthy coal. I was strongly reminded of all the servants I had ever seen – not even seen, really, I suppose 'been vaguely aware of' may be more honest, accurate, out of the corner of my languid eye; them beavering away in corners, constructing, or squirrelling away tidying, or ferreting away collecting rabbits.

At this point I was fixed with the fevered urge to disassociate, to elevate Alec above other workers of his kind; yes he was a game-keeper, part of the 'help' at Penge, a labourer, uneducated, roughly skilled, unleavened, unrefined – but not really – truthfully he was sensitive, intelligent, graceful, a gentleman, maybe of – I smile – great expectations! See – it happens in a novel, it can happen in reality, surely. Otherwise why?

Oh silly me. Oh those thoughts and rationalisations and mind games. Gentrifying Alec! Whereas, what I should have been doing, instead of anxiously and mentally changing him to try and justify our love, I should have given in right then, and appreciated him for exactly who he was, what he embodied.

I suppose I was frightened of the wide disparity between us and wanted to convince myself that we were – or could be – more similar than not, socially. Little did I realize how perfectly we would marry, but on an emotional level. My other half.

But – mere hours after we had vowed to each other, standing over him, I said: “Alec, look.. there's no call for you to do that, we – I can call someone, or -” here I paused, thinking: Mrs. Lemon? Did I really want her input? The live-out house-keeper - of Clive's acquaintance and choosing, and indeed, he was a favourite of hers – maintained and occasionally displayed a tight-lipped suspicion of me. She seemed to think, with me, Clive was scraping the bottom of the barrel rather! I, a malevolent force of corruption – how right she was, and so wrong! Clive's soul remains sacrosanct. Not even
Anne could sully him, I'm almost sure of that, unlikely as it seems anyway.

And anyway, even should I call her, I couldn't bear for our little bubble to be breached just yet. Alec would probably grin and josh with her, help her – no, not acceptable. Not going to happen, and thankfully for different reasons Alec was on the level: “Call! Call who? Nah, not at all – sure we're well able, ain't we, pair of us, got all the gear here – got a match?”

Wordlessly I handed him a book. I started myself to get fidgety watching him, because although he'd said 'we' there wasn't really any distinctive way for me to contribute – a feeling that harkened back to the university days, when we would have our round-table 'port and philosophy' discussion evenings and I was much more proficient with the former than the latter; court, as it were, never being held by me.

“If you're... well.. I might actually have a quick bathe.” I was acutely aware that I'd slept – outdoors! - in the clothes I was still wearing, dirty and rumpled and in need of care. Alec had possibly been wearing his crumpled cords and patched, grassy jumper even longer, but he waved and replied, “No bother! Away you and do that – I'll get this sorted in two shakes of a lamb's.”

Dismissed, I tapped my foot and yet walked towards the hall. Just as I was passing through the doorway, Alec called: “And eh! Don't be worrying about leavin' me alone with the silver! Ha! Ha!” It would be some time before I could enjoy – or even endure! - jokes of this acidity without clutching a door frame! But his effervescence, I'd see, his very outlook, was based on humour and lightness and a very cursory glance towards life's troubles. My parting gambit: “You are a ridiculous child,” before turning towards the bathroom, Alec's laughter ringing throughout the flat as welcome as the breeze in the leaves.

Inside the bathroom, I fully appreciated what I had said, overly-jauntily before: “alone at last.” Delighted and dizzy as I was to have Alec here – I was sure I was – still it did relieve to have a breather, a come-down, and I dare-say Alec, tinkering away with the fire, felt a similar alleviation. As long as we'd reunite soon.

I filled the tub, the hot-water being available building-wide from the mid-afternoon onwards, dropped my drapery and climbed in to think, more than wash, as is usually the case. My mind idled: was it not, to a degree, cozy, wonderfully banal and commonplace, to lie in the tub while Alec, a mere wall away, was banging and clattering away in this very flat, generally so quiet, hitherto so lonely?

Surely... in this spirit I closed my eyes and attempted, by smiling, and thinking fondly, and trailing my fingers on the surface of the warm water, to encapsulate, endorse, in truth to germinate, that easeful feeling.
Alas, one cannot forcibly relax; worries – the plague of my existence – continued to infest my happiness, like greenfly on a rosebush. Well, even I knew how to combat them – ladybirds, Mother told me at an early age. These worries may get eaten, but it won't be by an external benevolent force – it would be be by my devoting myself to Alec, to cease fearing both his leaving and his staying.

Righting myself – I felt it rather forward to reappear even half-naked, or even in a dressing-gown, so I was fully-clothed and hair carefully combed when I came back up on Alec, sitting cross-legged, habitually, in front of the fireplace, which was at present sucking on a sheet of browning newspaper positioned across its front – last weeks Times, looks of it – smoke puffing out into the room.

“I say,” I said. “Well done Alec! A Bonfire Night we shall have when it – after a bit – excuse me -” here I coughed and spluttered rather, the fug having gotten more concentrated as I approached Alec, who replied, or at least, said: “ Fucking, flipping thing! Where's the damper?” I assumed by now that he was talking to himself, and watched in silence through teary eyes until I realized that he was looking – glaring, no less! - at me. Forgive him; sometimes his intense stares take on the likeness of a frown and he can appear quite malevolent - “Well?!” he barked. “Or the whole place'll be thick wi'smoke – here, open a bloody window at least!”

Loathe as I was to let in any part of the external world, even air – I naturally bowed to Alec’s wisdom on the practical.

“Ah – hang about! I have she – there we go, and – away. Now we're suckin' diesel. It'll be merry now – if'n the chimley has been cleaned fairly recent?”

“I can only assume.. I haven't been using it as frequently as I once did, the flat I mean.” And I waved my hand in front of my face. Alec came over and took over, flapping his arms and attempting to clean the air around me. “Sorry about that! Perhaps you should have gotten Mrs. - er, after all!” So he did listen most carefully to me, absorbed even my stuttered utterances and half-formed trailing sentences.. I made a note to mark that.

“Not at all, it looks – er, is it supposed to be doing that?” For the sheet of newspaper that Alec had affixed to the fireplace, presumably as a rudimentary method of creating some draught in the flume, was blackening and then burning in the middle.

Alec said, “Tis surely – look, it's drawing,” and even as he said this he kicked the paper with his socked foot – which I would certainly have disagreed with had I known he would do it, but that's often the way with the wayward boy – before he dusted off his hands proudly.
“You're filthy,” I said.

“Oh. Perhaps a smudge or two?” He glanced at the looking-glass over the mantel for a split second; it seemed to cause a painful grimace. “Happen I could do with a quick scrub mysel', eh? No, better not touch me, it's true, right little filth-monger I am!” And he sidestepped towards the hall.

“I didn't mean -”

“That's alright, Maurice.”

“Can you manage..?”

“Indeed I can! Thankee!”

While the bathroom door clicked softly shut I tapped my foot, and my chin; at a loss with how to approach this more civil version of Alec.. I shook the old onion. Four seasons in one day, this fellow!

In spite of there being no doubt that he was fully capable of his own ministrations – he had found the W.C, at least – I felt I might as well prove myself helpful nonetheless by finding him a good guest towel – no, one of my own – and some clothes to change into.. it was rather fun, to go to my presses and rifle through the material. Clearly, any sort of formal-wear – three pieces, dinner jackets, even casual smoking ones – would be out of the question; Alec might, and probably would, assume that I was attempting to make him over, Pygmalion- style. Perish it!

Dashed shame I didn't have any cricketing things; he really did look rather fetching in them. There again, I didn't want to bring up the match just for a while, when I made my first frenzied attempt at escaping love. But browsing through the hangers, I came upon some items that seemed more appropriate and apolitical: tennis slacks, plain shirts, pullovers I might wear down to the Mission boxing and change there.

Satisfied, I crossed the lounge and in doing so noticed something beside the front door. It was Alec's boots, scarf and cap, all neatly stacked underneath the polished mahogany coat-rack, upon which he had hung my boating blazer he'd been wearing all day. Chiding to myself, I hung his cap and scarf upon a spare hook, and arranged his boots in the neighbouring shoe-rack. Though he had been, in my experience, the sort of character to not only take liberties but to snatch them, chest them and race off laughing into the middle-distance, he was more reserved during episodes of the non-sexual.
An entirely unjustified un-confidence, I might add. 'I'm as good as you', he'd said at the Museum, cockily but chin trembling. Stroking now the soft material of his scarf, I thought: No. Better. When really, it was equal footing we were striving towards; that which would fasten us together stoutly forever.

For now, however – for then, really, I do quite confuse myself – well, I knocked on the bathroom door. “How are you getting on?”

Splashes. “Oh, grand, grand..”

“I have some things to lay out for you,” I said. “Just a towel only, some clean clothes.”

“Well, bring 'em through then.”

Again – forward. Forward is the watch-word.

In I went, half expecting to see him lounging lazily in the steaming water, naked and knowing, hot and tempting – and I say, whilst I'm at it – why not lily-pads and palm fronds and gentle reeds bobbing alongside? Romance is darling, but it is for fiction.

Meat-and-potatoes Alec was indeed naked, but was perched on the edge of the tub, which was only about a third full, scrubbing energetically at his heel with a soapy rag (his kerchief, it transpired), splashing water all over the walls and floor. “Wotcher!”

Sidestepping the puddles – I too was wearing only socks – I made to leave the pile on the toilet lid. Alec had discarded his vest, and long-johns, and socks, and shirt, and braces, and britches, all in a joyful, uncaring wet heap.

“Don't look too close now! The water's gone cold – I swear! I were that long a-scrubbin', I were that encrusted, I well know it, making some headway now though – I'll have that – ta.” He gestured towards the towel I was holding, tossing his head to flick his saturated hair out of his eyes. “I'm about done now – started at the top and worked me way down, like.” A wet sniffler. “Cheers,” and he began rubbing the towel vigorously through his hair, face, neck, back all the while humming melodically.

You see? Put him in a situation where he can display his body, now glistening and wet with his
chest-hair curled into peaks here and there and his skin rubbed red with the towel, and he's all spunk: rather akin to firing up an engine.

Alec started to scrub lower-down, which seemed – I don't know – a faintly intimate endeavour, so I excused myself to his wry eyebrows and went to wait in the living room again. Now again, though I was 'home' – at one of them – I felt myself quite catapulted out of my element.

Tea! I might have clapped my hands. Of course: tea. To set things warm and welcoming and – normal – in the flat, because truly they were anything but. Never had this flat – nor the whole building, I shouldn't wonder! - seen such an odd couple as we, such extraordinary scenes. And only increasing..!

Alec didn't hasten, and it wasn't for me to wonder what he was up to in the bathroom taking so long, so while the kettle heated I drifted about the rooms, thinking about endings, and finishings, and gatherings-up. That was how I vowed to spend the next while, bringing everything related to my Old Life to a definite end, so that nothing from the past could ever reach forward into our blissful future and cause upset.

Oh how green! But can you blame me, the twenty-four hours I'd just had? Full to the brim with plans and eagerness for flight – although whither I had not yet broached with my companion – I went back to the bedroom and tugged down the suitcase that was gathering dust on top of the wardrobe. I had never gone in for going away, holidaying; Italy notwithstanding, I had only ever been half-enthused about joining Clive and his post-college Grand Tour and it was a relief at the time for me to beg off and start instead at Hill and Hall.

Of course I regretted it subsequently, given as how he slipped from my fingers, finally, in Greece – still, it would probably have happened anyway, had I been there with him or no. Would I rather we had our final showdown among the ruins of the Pantheon, or in the dining room at Alfriston Gardens? Hardly mattered – especially now.

My main point, from the preceding, is that, no traveller I, was at a loss at what to pack. What would we need? Bare bones basics? Or should we attempt to live as comfortably as possible? My eyes fell upon loafers, spats, Oxford shirts, scarves, hats, socks, ties, carefully pressed handkerchiefs, underthings innumerable, driving gloves, cuff-links... perhaps not. Not if I got my way, not if he agreed.

“Crikey! Haven't yer got just rails of clothes!” His voice spun me around and there he was in the doorway, peering around me at the piles of material on the bed, clad in my light cream and tan tartan tennis slacks, and the fawn-coloured woollen jumper: I had also provided a clean white shirt but Alec fore-went this, perhaps deeming it unnecessary given the circumstances, the company, the craziness. As it was, the jumper, which hung off him rather, afforded me the view of his chest-hair, bold right between his pectoral muscles, reminding me of how he blind-sided me utterly after the cricket-match – he being too real, too near, I had wanted to touch him, I wanted to now, and I could, so I did.

I reached over and squeezed his upperarm, he smiled but didn't remove his hands from his – my – pockets, a habit he seemed wedded to. Whether he transferred all of his appurtenances from trouser to trouser was yet another mystery about him.

And so I addressed the heaps of assorted garments. “Yes, I am rather dashed – what to bring along, and what to let?” All the same, with a friend with me, I was beginning to feel the bubbling
excitement of a trip, a flight – what one must rightfully feel before one's hols.

“Bung it all in, if'n you can't decide. I'll help you cart it about – it's no odds to me. I'll not be weighting us down, anyroad – all me worldly half-way across the Atlantic be now. Likely got chucked overboard when I turned into a no-show!”

“Hullo, really? That would be a shameful waste.”

“Not really; didn't I say that there's nowt worth owt in my kit? My bits and bobs sure.. no loss.”

“Do stop running yourself down like that, Alec.”

He smiled. “It's just my ways.”

“Well, mend them. How would you like it if I were constantly belittling myself?”

“Just you try it!”

We spent the next while going through my belongings – what few there were at St. John's – packing some, discarding others. Alec tried on my enormous fur coat – it looked as ridiculous on him as it did on me; but it gave him a laugh so for that alone it was worth its costliness.

Discarding I took to with gusto – miming as if to fling the unwanted garments out into the tree-lined street – Alec stretched across the sill as I did so, one leg dangling outside, with a cup of tea in one hand and one of his filthy roll-ups in the other.

He said, “All of this posh clobber? Now there's a shameful waste. Not at all canny of thee, Maurice. Hadn't you rather donate them charitable? Bring 'em down your – Mission?”

“Burn down the Mission.”

Alec raised amused eyebrows at my lofty vehemence.

I continued, “I'm done with it, and everything else. Really, just ways to fill the days, pass the time, sallying forth as it were..”

“Mmm,” said Alec, nothing more and he tapped his ash out the window. Ruffling the curtains and tickling his curls, the wind came in further and flapped the leaves of some books thrown on the bed, the dresser. I followed his gaze out of the window on which he sat and I leaned on my elbows. Five floors up, we were confronted with a pretty singular view of the city, of this borough at any rate and the less aesthetically gratifying ones far beyond.

Still, grey was the aspect generally; the buildings, the pavements, roads, deepening sky, the vehicles, even the trees in this light were less green and healthy and too few, of course, even in the citified suburban sector. Smoke and fog mingled upwards, the city quite exhaling her exhausted air.

Gently, I murmured, “Rather different, what? Than what you're accustomed to, rolling hills, clear skies, leaves of grass..”

Alec said, “Well, I have been here before.” Colour drained, he saw and hastily added: “Not in this here flat, by God! I'London, I mean, before this, you even. Fuck, that'd be summat, eh, I been here exact a'fore!”

Goldfish likeness, as before, was all I could contribute.
“What it is, this place, h'ain't it? The pair of ye. You and Clive. Little love nest.”

He sounded cautious, not contemptuous – like he was testing a theory, not getting in a jibe.

“It was,” I said thoughtfully, “after a fashion, our place, Clive's really, yes and mine; though it's not been used that much lately. It never was used much, merely a place to lay one's hat.”

Compensating for his bumbling, perhaps, Alec: “It's right nice. I like the – erm, finishin’s.” He looked back out the window at the last wisps of sunset; one by one lamps were lit in windows around the square, the golden lights diffuse and remote. “Nice view.”

Order restored, he slurped his tea, and I shook a shirt before folding it. I realized I had again missed the opportunity to ask Alec about his previous engagements – entanglements, no doubt – in London.

Evening drew in; the candles and lamps around the living room danced light on the richly papered walls, for I'd left the window ajar so that the sounds of traffic infiltrated faintly; louder was the rustle of the breeze through the beech trees just beneath our storey.

I sat in an armchair drawn up to the fire; Alec had dragged one over also but opted to sit on the rug with his back against it, toasting his stockinged feet. The wine I wasn't sure about, not usually being in the position to choose; and Alec said he thought only Catholics drank wine – and everything else – how and ever, I clinked through the drinks cabinet and unearthed some whisky of an agreeable smoothness.

It is absolutely extraordinary, the influence of another human presence. Many's the time I had, particularly in the past year, found myself drinking alone into the night, in front of this and other mantels. Alcohol seemed to only to compound my sorrow yet I needed it to function, to obliterate, and to sleep. Yet now, with Alec here, someone else working their way through the decanter, sharing the sin, as it were, him wobbily refilling his glass, then grabbing my hand and doing the same to mine, drinking was now the most comfortable, companionable ... pursuit imaginable.

We had remained hitherto clothed and physically separate, but still it would be inaccurate to say our evening had been chaste; electricity and warmth and ease and excitement crackled between us and we had followed each other around the flat tidying, poking around, doing chores, packing. I welcomed this friendliness more than anything at present; after all had I not once myself espoused that one must talk, talk, talk?

“Mmm... grand stuff,” said my friend. “Goes down as easy...”

“Yes.. I do apologize that there's no ice.”

“Arah.. not a bit of it! More refreshing this way,” and he clinked his glass to mine.

With a satisfied swig, he gazed at the fire, but spoke to me. “So.. what would you be doing of an evening like this, if you wasn't here with me? I mean.. if this is slap bang out of the ordinary.”

“You can safely say that,” I said.

“Well? What do you do for jollies?”

I struggled to say; so long had it been since I had had a true jolly – the Russet Room notwithstanding of course.
“If I wasn't here with you? If this were a run-of-the-mill evening?”

He drew up his knees to his chest and hugged his arms around them, then laid his chin on his arms, crystal and amber dangling. “Yeh – go on!”

“I have no great larks to impress you with. I never was any social butterfly I'm afraid! Really just floated round on the outskirts; well, of course, being different..” A sip of whisky calmed me somewhat. “But if I wasn't having dinner with a client, or attending a notable party in the same vein, or dining with someone from college, or the City, or home with Mother, then perhaps, if there were something of repute, and gaining fashion starting over in the West End, a show?”

“Show? Down the music-hall?”

“Ye-es, perhaps the theatre, the Opera.”

“The h-Opera! If'n you don't smile!”

“Don't laugh,” I pleaded.

“I weren't, I were just – repeatin'; let's just say I'm glad you didn't suggest our goin' out on the town tonight!”

Indeed I hadn't. It had been jarring enough running into Chapman in town earlier – I was so dashed proud to have Alec on my arm, emotionally anyway, but I was horrified still at the idea of putting him on display – of being on display, with him. Was it because I was ashamed, afraid he would tarnish – nay, shatter my carefully constructed conventionality? Or was it that I wanted to keep him safe from prying, prejudging eyes? Keep safe – after all, we were criminals.

For clarity, untangling: “Don't ... don't run away with the impression that I go out to an entertainment every night. For if I'm honest, if not for you, I might just have a quiet night down at the Club.”

Alec quirked the mouth. “Oho. The Gentleman's Club?”

“More like the blessed Boy's Club if I'm frank.”

“Ha! And what do you do there? Besides drink – play billiards? Darts?”

I gave a puff of laughter. “Perhaps! Really, mostly take the papers, talk.”

“Is that right? And what would youse talk on?”

God but he was a curious little thing! Though of course, as I said, I was flattered by his interest. To whom else would it matter in the slightest how I had whiled away my miserable, miserly life thus far?

“Oh God, mmm... Business of course, current affairs, politics.”

“Putting the world to rights?” said Alec.

Now I was certain I was ashamed. The nonsense I'd blustered and blown! About 'the great unwashed', the poor, scourge on the city, the diluting effect that the working classes had on the Great British Character! And yet no servant – least of all Alec – that I'd ever encountered actually attested to this prevalent attitude. I'd always been polite, genial, a generous tipper. Why did this spirit of philanthropy clash so with my cold speeches? Which was the real me? I was then a man juggling several dualities.
“So much hot air,” I said. “...really. Not that I contributed much! No great loss on the place without me tonight, or from now on, come to that.”

“I dunno about that,” he said. “I like hearing you talk. You're main clever.”

Not a compliment I had often – maybe ever – had bestowed upon me; certainly not with such bright-eyed sincerity.

“Not even close to the case, Alec. I know a few bits and pieces out of books and can recite them back, but as regards a more essential, earthy intelligence, well... I shall rely upon you, to educate me there.”

Alec shot a look of disbelief. “Me?!”

“Oh yes,” I said. “It's palpable. How much sooner we'd've gotten off the ground, the two of us, if only I'd listened to you from the out.”

“You think I got a handle on this thing? You lookin' to me for guidance? Well Maurice, you'll be left wantin'.. I'm afeared you're coming to the goat's house lookin' for wool, that ye are..”

“I'll take that chance,” I said. Besides which, I was sure he was wrong – this was more of his automatic self-deprecation. He would look after me.

“And you?” I asked then.

Through a mouthful of whisky, Alec: “Mmmm?”

“What of you? How would you be spending your leisure time, were you not.. hadn't we.. well – at home?” It hadn't occurred to me that I could ask – now I was desperate to know, had to acquaint myself fully with his habits, his hobbies, his 'ways'... A mystery man he remained at that time for me to slowly, delightedly unravel.

No hesitation on Alec's part. “Down t'pub.”

“Ah. And what would you be doing, besides drinking, a-and billiards, and – dear me, what else did you say...?”

Chagrined, but grinning, Alec knocked my knee with his elbow. “Give over, you.”

I leaned back in my armchair, smoothed the lapel of my smoking-jacket, swirled my drink. “Elucidate. Indulge me.”

“Since when do I do owt else?” said Alec; I merely stroked his arm with my sock.

“Hmmm.. I'm s'posin' we'd likely be planning our next fishing trip – if I weren't going away, like. If things was going on like they done. Hellfire, that's probably what they lads is discussing right now, that's if the aul pair have released them from a-beatin' the boglands with sticks a-looking for us! - for – me, I mean!”

Toes froze mid-stroke on his sleeve. “What – do you really think they will be? People? Looking for you?” It just hadn't occurred. Heedless! Stupid! Of course one – or especially, two – cannot just disappear overnight in to the blue, even if profoundest midnight shroud the serene lights of heaven. It had been dark, but must get light again. Fanciful.

Suddenly I was seized with fear – that my much longed-for treasure – my Alec – might be snatched
away so wretchedly soon; I had considered that in snipping the last silken threads with Clive that I had put an end to it – whatever 'it' was. Our inessential lives, Alec's and mine. Not so.

“Oh, Well...” Alec said. “Aye indeed, that they might, that they well might... not lookin’ too hard, mind you! What I meantsay.. I'll warrant it's going down as just another of Old Alec's mad jibes, skippin' the boat, vanishin', not a word said.. No.. erm.. looking back...” Flames reflected in his eyes that had dulled even as his face reddened.

Had I been a noble man – a good one, a right one – I should have relinquished him then and there, freed him, encouraged him even, towards the path of sense, said: “You can, you must go back.” But I couldn't – couldn't even whisper it, was afraid to even think it lest he read my mind – those dark, knowing eyes of his.

To release Alec, send him away, lose him now – I might just as well have taken the letter-opener on the parlour chest and stabbed it into my heart, or jumped out of the window, or applied myself to a belt, or the curtain-sash, a scarf. Any of these would have been preferable to his leave-taking and one of which would most likely proceed such an event. No. Coward I was I clung – terrified and rocked – fear I could endure, loneliness not. Never again.

Daydreams and wonderings occurred to Alec frequently, constantly, but they flashed by like street-lights dashing past a carriage window. “Still!” He drained his glass, which, if you'll remember, he had only fairly recently filled with whisky. “Happen it'll blow over, soon 'nough there'll be summat else to gossip about.”

Was he seriously so cavalier, or was he putting on an act? After all, he was both intelligent and compassionate; for him to abandon his family and expect there to be no repercussions was too simple an idea for him to truly believe. More my remit.

With the poker he'd kept handy – he'd decided that the fire was to be his area of expertise – Alec nudged the glowing coals, and as they crumbled and fell apart the flames fluttered higher and waves of intense heat were released. I stared at the hearth and tried not to think. Alec was an expert in that juncture too.

Effortfully and woozily lurching to his feet, as though he weighed a waterlogged tonne, he then stretched to his fullest height, hands in the air and toes on tip, only to plop himself down heapfully into my lap. It was most awfully enjoyable to feel his warm bottom wriggling against my thighs, as he curled around, relaxing and then moving, throwing his legs over the arm of the chair and about sending my glass quite airborne.

With some difficulty – the chair was not a large one – he fed his arms around my shoulders, and laid his head on mine, his breath blowing the hair at my temple. There was meanwhile no difficulty at all in my putting my arms about him, circling his waist, being drunk and uninhibited enough to slide a hand up under his jumper and up along his beautiful soft side above his hip, and then back down, now inching my hand into his trousers, finally clutching the top half of a generous buttock.

Alec picked a patch of hair on my head within easy reach above my ear and fell to combing it, over and over, and over with leisurely fingers. I rubbed my face on his shoulder – is the picture clear? I remember it vividly. Better than a photograph – I can conjure up the feeling of his heavenly heavy body in my embrace. Not that I need now magic up memories: but still, I like to. Simply part of our wonderful, mad rich story.

Clothes were not ripped off, left hanging off the chandelier or crumpled on the carpet. As we merely sat, half-lying, gathering one another, breathing lazily, alike in warmth and feeling, and above all – together – I felt more and more contented, and comfortable, it just grew and grew, not unlike, as it
Alec tilted his face downwards and I, as if waiting, immediately, almost simultaneously, leaned upwards and when our lips met it didn't seem like the end of our intimate conversation but a continuation; further communication, justification, assurance, connexion. Splendid, simply splendid to have a beautiful boy curled in your lap, his every limb and body part inclined towards you, his muscles relaxed but blood pumping with youthful energy, his hands guiding your face, his eyelashes tickling your cheeks as he kisses you deeply, slowly, concentrating very hard on every push and slide of the tongue, every press and release of the lips. Breathing is secondary; the lungs realize this and become quite frantic!

O Alec! Breathtaking, beautiful, sweet loving boy! I could scarcely believe he was really there, wanting me avidly – such early days back then! And yet certain aspects had already become so fond and familiar: of course I'd re-imagined all the love we'd made so far many times, a thousand fold. As soon as Alec touched me that night at Penge, my body changed; he left his mark there like the scent of a plucked flower on fingers – when he departed I only had to close my eyes to feel warm, almost painfully wet skin rubbing on mine, hands in my hair, hot spasms between my legs and his.

“Oooo... Maurice..” he breathed now, as I kneaded his buttocks and he strained against me in response, and it was like having all your sins awashed away, all your fears and doubts reduced to a handful of dust. A crime? A perversion? An affront to Nature, to Society, to Science, to Civility – hang it, hang it all! Every one fades into obscure and oblique insignificance, and more distant than the furthest stars; right now, the closest entity to me was Alec, Alec shifting around so as to press himself even more urgently to me, as if he wanted to assimilate his very being with mine, biting along my neck. My eyes closed blissfully and my head tipped back; he followed and put his mouth to my ear, a kiss, strange and wonderful then: “I want you,” he whispered when he'd managed to ingest enough oxygen, heart jackhammering and his body squirming like quicksilver. Tongue on my ear, oh, and.. “Shall we..?”

It had already been far too long. Twenty-four hours or so! In each other's constant presence, yes, but I wanted more, more, what's even more intense and real than Presence? Union. I nodded; he dove in for more mad kissing. To my own surprise, and in my haste, the Magic led me to gather him firmly, my arms hooked under his knees and back, and lift him bodily as I stood up out of the armchair. Alec pulled his lips away from my throat with a start and looked wonderingly down at the carpet brisking by as I strode towards the bedroom; I carrying him bridally, to our mutual mortification – we shot red-faced but shy and delighted grins at each other, glad when we reached the bed and I left him carefully down on top some shirts and towels and other irrelevancies; he wound his arms around my neck so I climbed awkwardly on top of him, propped up on my arms as he strained upwards.

And... well, a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell. But then, we did a lot more than kiss.

As it had been in the boathouse – on the floor! - I was in, shall we say, the more dominant position, as I was on top of Alec and gradually lowering my weight onto him with every fresh kiss, every squirm and readjustment, every pull. But I was only so because, again, Alec let me, or made me – he was the leader and I did willingly all his body and eyes and breathes asked. In fact he had practically, hitherto, been telling me outright what to do and when!

I was a fast learner – to my amazement, never had been in school – but all the same though I was happy to discover what Alec's preferences were – if you're interested he liked (likes) his neck and shoulders kissed and nuzzled, his sides and flanks caressed and squeezed, his ears kissed, his upper legs massaged, his hair brushed back even when it's no longer in his eyes – still, how was I to surprise him if all I did was follow orders? Even at this early stage I felt the growing desire to experiment, to push, even if it was to take a long time before I became half so naturally talented a
lover as Alec. Happy was I to be his nightly canvas..!

Of course I was still abominably shy, as well as eager. I was hard and so was Alec but I didn't feel ready to extract either of us yet; it was safer and most lovely to kiss, kiss and continue – Alec emitting the most pleasured little moans whenever his mouth could manage it.

So I'm good at this? Something I can do well? Yes.. pressing closer, or lower, I pushed my mouth on his and kissed with absolute abandon and the barest of finesse. Rather too unrestrained maybe – Alec's eyes flew open with the force of my kiss and he grabbed my shoulders; embarrassed, I travelled along to his neck under his ear on the rough stubble of his jaw and he didn't admonish or laugh but groaned fit to burst.

My left hand I wrapped round his body so it was trapped underneath; my right I actually had to keep clutched on the headboard as otherwise I might leave too much of my weight on Alec's chest and lungs..oh how I overthink! I was just so very sensitive to his comfort and pleasure!

While wondering what to do next, as Alec seemed perfectly agreeable to my taking the reins, I kissed his neck, licking and then gently biting a spot - “Oooo.. Ooh!” I paused and sought his eyes, which were clamped shut; slowly he opened them – I bit again to check - “AH! Ah, Maurice!!” - this time his eyes rolled towards heaven and perspiration flowed at his forehead and lips.

So – he liked this – his hand came to the back of my head and he forced my face against his neck - “Again, c'mon, really bite it, fuck-it, leave a mark, eh, who's gonna see!!” Even though I ascertained from his hisses and gasps that it was painful at least to some extent, the pleasure clearly over-rode the discomfort and he clung harder as I gently but constantly nipped and licked and kissed at a concentrated patch of skin on his neck below his ear, loving the feel of his pulse racing under the wiry, hairy wet skin. My own woolly jumper's soft collar I had pulled aside.

Bolder, I chewed lightly on him – he had said to leave a mark! In answer Alec convulsed, howled and actually kicked his tennis-trousered legs exuberantly, almost panicked. Alarmed me rather and I pulled back, a bit cautious to even kiss him now; I looked at the red circle I'd made on his neck, panting.

Alec was heaving, he had liked that so much! Automatically he removed a hand from my hovering shoulder and reached for his own straining bulge, squeezing and rubbing desperately as if he was externally compelled, whining and biting a lip.

“Here! I'll -” and I slid my hand down to join his, his hips now bucking crazily.

“God!! I'm sorry, that just – Jesus – sends me spirallin' – didn't mean to rush, sorry, just I – oh I been wanting you all day -”

“And I you – oh Alec..” I fell to kissing him much more softly now as we both worked on his pleasure centre. Well – one of them.

What followed were minutes – delicious ones – where I lowered my clothed body down on his and we struggled and wriggled round, straining our hardness against one another and pawing clumsily at each other's bodies. I'm afraid it lacked delicacy – born of desperation and, I believe, emotional and biological chemistry. I won't be told otherwise.

It was so rough and inexpert – probably adolescent – and wonderful, and yet at the same time I was trying to regain some control; I wanted the occasion, the event, the completion – whatever way it happened, I didn't want us to just finish frantically in our clothing – most fine but I craved that culmination, that build-up, that stretched-out scene where Alec decided what we'd do, leapt to the
of his considerable skills and awareness. Braggart that he is, he loved to incite and inform me with something new but at the same time always it centred on me: deriving my moans and making me incoherent with pleasure he took as a personal mission.

By now I had given up on trying to maintain the upper hand as it was all that I could do to keep up with Alec, who by now had pushed my smoking jacket up to my armpits, and my pyjama pants down to my knees and was fiercely rubbing my back, down my behind to my back-knees and back up again, over and over. A leg wrapped around mine, curling round like ivy. My head was yanked away from his by the hair as our lips parted; he gasped for oxygen, pushing me back into his neck but I couldn't bite any-more as I myself needed air, hot air breathed frenziedly through his hair.

“Please I – want to see you – your – body -” - as I was pulling up his jumper, exposing his wondrous, soft and generously-haired belly, at which I dipped and kissed and rubbed with my face, before attempting to yank his slacks off - “Whaou! Wait, hold on there, pet, they wonnot -” Alec rolled around from under me and hopped onto the carpet, undoing and pulling his pants off hastily with his tongue stuck out in concentration. “Right – just a mo’, gotta -”

Gifting me a grin, he subsequently turned and bounded out of the bedroom in just his joyous jumper and socks, leaving me questioning but confident that he would return, and I shrugged out of my smoking-jacket and ridiculous pyjamas in preparation. Rattles sounded from an adjacent room: could have been the lounge, the kitchenette, the bathroom, the other bedroom. I stretched back on the coverlet, quite naked, at both times cold with the chill of the breeze and warm with wanting.

As the lights remained lit in the lounge, but hadn't been seen to in the bedroom, such was our haste, it was a dark, decidedly, deliciously male silhouette that appeared and lingered in the doorway, with an arm leaning provocatively upon the jamb – I rose up to my elbows, and even extended a hand towards him, but the shadow, so familiar yet so strange, stepped ever so slowly and languidly to me, with something in one hand and the other by turns on its hip, in its hair, biting its finger, driving me quite mad with desire.

Jaunty little tease as he liked to play, he couldn't himself resist for long – I saw the outline of that curly hair and the big sleeves of his jumper – far be it for him to wear fitted clothes! - as he approached the bed, knee-walked over it and straddled my thighs. A metallic sound rang manifest: upright and careful, he was opening a tin of something that glistened rather in the light of the street-lamps outside the window and the firelight soothing in from the living room.

Next thing I was aware of was his warm, slippery hand applying itself to my hard, warm exuberance which was directed upwards, bobbing and waiting until Alec's touch rendered it ready and able...

“...darling...”

A smile. “H'ain't even started yet, gorgeous...” And to my absolute shock, horror, disorientation and delight, he leaned forward on his hands and knees over me, I thought he was to kiss me and I readied, only for him to look backwards between his own legs, take hold of my wet and weeping blatancy and commenced to slowly, impossibly lowering himself towards it, with the utmost concentration and care.

That first soft nudge of his back-cheeks to my tip very nearly rendered me finished and done; I needed little more pressure and sensation than the fact that he was there, he was beautiful, and warm, and real and desperate for me, and willing, and human and wonderful and dark and doe-eyed and – and - and strong and muscular and masculine – all I'd been craving – when he steadied me, and those cheeks began to ever so slowly enclose me, fit themselves around me, I held my breath and gritted my teeth for control – Alec, still looking steady backwards though it was so dark in the room, had one hand on me as he adjusted himself, one hand loosely on my shoulder to steady me, and he
was grunting and puffing a little while my eyes rolled around my head – Alec, Alec, Alec!!

“Jesus – God!!” That was me – Alec’s breath remained held, as if the process of breathing was so closely related to the action that his lower body was now painstakingly undertaking – half of me took so far. Oh my lord.

As he accepted more of me in, Alec was compelled to rise sitting, pull his face away from mine; and of course I was compelled to object to this increase in distance.

My hands I had on his cheeks – the facial ones – and as he sat up more, taking more – God – I slipped my fingers from his close-eyed face down his jaw to his neck, lingering over his woolly collar somewhat disappointedly, until he noticed and whipped the beige cable-knit off violently with one hand and I was free to roam all over his chest and sides and body and hips.

Lower lip bit purple, almost bloody, as far as I could make out, he finally released me from his hand and sat bodily down on my hips – it felt incredible but I was consciously cautious. It felt incredible but I was so very unsure, inexperienced, wary: I was inside Alec, as I had been at the boathouse, but he seemed so very – very conflicted over it – that is to say, as I gazed up at him, his face, with its scrunched eyes, pouring sweat, red cheeks, grinding teeth, told me that he was pleasured, yes, but working exceptionally hard for it.

“A moment?” I whispered.

His eyes opened and met mine with as much love as ever I’d seen. “Yeh... yeh, just.. get us used..”

Us, he said: as if this was a mutual effort. Precious boy.

More, and then no more: fully there, and he seemed to bob a curtsy on me softly, and tipped his head back: “Ooo.. I love you.”

“Oh thank God!” I said, words rushing unchecked and gasping.

Dimpled grin and side eye, Alec looked ready to laugh, and foolishly I stammered, “Just, well – y- you hadn’t said it yet, and – and -”

Now a full teeth grin and he rolled his head around slowly; maybe shaking it at me. As well he may.

I had been running my hands up and down his sides, and he had had his on my shoulders, but now I took both of his in mine and squeezed them assuringly, and he gifted a wobbly smile, and as we held hands thus he began to move, to very very gently incline towards me, then lean back again, then the same again, and again. It had flashed though my brain that he might well – would well – in this position grab me or the bed-post behind in a vice-grip and fall to riding me frantically, but this – oh this – oh Alec – he was merely rocking to and fro, backwards and forwards, our hands linked, our eyes simply pouring into each other every sympathy and understanding.

Is this alright? Is this enough?

Enough! It's so much – more than I've ever felt or wanted, dear boy, darling Alec..

Oh! I'm glad.. main happy..

As am I.. Just keep this pace, it's beautiful, you are..

And it was, he was.
He leaned back, then forward, put his hands on my belly, slid them to my sides – I was paralysed and dazed and disbelieving, just about, and making no effort myself to the proceedings – yet was it not I receiving all of the gratification? One wouldn't think so, however, from Alec's countenance; he still seemed quite pressured, eyes shut, but was rocking so gently and murmuring softly...

I tried to relax and enjoy but it was difficult, when each fresh session of sharing with Alec proved to be the high point of excitement of my life entire.

Leaning over me, weight on his arms, he said: “Let on...”

I just bobbed my mouth idiotically.

“You know... when you -” And he leaned back, sitting up on me once again, and he smiled his wonderful crooked smile, and whether it was this, or his warm, tight, body below, or mere coincidence, but at that precise moment I cried out and fastened up into him, done, sudden, my fingers clawing the sheets, a good thing, for if I was touching him I might well bruise brown.

When panting subsided to normal – though what's normal? Ever since this explosive thing with Alec began I'm dashed if my pulse-rate hasn’t increased permanently; not just during night-time antics but all day every day.

We slowly stopped moving, only trembling, soaking. Alec looked more beautiful than it is possible to describe. He surpassed poetry – the most wonderful, lyrical pronouncement paled; what a waste to hunt through dictionaries, observe the Old Masters, visit the sublime Alps, study iambic pentameter and sibilance and rhyme – when this panting lad, his legs parted and thighs pressed to my hips, breathing shallowly, his fringe, his eyebrows – lashes even! - plastered with sweat from pleasuring me – Alec was passion.

Couldn't be bottled but could be caressed and cuddled – I liked that just as much as the sex-act; in fact even during the deed I would have a section of my mind reserved and giddy with anticipation for the proceeding closeness, the bliss of wrapping ourselves around one another, chastely this time, whispering and kissing each other to sleep, as we'd done before and would do again on occasions innumerable.

Ever the pragmatist, however, Alec took to scrabbling round the bedcovers, carefully keeping his hips steady on me. “Is there a – need a – rag, or hanky, summat..”

“Oh,” I said, and I began reaching over the side of the bed where half my wardrobe lay crumpled. I couldn't reach and Alec was staunch, so I grabbed the pillow from behind me and, pulled off the pillowslip and handed it.

“Ta,” said Alec and applied it to his backside, and slowly eased himself off of me. It seemed to me pointless at this juncture to avert my eyes out of demureness and besides, I wanted to watch. He mopped himself up unabashedly and stood on the carpet, rubbing his head with both hands before tossing his fabulous mane of hair back.

“Oh God... mm.. the lavvy?” I directed him and he thoughtfully applied some of the floor clothes to his body before departing, with a slight limp that made my brows tent in concern.

Creaks issued – the poor bed had never seen, nor possibly imagined such scenes, such energetic activity – as I swung my legs out and made for the kitchenette, fishing my smoking-jacket out of the sea of material on the way.

It was a season of firsts. Never could I have imagined myself not only electing to make tea, and
unwrap cakes and slice bread and arrange fruit, and generally fuss about the kitchen, but to enjoy it, to take down particularly nice tea-ware and to smile in expectation. How wonderful it was to have someone to care for, attend to! No wonder women seemed to garner all of their basic human needs and satisfactions from being mothers.

With everything crammed onto the only tray I could root out from beside the oven, I clattered back to the bedroom, and set it down just as Alec came back in, walking a little more comfortably, in the same woolly jumper as before, and, actually, a pair of my own pyjama bottoms of maroon paisley. He was a sight.

“Feeling pepped?” I asked, sliding back onto the bed and patting the mattress for clear invitation. Alec advanced, and looked at the tray with its steaming teapot and rather higgledy-piggledy assortment of broken, crumbed cakes, cucumber sandwiches, grapes and crockery which I had all but jammed on.

“Am I dreamin’? Or have you gone and prepared tea?”

“I have indeed,” I said cheerfully. “We’re behind on our meals although caught up satisfactorily on everything else.” Here I smiled rakishly. Yes, I did. I had never had charm. At least – not of a very refined kind. If I had any draw, any – attractiveness, at home, in school or college, it was down to the reassuring, spirited boyishness that I worked like a Trojan to cultivate and exemplify. Exhausting. Now, my brain buzzed just as chaotically, but with much pleasanter thoughts and obsessions.

My obsession creaked the mattress himself as he sat down beside me, wonderfully closer than he needed to, given as it was a king. I leaned over him and brought the tray to rest precariously on the bedsheets in front of us. “I assure you it's quite real.”

“Nothing feels real at this time of night!” Just as he observed this, the clock in the hall struck – twelve gongs – we counted.

“A midnight feast!” I proclaimed the occasion, filling a plate with sandwiches and broken pieces of cake and handing it to Alec. “Just as we used to have in school.”

“Ye would? At night? Oh yeh – you’s'd be boarden, wouldn'ae?” I was getting more and more accustomed to understanding his broad – perfectly darling! - provincial accent.

Pouring the tea, which had steeped to just the right strength, marvellous, I rejoined: “Ah yes, yes we would set our alarms, go to bed as normal, affect sleep when the monitors checked, and we’d get up really quietly – though part of the fun was the danger, really, if someone dropped a teaspoon or caught a sash on a door-handle! Oh and we’d huddle on our common-room, try and get the fire back into life, have our – stashed apples, jam sandwiches, liquorish all-sorts, ginger pop.. frightfully good fun. Just frightfully.”

Why on earth was I prattling on about something – albeit a fond memory, for once – that happened years and years hence? Why would Alec be interested? Yet he was charitable. Did I keep forgetting this central trait of his, or had I yet to allow myself to believe in it? More food for thought.

In the process of opening a – rather haphazardly-shaped, I'll grant you – sandwich and examining the contents, Alec replied: “We used to bring us rifles to school, shoot for rabbit an' pigeon at the lunch-hour.”

I was appalled. I appal easily. “I – beg your pardon? Guns, in the classroom, did you say?”

“Yeh, we propped ’em up at the back of the room, ready, yeh – quite a bunch of ’em depending on
the time o' year of course."

"Heavens... at my school you would have gotten jolly well sat on for that. I never heard the like of it."

"Wot – seems to you awful – uncivilized, like."

"Yes, frankly! I fail to see how you could colour it otherwise."

Alec shrugged. "It were just part of the ways. School-master used to show us our aimin' and what kind of flat plains had t'rabbits and marshes the duck..." With his mouth full of cake and sandwich, he turned to me suddenly and poked my shoulder with a finger so my tea-cup sloshed. "You does shootin' – remember? I seen it mysel': before you go castin' dispersions from up on your high horse."

"I? Hunting, you mean? But – contextually – that's a different matter entirely. We would do it for -"

Alec: "Sport?" I frowned. Alec added, unnecessarily barbing, in my view: "We eats what we gun down, general. Or sells. What do ye do with your foxes?"

Bristling is another talent I excel at.

"So now you're calling me barbaric?" I said.

"Did I say that?"

"It was inferred."

"Well," said Alec, "Consider it un-ferred." And he patted my face, which I rather liked, and I also liked that the debate had reached its taper.

A few stray currants that had escaped the cake remained on the plate among the crumbs. Alec righted this, and followed by licking his finger and wiping up those crumbs. He'd not yet taken his tea, so I precariously poured him a cup: "Hope you like it strong, it's been steeping." Alec nodded in thanks, or agreement. I speculate all – later I would be able to read his every gesture like the Queen's English, due to the connexion between us that would prove most fortuitous, not least to our relationship.

Three sugar cubes were dropped in and stirred noisily; he held the cup by the rim instead of the handle but at least he did hold the saucer too. Damnation! I shouldn't have been noting these breaches in etiquette, like a purse-lipped M'arm at a Finishing School. But then – I noticed just everything about him. Couldn't but.

I wondered. I'd been mulling, so I broached. "Ah – Alec, on the subject of outdoor pursuits, did you ever, can you imagine... ahem. Did you ever hear of that – silly – children's story, Robin of Sherwood?"

"Robin Hood? Yeh, oh yeh, we hear'd that at school. Larks!"

"Quite!" I was pleased; further commonalities between us. "Pure fancy of course.. living out in the forest away from the prying eyes of society and authority. Free to live the way one wanted, unrestricted, unashamed, possible but... ah.. pure fancy...” I was never a very good convincer. Clive,
for example, took it upon himself to fall in love with me – wasn't my knowing doing.

Alec remembered: “The gang only lived out in t'woods a-cause they was hidin' from the coppers – being criminals and all.”

I said, “But so are we.. can't you see? Our love for each other. The way we are – condemns us -”

“Whoa! Steady on, Maurice. You sayin' this is what you're proposin' – that we up sticks and disappear into the wilderness?”

“Into the Greenwood, yes.”

Alec: “HA! HA! HA! HA!” Each one a knife.

“What?” I said. “You think I'm only ribbing?”

More laughter, the cups shook on the tray and of course it was down to me to remove it and place it on the bedside bureau.

Miffed, I rolled away a little, grumpily brushing crumbs onto the carpet.

Alec, still: “He! He! Ho! Ho! You'se want to live in the trees like Robin Hood? And where do I figure in this scene? Maid Marion?”

“Don't be absurd!!”

And his raised eyebrows shot the exclamation marks right back at me.

I crossed my arms, and as I hoped, Alec scooted closer and began buttering. “Aw.. eh.. C'mon, if'n you did go natural that way, livin' wild.. You think I'd not follow?”

“Follow? No. I want us to walk side-by-side wherever we go, as fellow men, as equals. You aren't my supplicant – you said so yourself adamantly!” Scepticism painted his face however.

Blushing now, I: “In fact, given that you didn't – fulfil earlier -” Here, I squeezed his trousered thigh, and was thrilled when he gave a jump. “In the interest of fairness..”

“I told you it's alright,” he said, “We'll git round to it, I'll git used to it again.”

Venturously, I: “There are other ways..” And I leaned towards him, looking deep in his eyes. “Unless you're tired -”

He said, “No. Not tired.” But cautious. I finally slid my hand over his bulge, soft yet, warm and malleable, but I knew that very quickly he would achieve the state of arousal: particularly if I were to shuffle closer, apply my lips to his neck and up to his jaw, softest, barest touches.

Air that he had been holding exhaled sharply out his nose; I nudged him with my head to lean back against the pillows, while continuing to fondle him with the wonderful result of his hips beginning, of their own volition, to undulate and twitch.

Now we kissed, naturally.

Of course I was nervous, though Alec's dark eyes twinkled up at me as I kept rubbing at him. I was learning; I knew not to be too rough but to have enough pressure every so often so that he let out a gasp of pleasure and satisfaction. What I wanted to do.. I wanted to do more, but, how to, and would he.. or could I even do that to... for.. a servant?
I licked my lips, and drew out the moments. Mentally built up my courage and crawled back a bit on
the quilt so I could dip my head down, approach his – my hand, I know I should pull down his – my!
- pyjamas, reveal his hard longing length, and my mouth I – but I – want to so badly but – I panicked
and hid my face on his belly, nestling into the comforting woollen warmth.

Nervous, I imagined his voice: *Lost yer bottle? Or worse, Don't you want me?*

But my darling would say nothing of the sort; the trouble was, the kinder he was, the more eager I
was to please him, to impress him, to show how I felt for him physically, for him to reach the
ecstasies and for me to be the one to take him there. For now there was a stalemate, I laying my head
on his stomach, he stroking my hair, my hand sporadically squeezing him intimately.

“It's alright, Maurice, you don' have to..”

Frustrated, I burrowed my face into his belly more so he laughed, and I looked up at him: “But I
want to..”

“Allright,” he whispered, and it was now, he'd show me, my fears took flight at the tenderness of his
fingers as he encouraged my head downwards. Now I was facing his paisley-covered erection, his
hips and my lungs both starting to heave with wanting, with what was about to happen, what must,
only there was no obligation, but desire, mad, unyielding and glorious.

“Just.. as you were doing, just now..” And Alec stroked my head again with – nervous? - pats and
brushes.

I happily obeyed; nuzzled into his readiness with my face, the same way I had just being doing on
his stomach, it wasn't scary at all, only warm, soft, yet hard, lovely, friendly and yet sensual, the feel
of him against my face was very heaven, his pants and sighs the stars.

I kept caressing him with my hand too and he started to very gently and slowly move his legs, his
feet dragging the bedsheet with curled toes, and it was so warm and intimate and his hand was soft in
my hair still, trying to curb his obvious excitement, I was compelled to kiss him primly through the
soft material of pyjamas and “Cr- crikey -” he liked it so I kissed him again, and again, his hardness
and over and around his softness too, kissing up, and down, and I knew then, and slid my hand
upwards to the waistband and began very slowly drawing down his garments, all the while nosing
his bucking vitals, now I was revealing his skin, he whined as my fingers tickled past his hips which
he rose to allow me to pull down his pants about half-way down his thighs, exposing – exposing –
here it was, so near and so evident -

Fascinated, I reached for his hips, hovered my face, ever nearer – Alec, who had been a sleepy,
squirming puddle of satisfaction suddenly regained some control over himself, grabbed my hand and
choked out: “It – it's alright, it's grand love, you don't have to launch in.. you can just touch, kiss if
you'd like, just – with your – O-oh God,” - for I had again tended eagerly to his suggestions, holding
him steady, running my cheek along his thick, warm hardness, sliding my lips up to the tip, and back
down, a small kiss, another, another in that wiry bush of hair..

“Oh fucking Christ!!”

Kiss, lick, tip, touch, hair, touch, slide, the other side... rub and breathe and nudge.. wet fingers and
warm tongue..

“Maurice!”

All of a sudden Alec sat up, bounced back away from me, the hand which had been trembling in my
hair now flying to his erection and he pumped himself frantically while my lips glistened, watching, stunned, as he brought himself with a groan, his other hand cupped around his surge so as to protect my surprised face.

He needn't have – but he did. Even then it was clear that I and my comfort took precious precedence in his thoughts, even as they swirled and splashed and spiralled. He needn't have – but I was rather glad he had; I could see, feel, smell – quite enough to be getting on with. I sat up.

Dazed, Alec looked over at me, swaying slightly, his hands still covering himself, wet, red cheeks, tented brows, huge eyes, teeth on perfectly curving rosebud lip... Botticelli angel. Though if I called him that now he might not have truly appreciated it; best to save it.

“Holy.... God. Cannae... cannae believe I survived that.. seein' you down there, a – and then...” He blew hair out of his eyes and smiled, shaking his head. His happiness amazed; mine proud, proud to bursting.

More hankies were employed, and the two of us more or less shevelled, and the tea-things cleared away, or aside, at any rate, I lay back and Alec threw himself onto my chest, arms around my neck and kiss after kiss after kiss on my cheek, my jaw, my neck before he tucked himself under my chin comfortably. Sleep claimed him and as it did so his arms slackened as his body relaxed, loosely but heavily draped on me.

I was not so sure and presumptuous, even then – I held him tightly, vowing to never ever let him go. Still I must have done at some stage, for when I awakened to the sun shafting in the half-closed drapes, I was alone.
Alone, I knew, but not abandoned. He had departed but not gone, of this I was certain – wasn't I? I didn't panic – couldn't, simply wouldn't allow it. Alec was true-blue – though if course this was easier to believe when he was actually physically with me, his arm tucked into mine. Though I suppose one is supposed to believe, even in – especially in – the absence of the material: isn't that religion?

Brushing back a curtain, I saw that outside, the sky was blue and cloudless; the rain staving off for the time being. Glancing around at the messy room: clothes dropped on the floor and walked upon, crumbs, tea-leaves and God-only-knew encrusting the bedcovers, mud – again! - on the carpet – I elected to leave the curtains tightly joined, despite our being on the fifth storey. It felt safer – more enclosed, more inside, hidden.

Except – us? What of us, now? Presumably my partner was wandering about outside, this bird had flown, gone now out unto the harsh rude gaze of the world's entire population. Or London – same thing. Did he not realize the circumstances, the danger, our vulnerability?

Fruitless, I knew, but upon entering the parlour, the kitchenette, the other bedroom etc etc: “Alec? Alec?” A ringing silence.

“Dashed boy,” I grumbled as I prowled around, gaining some comfort from the fact that his bag remained where I'd left it neatly on the shoe-rack. Only his hat, scarf, boots, were gone, and his overcoat: all the same – I mean to say – getting up so early – it was before 8am – and slipping away like a thief, it was so like him, and yet just too bad!

Suddenly, something caught my eye – even despite the mess the flat was in, honestly, a tip! - it was propped up against the milk jug in which I'd placed Alec's bloody flowers – an envelope. A note? Apparently the envelope itself was the note, the writing was on the outside where the address should be, oh very clever Alec, very economical! Why must you colour your every action and undertaking with your own queer tint? Am I to stumble around you, always in a constant state of disarmament? Well if I must I must.

Looking at the note – reading is the wrong word – gave little illumination. As it was, I could only make out the odd word – the first – 'Maurice' – presumably – and then several lines that one imagines the private journals of a raving lunatic would throw up: 'bother', 'nice', 'hopped' – what!! I detested the confounding verb then – some acutely frustrating excited inking, 'thereabouts.' At the end, a lifeline: 'Your Alec.'
Well! If that wasn't something to confront at this hour of the morn, with not even a cup of tea to block the blow. Confusing fellow – what could it mean? Why had he not wakened me? I could only assume that he 'hopped' not to 'bother' me. What an absolute irony: I was usually such a fitful, light sleeper, and yet every night I'd spent with Alec – after Alec – I'd slept like a baby, exhausted but happy and contented. That sneaky little scoundrel..

All of a dander, I returned to the armchair – a bedroom is far too lonely on one's own, I'd found, once one's shared – and had a musing cigarette. Alec's envelope I twisted round and round in my fingers, looking distractedly around the dishevelled, cold room. It just wasn't good enough!

There again.. maybe it was. He'd gone out – hadn't felt the need to ask my permission – after all, he wasn't on a leash, he felt free to leave and I should feel the confidence and complacent assurance of a spouse that he would return. Only, he wasn't a spouse – nor I.

And our friendship had only spanned roughly a fortnight at that stage, and had had nothing short of a rocky start, and the sex, though wonderful, incredible, was it really enough to bind us? People have fantastical sex all the time, all over London, every night – strangers, one-nighters, drunk, for money. I'd no doubt, though no experience.

My point: my fear: what exactly did I have that would keep Alec drawn to me? A rollicking, roving, footloose, young and lusty lad like he? Oh Alec! Stay near me – do not take thy flight!

My fingers gripped the envelope's corner and I tapped it rapidly, restlessly on the antimacassar while my cigarette smoked - hello, what's this? For I felt something move, slide in the envelope as I flapped it, as if there was something inside. In fact, there was. The flap had been tucked in, instead of sealed, in that way rather thoughtless – flighty – sorts have, not gummed and certainly not waxed. With some trepidation, I extracted a folded paper, of cheap, off-white, and – a telegram. My telegram. The one I'd sent to Alec at his home, in answer to his threats, his beggings, his entreaties – the information he'd tried vainly to use for blackmail at the Museum..

' “A.S. Yes...” ' Yes. Indeed yes.

I saw – clear as the blue sky above me – this for exactly what it was. What had this very meeting referenced in the telegram led to? ‘ ‘I wouldn't hurt your little finger’’ - well, here it was. The only clue, the only incrimination – the only bit of concrete evidence tying me to Alec, and going some substantial way to proving or at least highly suggesting (even worse) our illicit association. Alec had never had any power – socially or politically; in wiring thus, I'd given him a little – and here he was handing it right back to me. Like the tip, at Penge, he wonnot take any of my supposed kindness if it meant acknowledging our differences. He is me, in disguise.
Lips twitching to a smile, energized with warmth and love, I stood, put the telegram back into its envelope and tucked it neatly into a box on top of the trunk I'd been packing. Very glad, even so, that something remained of our – albeit chaotic – beginning.

Work. To work – to get things done – for good. I washed up, grabbed my hat, umbrella – my briefcase was at Alfriston Gardens, no good, no use, no chance - walked briskly to the street and hailed a hansom, had brunch in a café on Mount Street, and gained the office by ten A.M precisely. I answered to no-one about my lateness; save for Ms. Best, the secretary, who jumped up at my appearance and handed me my messages.

“And Mr. Hall,” as she took my hat and coat, “Some-one quite urgent has contacted us, regarding a client's meeting you – er – missed on Tuesday night.”

Because I was at the hotel with Alec. Impassive of face – I've had a lifetime of practice - “Yes? Oh yes. A bit mouldy of me, last minute, I do realize – but unavoidably, an acquaintance, I had to see.. only one night in the City you see, before he was to – er – sail..”

Ms. Best is earnest, forbearing: “Oh of course, sir – only, Mr. Hill says that he's managed to pull a few strings and organized another evening where you can meet the Messers and their son, and, if it goes well, to attend with them next week's bicycle gymkhana at their country residence in – ah -”

“Kent. Well, we shall see. Won't we, Ms. Best? That we shall.”

She: “Erm.. of – course..”

If this little exchange with Ms. Best had gone well, or at least – passed – it was a display of and a testament to my acting skills, abilities at poise and composure. Well, it came at the price of seeping the very last modicum of rationality out of me; once closed into my office I confess, I just about fell to pieces. It wasn't merely that Alec had skipped away and I wasn't at all sure when (or whether?) I'd see him again. It was being here, in the cold, austere, but so very safe and respectable office that made me sweat and doubt.

Was it not possible that Alec had gotten cold feet – or rather, come to his senses? A man was he of course – but a boy too, so young; that came clear last night when he was staring into the fire making
reference to his family and home, remembered them, missed them. He was of them, he belonged there. Just like I belonged here; and I looked dolefully around at the file cabinets, the leather chairs, expensive paintings, fountain pens, the thousands at my disposal.

No, I say, I said – why should it be so? I must live alone, isolated, imprisoned in a room – like the cell of a bee? I could see now that loneliness wasn't inevitable, but it was still possible. Still it dogged me – its eradication, staying off, slaying relied utterly upon Alec. Consequently, so did I!

Thus did I spend my morning – what little of it I dedicated to the office, having – hang it! - slept in: chain-smoking with growing disquiet, jogging my feet, drumming fingers, staring out the window at the park and the ever-changing faces; jumping when the phone rang or the door knocked, drinking far too much coffee.

Lunch brought no relief, in fact it was worse; lacking the foresight or imagination to invent an excuse to stay in, or go far away, I was obliged to follow routine, the usual place, the usual bunch. I was very clearly not myself, barely answering questions, picking at my food and jumping like a rabbit at every shout, laugh, bang of door, scrape of chair, slam of till, poke in my arm. Only coffee brought me any joy, though I could feel its effects agitating as well as stimulating.

It was awkward: not least because most of the fellows at the table were also my train-mates, as it were, and my absence on the usual 6.08am – both yesterday and this morning – had been noted and therefore I had to undergo light-hearted scrutiny. Wiltshire, I said, which was in any case the truth; I even gave a little liberty on the subject of Anne and Clive – eyebrows were raised and bread chewed over this morsel. Hell, I had never felt so different to them all – Alec bouncing around on the bed, on me, back at St. John's! - if only they knew!!

But they didn't, couldn't; because they treated me normally, chummily, glad to be around me and my dull, reassuring respectability. Meanwhile, their company felt like quicksand drawing me back into my old life. Please, God, don't let me be alone again! Don't cast me out of Eden!

Calm down, Maurice, I told myself – my own self being up until now my best and only friend. I studied my hand – was it trembling? I peered at it until it began to.

“Something the matter, old chap?” Hathaway appeared beside me; all but I had noisily left the table and there were a dozen coats being shrugged into, hats adjusted, umbrellas clasped. Washington leaned over to me also.

“Think you've got the black spot, what! Haw haw!!” And many more shouts of laughter, including my own, horrifyingly nervous and wobbly and unnatural – unnatural! I quickly threaded my hand
into my coat sleeve to hide it, begged off all offers of cigarettes, and went to settle. With my wallet already fumbling about my hands I felt ready to flee – anywhere! - when I was told; “Not necessary, sir – Mr. Hill covered the tariff.”

I: “What?” And I looked around to see Mr. Hill's genial, I say, fatherly expression of comradeship. A twisted smile adorned my face; my groan was internal.

Because, if Alec was suffering pangs of – doubt? No. Regret? No. A change of mind, a renouncement, a retreat? None, but if he was finding it uncommonly hard to face the reality of severing total ties with our old lives, our old selves – well I could relate. After all, we were building ourselves anew.

Though Maurice Hall, from boyhood to a man, had had his miseries, his difficulties, his alienation and desperate times – I knew him so well and was rather sadly fond of the fellow: average student, competent sportsman, struggling intellectual, son, brother, banker, colleague. Now I was a lover and it superseded all – it had to, because I was no longer any of those former things. Stripped naked seeking warmth.

Metaphors such as this plagued me. I could feel myself spiralling into despair, and, akin to the time a few weeks previous when I had decided to seek medical help for my: condition, I fell to the comfort of rational, numbing practicality. Alright, it came to nothing with Barry. Perhaps because there was nothing medical to cure; no remedy for loneliness but sharing, companionship. However I recalled the simple plan of action and composition of the subsequent letter to Lasker-Jones, which in my turmoil had a calming, balming effect upon me, even as I scribbled; stronger than a cigarette, packets of which I'd burned through.

So I dedicated the afternoon to practical matters; I dealt with the messages I’d had from Ms. Best. I studied in detail the morning's exchange rates, and further, refreshed myself with the trends of the last three months in carefully-filed ledgers. I read the business sections of seven dailies, I called colleagues on the phone and over in adjacent offices, I drew up advice, carefully written for Ms. Best to type out, for to send to our ten best clients, and wrapped up the affairs as best I could of the remainder.

I left letters and instructions for my own investments, to convert to Mother, Kitty and even Ada, although she was Chapman's remit now. About all I could do for the girls now... Ensure them the financial security that I, as man of the house and head of the family was obligated to provide, which I had done impeccably, and the other facets of my manhood I had willingly compromised. Heavens, the last upset I wanted to inflict upon them – in my inexplicable absence – was the threat of their falling destitute – being evicted! Unthinkable.

Funnily enough, even though the devil on my shoulder was doing his utmost to convince me that
Alec had in fact cut and run, back to the exasperated but loving arms of his jovially long-suffering family, I felt no similar inclinations. Rather, I felt that I would be doing Mother and the girls an act of great kindness; I was always and ever, if not the black sheep, then the square peg, though the patriarch, and the women-folk forced to dance attendance.

Any fondness in my family for me, any warmth, was tangled up in my entanglement with Clive. Maurice and Clive together, a twosome, was jolly, fond, dear, presentable; Maurice on his own was a clumsy, barking oaf: a persona I've been exacerbating these past six months. Strange to think: if Mother could see me now, that Maurice with Alec was the best kind of Maurice, the king of him, he's finally come-of-age and joined the human race. But as Alec had observed, our families would hardly take to each other – even if the link were otherwise to a homo-romance.

I organized some money to draw out, then set about preparing to close my accounts. I cancelled papers, pub and restaurant tabs, settled bills at the laundrette, the gas-man, the cleaners, housemaids. I sent tips to the post man, milk man, coal man, barbers. I arranged a gift and money for Ms. Best as I knew she would be shocked but professional about my disappearance and the final duties I had left for her.

Though I might catch fire for it later, I arranged for cash compensation of Alec's ticket to Argentina to be sent to one Fred Scudder, Osmington – if he was even still there, or would even accept it.

Somewhat optimistically, I procured an address and wrote to the shipping dock in Buenos Aires, and requested that should it arrive in Argentina intact, could the trunk of Master Alec Scudder be returned to England using the enclosed funds – I scribbled a large cheque. I bought – again at great expense – a P.O. box at St. Martin's Le Grand and booked it under Alec's name. I didn't know what else to do; I only knew I was good at writing letters and calculating sums and wiring and phoning and organizing. All the same – I left early, literally racing out of the office, down the stairs, across the parquet and barreled through the heavy gold revolving door.

Back at St. John's, I hesitated at the flat's front door. After practically running from the kerb, up the stairs, and down the corridor, I felt fear, dread, trepidation... all sorts of things one doesn't want fogging up one's brain. And indeed – all justified. The flat was empty of human life – and remained so when I entered and slowly moved around it.

The mess looked all the more squalorly in the cold light of early evening; the toast-crumbs and coffee-rings on the wooden floor by the hearth could be construed as a sign of coziness, domesticity; however I saw them as clues that lead nowhere, a trail that had gone cold. I considered sitting in the armchair and running my hands roughly and agitatedly over my face and hair for a while, but I'd have all night for that – should I find myself alone again, naturally.

Instead I searched for, and found, within me a measure of the same strength – or robotic utility – that
I'd employed in the City. I tidied all the cups and dishes away, swept, shook, bundled into laundry bags, opened more suitcases and folded and balled and wedged and buckled and strapped until the apartment began to take on the aspect of a hotel suite all neatened up and waiting for its inhabitants' departure, for them to sigh and smile and exit, immediately no longer revellers but people once more. I hope I didn't squeeze Alec's haversack for more than five or ten seconds before leaving it leaning on my chest. But I can't be sure.

Silence rang cold, suffocating, harbinger of despair; there is a huge difference between solitary, torturous introspection and the loving peace and quiet of a sexless, non-verbal evening passed with someone's head on your knee. I remembered that from way back...

Unbearable the flat was then, merely sharpening my aloneness, I parked myself at the café across the street from the building. Though it was a bright, sunny evening, hinting at September, it was abominably cold rather; still I sat outside the front of the premises with coffee and listless pagings of the Evening Standard.

My breath made puffs, my fingers cold but I had a good vantage point – I could see down the street either side of the flats – of course I had no idea which direction I should have been looking – but the walkers weren't too thick, and they were slow and talkative and I studied them, seeing the odd familiar face, but not the one I was looking for, not the one I loved.

Evening melted towards night, I exchanged my coffees for whiskies and checked my watch constantly, tapped the table, smoked, nodded to other patrons. As my heart demurred whether to break, or simply slow, to a slow thud – there!!! There – oh there – coming from the East, his usual unhurried gait even more sluggish than usual, in fact a bit of a limp – like last night! - and his jacket open, revealing a filthy shirt, his face even more care-torn, being covered in what looked like oil, dirt, sawdust, blood! Even his cap had been crammed most haphazardly on his wayward curls.

As he shuffled along, Alec attracted more than a cursory glance or two; most of the strollers on these footpaths were attired in, and used to seeing, suits, bowlers, expensive gowns, unnecessarily decorative head-ware. In all incongruity, Alec looked, frankly, like a dustman: no stranger to these parts but who belonged – all things being bright and beautiful – in the back streets, far in the A.M., so as to not be seen.

Walking un-rhythmically along the shiny black railings, ordained with bushes of rich flowers, Alec was something absurd, right out of a theatrical show. Conscious of this – it seemed to me – as I rose slowly, heart hammering – he shot nervous glances around and pulled anxiously on his sleeves.

As he approached the block of flats, he slowed to a stop and hesitated on the steps; a couple descended towards him, looking set for the West End all in furs. They subjected him to pointed gazes which he returned, although his eyes struggled to promote defiance and were more the exemplar of
apology. He managed to refrain from tipping his hat.

Vindictively, I watched, folded my arms and waited; thought I should like to see the little sod suffer as I had, wracked with uncertainty. But I found I didn't like it, at all; my heart had not discarded its sympathy, its quality of mercy.

Alec was lost, I was his finder. Besides which, I was still bloody cheesed off with him and if our re-meeting now were to afford me some venting, so much for the better!

“Alec!” I called, and gave a small wave; the risk of public association, right outside one of my known addresses, no less, I deduced to be worth it as I'd be departing forever soon anyway. Wasn't that the same first fiery spirit that had encouraged Alec up that ladder!

Spotting me, his face broke into a toothy grin, those dimples still discernible under the dirt, and he came over with much more self assurance, crossing the street and even popping a hand on a hip as he stood and looked up at me.

“Alright?” He looked around at the table where my cigarette smoke twirled upwards and whiskey glasses were gathered. “I weren't expecting that you'd be outside, but up above at the gaff.” - He tossed his head towards the flat - “Proper nippy, int it, me hands is that chilblained!” And he showed me, and it further appealed, despite me, to my sympathy, to see his skin indeed red raw with the cold, his fingers chapped, cut and tattery, his nails purpling. It was all I could do not to take his hands in mine and rub them gently, raise them to my mouth and blow warmth onto them, kiss them.

To ensure I definitely wouldn't, I passed my hands behind my back, adopting a characteristic, offensive stance. Maybe Alec saw this, maybe he saw my physical withdrawal as a rebuff.

“Erm.. fancied a drink, did yer? Can't says as I blame you, I could do for a bloody hot toddy mysel'! Sh-shall I get 'em in then?” The same apprehension that had given him pause at my apartment building foyer resurfaced as he looked up at the shiny glass doors of the restaurant, plush red curtains, calligraphed menu and watchful waiter. Fortunately – for me – there were no other patrons within easy earshot.

All the same what I wanted to shout I hissed: “What are you playing at, Alec? Where in heavens have you been? What do you mean by sneaking off in secret at the crack of dawn – you – filthy little guttersnipe!!” Oh God, forgive me, to remember it – yet it happened, I can't paint it over. I was so angry! The power he held over me!
Alec's dark eyes blazed like coals in a furnace. “You wot?! Now just a fuckin' minute! You better watch what you say, mate!”

I wanted to calm down, to apologize, to let him lead me back up to the flat and surrender to his loving ministrations. But emotions will have their way: they see a hole in a dam and they rush for it.

“After all we did! You tiptoed off in the dark of night -”

“No!”

“You left me!”

“I never!!”

He inclined closer to me, raising his arms; in abject panic I stumbled backwards and landed heavily in my chair. Shamed, Alec drew his telling arms back, while I put my forehead on my hand, elbow on table. Alec glanced about before coming closer, having turned his eyes to their most imploring and earnest.

“I didn't do the thank – I tell you – I left you a note!”

“This?” I said, whipping the paper out of my pocket. “This note?! And what bloody good is it? You would need the services of a war-time code-breaker to decipher this scrawl!”

St. Paul's cathedral, some five miles away, no doubt rang with my injured tones. Snatching the envelope with a growl, Alec brought it to his face: “Tis perfectly clear! Ah – alright, it's a bit of a dog's dinner, I'll grant you. But – well, I were still stocious from last night – come on, we had a whole of a bottle – or, vase, or whatever that was of whiskey between us, and my writin' ain't the best at the best of times. And I were shovellin' toast in, had to get a bit of a rush on -”

“A rush.” I said. “To get away from me.”

A long groan, flowing into my name: “Maurice. For the love of all that's holy! I went out, that's all, what does it matter -”
“Doesn’t matter!” I seethed. “Only that was the start of our – that morning, waking, I wanted to: always wake you awake..” There I went again, disintegrating into a muddle. Was I even cross? Or was I covering up my fear and insecurity with a brutal show of anger?

Soft sweetness stole over Alec’s liquid eyes -

“Everything alright, Mr. Hall?” Not the waiter, but the manager appeared by my side, facing the enemy, Alec, who immediately drew back in defence, deference. I shot Alec a warning look that said: *Don’t* tip your hat to this herbert, and while you’re at it, please don’t run away again! The manager barely looked at Alec, though it was clear that it was his scruffy countenance, his mere presence, that had drawn attention.

“Yes, everything is quite alright, thank you.” I, composed.

The maître d’ pursued: “Would you like anything – removed?” Alec shifted his weight from foot to foot nervously.

“I should like nothing *less.*” At my firm tone the head-waiter blinked. “I was just leaving,” I added, and I crushed my cigarette, tossed down notes, whipped my coat up onto the crook of my elbow, grabbed my hat. At this the manager smiled, reading his own meaning into the dispute, and raised eyebrows horribly conspiratorially: hard to get good help these days, is it not sir?

Fed up with everyone, I barrelled away, unhappy with how the exchange had gone, how it made me look, just plain unhappy. I knew fully that in storming off I was only making myself unhappier, childish, embarrassed: putting my finger in my own eye, as a favourite term of Mother’s ran.

A hand touched my arm, just once, and briefly. I shot him a look that mixed relief with still stout annoyance.

“Says right here,” Alec, with some breathless effort matching my brisk march, was flapping the note: “That begging your pardon for slipping out but I didn’t want to bother you, lookin’ so graidley nice and peaceful sleeping, am just nipping out down to the docks in that I am hoping to bring back a few quid in us pocket. Back about eight or nine or thereabouts. Tarrah till then... See?”

I kept walking but slowed a bit, our shoulders knocking. When you are unable – afraid – to touch your beloved with conventional affection in public - kisses, strokings, arms around shoulders – you
fall back on emphasizing and adoring the smallest, most innocuous, accidental gestures – bumping, shaking hands, helping from a stumble, brushing hairs off a coat. Suffice to say that my shoulder was now throbbing warm.

“You were – where? The – docks?” I said.

“Yeh.”

“...why? At that God-forsaken hour?”

Alec blinked. “Well, land – you has to get there early so as to beat the crowd. And weren't there one - a sight of lads. Sea of 'em. Got through though!” And a cocky smile.

A mask of confusion turned to face him. Alec elaborated: “Workin' I mean. That's what I were at! Sure what else?”

“Working? You were – you got work – just like that?”

“Aye, arrah, s'not great work – labourin' – only. See, I done it before, the time or two I was i'London, couple lads I knowed put me onto it. What you do is, you head down to the docks and – well – present thyself; stand to the front near the barriers if you can, right by the ships, and the foreman, he stands up on a crate and gives us all the once-over, like, and he picks them's he thinks the strongest, hardiest, or reliable, if he knows 'em already, and gives us a day's work n' wages. Eee... hard it were too – barrels of tea, and fruit, sugar we was pitchin' about, damnable on yer, I should've brung gloves, payin' for it now -” And he looked down at his poor hands.

“Still!” Now he was brisk. “Brass in pocket – see?” Somewhat grimacing in pain, he pulled coins – coins – from his coat, waving his hand triumphantly; I closed my eyes at the sight. Comprehension was still a long way off.

I said: “I ... don't... What, moving cargo? You were carrying barrels, crates all day?”

“Yeh! Why - what do you think I'd be at down at the docks – whorin' for the sailors? Ha! Ha!”
It was all too much! I had craved Alec's aggressive presence, his undeniability, loudness, lewdness, life. But I couldn't keep up and I couldn't take it in.

Slowly, I: “No, not at all, but, I still don't know why you felt you should go out and break your back all day for...” Peanuts remained unsaid.

“For you!” said Alec. I kept my eyes questioning. He continued, “For us. Lookit – this is lovely, being with you. Your flat is proper comfy and nice, and you're... Like a dream it is, and no mistake. I'm that happy, more than I could say... But this ent an ‘oliday. The two of us, we've struck out for it together, on our own. And, well – I waked up this morn and I thought, there's a few hours ahead of me, mornin', avvy, evenin'; I could well doss about the place, or I could git up, throw in a bit of time doin' whatever – don't matter what - and bring back some earnin's...” A pause.

No words came to me – angry, exasperated, loving; I was adrift in wonder. Just what kind of a creature had I on my hands?

I felt my shoulders all but sag with the with the weight of him, of even more love for him, and it made me afraid and desperate to think that I was in the thrall of someone who came and went so casually! As usual, being confused and uncertain, I played the brute: just as I had with Mother, Kitty and Ada, Clive.. and frightened them away.. and now I would do the same to Alec, why should things change, be any different, get better?

“Now – now see here! This isn't on! It won't work!” I blustered.

“How do you mean?” said Alec.

“You cannot – keep – disappearing – like this! Maybe you lived thus at home, and up at Penge, but you – I – when it affects me so -”

“Am not disappearing – just dodging about – for our protection, I may add; you're the one who acts like everyone we pass is a-h'aimin' a gun!”

“I don't want to wonder where you've gone every time you go -”

“This again!! I flaming left a note -!” A temper tantrum seemed imminent, Alec's growing ire – spiralling, my head spinning, throat – clenching, breath catching – and – remaining – caught – I took
a drunken step backwards and preposterously flapped air at my face, trying to – *force* – myself to breathe –

Alec, startled, peered at my face, now red, panicky –

“...Maurice? Ey, lad.. c'mere..” By the elbow – helped immediately – he led me over to a bench in front of some railings surrounding a leafy park. Though I was gulping and gasping and really making the most terrific scene, he didn't look around – as I would have – to see if anyone was staring or marking; his eyes never left me.

“I'm sorry... Already, I - I'm suffocating..” It was difficult for me to both think of words and then form them.

“*I'm* thoughtless -” Alec said and struggled to say more; it is his nature to augment verbal communication with physical – waving, grabbing, poking, lewd re-enactions, nodding. I could see he was longing to touch me, soothe, he wanted so badly to take my hand that he even almost mimed it, stroking it too... this was a way to get by, under prying eyes. A code between us that would last a long time thereafter.

Life and outlook was shifting, all the colours different, hazy, hue; my indecorous admonishing was being met – matched – bested by root sympathy and understanding. Blessed *terra incognita* to me – the future was a foreign land but at least I had a travelling companion.

Always caring, still so novel to me then. Alec extended open hands anxiously: “What can I do? Tell me..”

“You said,” I said, “.. last night, that, were you not here with me, you would be going away.. fishing with the lads..”

Cautiously: “Yeh..?”

“Let's us.. let's us go away.”

“Fishing?”
“No! N-no... but away..”

“On ’oliday?”

“Yes. While we think of future plans.. We could have some space, peace, change of scenery..”

“We could.. Where?”

I hadn't even thought. Bath? “Anywhere you like, darling. Maybe somewhere with a bit of sun, what's left, bit of sport.”

At this he appeared to brighten. “Brighton!”
And continuing at the usual glacial pace. I've never been to Brighton, that come across so obviously? Been to Plymouth, surely that's much the same? For all my great concerns about historical authenticity :P

And so Brighton it was to be. I'd like to say that I went along with it despite my misgivings because, besotted as I was – love brings willing, willy-nilly – I would have said 'yes' to anything suggested by my darling Alec. But that would be disingenuous; and I don't see why I should lie here, especially seeing as there is no more need to create a coveted fiction, the way things eventually unravelled..

In any case I was even then ever-ready, willing and able to bark “NO” at any number of my little swain's hair-brained schemes and ideas; in my defence half of what he spouted was pure nonsense designed to wrong my feet and amuse himself. Let's become riggers on a boat in the middle of the sea, he'd say. Let's join the circus and become tightrope walkers. Let's open up a hat-shop, let's become amusers at a Gentlemans' Club. I despaired of him, really I did! Well – not really. Only on the surface. He was – is – my very light.

Even so I made considerable protestations – each, to my mind, the very exemplar of reason, sense and judicion - against Brighton. Alec's single reply – single reason, in fact – was that he “fancied it.” Verily I was the last person who should divert and discourage Alec from pursuing what he fancied and in this aspect Brighton and I were apparently brothers.

What concerned me rather pointedly was the worry that the leisurely pursuits and lax holiday atmosphere would throw the damnably vast distance between Alec and I into sharp and unwelcome relief. But could not the same be said about anywhere, or indeed – anything? But the sea-side, of course I'd been there before, it could have a cautiously lightening effect; it is a silly place.

Before that: London, still, we were heading back to our rooms, my episode on the street and the bench quite behind us, and we walked more confidently, harmoniously, although Alec's dishevelled state still attracted many glances just slightly too lingering. But not quite lingering enough to suggest that a policeman was about to be hailed. There are degrees of danger. We were then warm.

“...Brighton,” I said, musing, but also sharp-eared, “So it – ah – holds an especial appeal to you?”

“Lookit, it's gettable, it ent far!”
I was seized, sickly suddenly. Why I was unsure, that it would cause me to – distant faraway
overheard snippet? - still, couldn't say why it came out so unwilling, choking: “You've – been there
before?”

“Ara no!” said Alec; my shoulders instantly lost their rigidity.

He continued, as he tends to: “But a fella down the pub, he bin, and he told us all abou' it, the sun,
the fair and all, the stalls – the beach! The sea! France is – well over -” He looked at the sun, then my
wristwatch, and, knowledge attained, turned and waved towards what I could only believe was
France - “Right clear across the Channel. Dunno if you can see it clear as Dover but might be worth
a luke, eh?”

So Alec hadn't been there – but was blustering and blowing as if he had. To me a distinct advantage
materialized – it would thus be neutral ground for us, being mutually unfamiliar. And bugger it, a bit
of sun couldn't harm. I allowed my arm to be twisted; Alec enjoyed the feeling of victory!

It beat climbing Mt. Snowdon, the expedition Fetherstonhough was organizing, if he were still
allowed to being married now; hillwalking does render the back rather wretched and I was
anticipating needing my back and body to be in tiptop condition on this 'ere 'oliday. Brighton it was
to be.

Well by now it was far too late in the day to simply jump on a train and go, so, having safely
deposited Alec at the flat once more – he got directly involved with the grate again, sweeping out no
small amount of ash – whilst I ventured forth to get something to bring back for tea – I hadn't until
now realized just how often one has to keep buying food!

Whereas, I had been used to having it merely served to me, ringing for it, or, on a bad day,
wandering to the packed larder and deliberating for ticking minutes on end over what to have for a
bite before sighing and settling for a scone, or an apple, or flapjack or cake or jelly or piece of
leftover roast.

The prospect of having to *continually* buy food regularly, forever! - for Alec and I – it jarred; it filled
me with inexperienced dread and almost painful happiness.

Dread – only because I had no confidence in my own abilities of basic survival! Housekeeping –
indeed, anything to do with the inferior interior, the domestic – was strictly the remit of women and
servants.
I don't know which of the two I was closer to on that jamjar reading, bread squeezing, basket filling expedition, but I was fully aware that I was radiant – then, the simple bright shining of a woman – the shopkeeper smiled widely at me – I had been beaming. Perhaps I even tipped my hat to him – let's suppose I did. I fancy I would – with Alec to hurry home to!

And so that evening was passed in much the same way as the last – and as how I hoped they would continue to do so: no space in my dreamings for offices, labours, guns, interference, cold, wet, wind; well. We made love somewhat earlier than the evening before however – as eager now as in the boathouse – actually quite nearly a repeat performance, you might say – I came through the flat door and Alec was down by the hearth, not sleeping this time but burning yesterday's apple cores – at my arrival he turned with eyes full to bursting with loving ambition and he opened his arms, still kneeling and I tossed my baggage onto the sofa and dove into his embrace, and we tumbled around thusly for a time. Quite a time.

Afterwards, we disentangled and rose back to standing slowly, leisurely – Alec's right knee emitting a snapping noise periodically - “My land, my bones,. I'm not the man I once were!” - oh how I could joyfully agree and attest! After tea, or supper, God knew, it was immaterial, we set about bathing, tidying up the flat, and finishing:

“Packin'! Christ. Feels like I been spending the past two year' o' my natural packin'. First for t'Argentine, now this...” He was only complaining out of pure habit. He was enjoying himself, pawing through my things and laughing.

To my surprise he even lingered over a book or two, and some old magazines, so I packed them in, whereas I had been intending to leave them, heavy as they were. Perhaps they'd prove useful, wherever we ended up eventually.

“And at work, too, of course?” I kept the conversation going – it was so easy, affable and natural with him.

“Hmm? At work?”

“This morning I mean, when you were – packing crates, was it not?”

“Oh – oh yeh, over at t'wharf? Well, s'not actually what you'd call packin' – stuffin', like, happens abroad on the ship hersel'. Bit more tricky. I were down with the dockers, moving the crates, like, carryin’ ’em – eee, they were heavy as, I don't mind sayin', and to truth you, it weren't long afore I were red and sweatin' and staggerin' with the heavin'! The poor unfortunate fuck I were paired with! Didn't the others laugh to see me so! The rookie. I'm not used to it, see, the real heavy lifting; up at
Penge I only had to cart around dead animals sure, rocks, manure, tools, the like – pianos, ha ha –” A secret smile between us there – I thrilled at our very small but treasured shared history.

“Me back's that buggered, I tell thee...” Alec reached behind himself awkwardly to squeeze his own shoulder.

“Here. Let me!” I sat on the bed and patted again the space beside me; Alec came over still twisting his head around. I scooted behind him and began massaging the tense muscles in his neck and shoulders. Immediately his head dropped forward. “Mm... ooh... Oh that's lovely...”

“Now don't read anything into it,” I said. “It's merely a part of physiotherapy between sportmen, nothing more... We – I and my team-mates – used to have to tend to each others' shoulders when we were preparing for regattas...”

Alec chuckled. “I bet you did. And the rest! Oi!” For I had pulled gently on his ear.

He flapped my hand away and I grabbed his, turning it over and examining the calloused fingertips, stinging red palms, broken fingernails. Murmuring, “My poor, hardworking angel.”

“Poor? Not a bit of it. Work were hard, I'll grant, but the pay weren't bad, not by a long way. Better'n Old Durham were sweatin' out!” At this Alec began looking round him, perhaps for his jacket, his pay. Instinctively I ran my hands down his chest and drew him closer to me, so he was fast with his back against my chest my legs about him.

I didn't want him to talk about his earnings; it didn't matter anyway, because though I'd arranged to have Mother and the girls taken care of, I was determined to also look after my beloved. Mine and I pulled him tighter against me.

I set the alarm for half six in the A.M., although Alec suggested that we merely leave the window open for to the chimes of Big Ben to awaken us. I laughed in reply, though I wasn't sure if he was joking or not. (I never really am...)

He didn't laugh too, only sighed and rolled over, facing way from me towards the window, which was my cue, I knew, to spoon up behind him and hang onto him jealously all night.
Night-time is of course, the time for all magic, dreaminess, otherworldly joy; a body lulled in these flowers with dances and delight... For some, maybe. For me, sleep had, before Alec, been a way of escaping the wretchedness of everyday living – how I used to loathe waking up every blasted morning alive and alone and ashamed!

And yet now – I mean, then, but now, still, also – now it was morning, cold, harsh light, traffic sounds, cars, voices calling, footsteps hurrying and I was at Liverpool Street Station about to embark upon a trip to the seaside, and my beautiful becoming lover would be coming with me.

Alec stood stooping, yawning, hands eternally pocketed, as I saw to having some trunks and bags put into storage either here, or perhaps Paddington? Alec said outright that he “hasn't a bull's notion” about organizing and seeing-to and categorizing, but when I had decided which bags to leave and which to store, he came right up as I pocketed my ticket and fetched away my suitcase and travelling-bag, swinging them merrily from his arms, although we could have had them loaded, indeed probably should have; the porter following Alec uncertainly but going un-noticed: it simply didn't occur to Alec to delegate.

“'Ey! Maurice! Come head!” He was waiting on me at a carriage; we were going second class because – well, we just were. Alec held the door open for blushing me and – it really was quite cramped still – we edged round each other, taking off coats, hats, unearthing tickets, tobacco tins, gloves, until we were seated and – ah.

Now I remember why were were in second – once again we were compelled to be pressed together, like we had been on the train from Wiltshire. Again I got the window seat; Alec volunteering to sit in the middle so as to shield me from “God knows” whomsoever might squash themselves alongside us on the small seat. I hoped he might be jealous of anyone who came close to me. But that was a while off yet.

Though Brighton wasn't far, and was a more or less straight south line, it was still a fair journey and there were many stops, and at the stops there was a lot of fuss and fumbling with luggage, and laughing farewells.

We watched out the window. Many if not most of the passengers were ladies. Presumably the men would be at work and the children school; which on thinking does in fact leave rather a blank space for women; a space in which Alec and I now somehow inhabited, owing to our rejection of the
mundane masculinity of conventional society. All sorts were now possible. Really, I thought, anything could happen and I trembled!

What did happen was that I read the morning paper and smoked; Alec nattered with the other occupants of our carriage for a while before nodding off, his arms folded over his chest and his head on my shoulder.

Unwise, perhaps; a clear breach of the reticence and careful distance that must be maintained between lovers of 'our kind' – but I found it impossible to rouse him. Not only was it so very pleasant to have his dark head tucked under my ear and his body stealing warmth from mine, I also – dangerously! - glowed to think of the impression the scene gave of me.

To explain: I was accustomed to playing the part of, and promoting, the well-respected, well-heeled, upper-middle-businessman. I know that I exuded the very air of high finance and no doubt, in my expensive suits and leather case, I cut an impressive figure – all a careful, but no less powerful for it, construct.

People might look at me and think: businessman, gentleman, perhaps, if a look grew longer, sportsman. But these descriptors said nothing about me personally and as such my public persona was – I could see now – to a degree dehumanized, devoid, generic.

Whereas now... the middle-aged lady, sitting across from us, accompanying an older woman who could only be her mother, both in matching bonnets and big blue eyes – the younger's rather sharper and which now rested on the tableau of men confronting her – she marked, couldn't help but – one man, rather tall, broad, dark, legs bent awkwardly under the chair for the lack of room, and who was holding his newspaper one-handed, for to raise the other – his left – would be to disturb his dozing companion, curled so close it was almost a snuggle, his dark lashes on his cheeks, red from sleep – and she smiled, to see it, to see us.

That tall man, she might think, now returning a small smile to me – he is loved, and therefore loveable; or at least – and more reasonably – liked and likeable. It was not a personality trait I could ever have believed myself as possessing, even in the maddest delusions. Certainly I didn't like myself. But Alec and his friendship opened up so many new – sexless – facets to my character that I found myself transformed, or, rather – I used the word again – opened.

Oh how ironic it was, I would think later – running away with Alec meant that I was to be forever lost to and the disgusting enemy of my family and friends. But if they could see me now – beheld me, met my eye – why, because of my love for Alec, they would, bewildered but delighted, find me the proper, kindly, fully human man they always wanted me to be: sweet and fussing over Mother, jovial and conspiratorial with the girls, genial and proud with Dr. Barry. I might even salvage a friendship with Clive and play tennis twice a month!
It does occur – I'm no total fool – that were Alec a woman, and nearer 'our sort', this idyll could have been possible; it is a truth touted by many, not least Clive, that if a man is brutish, caddish, callow, as he might well be after an all- male educational experience, well, all he needs to sort him out and render him mellow is the love of a good woman. I could see now that it was not the woman – the person – that was the essential ingredient, but the love. Love is not discriminating on gender. But society is.

Were Alec a woman, I could have – would have – dropped a kiss on top of his – her? - head, squeezed an arm and murmured low and closely that we were nearly at the station. I still could, of course: but it would have made the lady sitting opposite uncomfortable, to say the least, and do you know I didn't want to – it would have spoiled things for her, turned her face aghast, and spoiled things for Alec and I too, and possibly everyone else in the carriage, train!

For whatever reason – she probably couldn't herself say! - sudden evidence of our love would be an abhorrence, an affront, best eradicated or, if necessary, swept under the rug. Blazing a trail towards universal homosexual acceptance was not, I'm afraid, a priority of mine in those days. I wouldn't have known where to start! England wasn't ready and perhaps never will be.

Compromise and compensation – they do the trick for Alec and I, for the moment: we seek to hide, to obfuscate. We had no acceptance but we had togetherness and I shall ever opt for the latter. So instead of a kiss, or a caress, I jounced Alec gently with my shoulder and said low, but not too low: “Better wake up, we're nearly there,” to his slowly rising, tousled head, blinking eyes, flushed face.

“Oh yeh?” He gave a long stretch, first with his hands high in the air and then with them out in front of him till something cracked. “Great! I'm dying for a slash.” The last four words he thoughtfully whispered. “And yet I'm gasping for a cuppa at the same time. Credit it!”

“Yes, yes,” I said, perhaps hushing, “We can sort all that out at the hotel.” Force of habit led me to term it thus. Although it called itself a hotel – the Edinburgh Arms Hotel, for some reason – it was, to my eye, little grander in style and quality than a bawdy-house.

There wasn't enough time to be fussy however; my main proviso was that it was – discreet, non-judgemental as they say.. all the same I was staunch and forthright when stressing at the reception desk that we wanted a twin room. Twin, alright? As we are two – two friends, holidaying, perfectly commonplace, nothing more. (Oh, everything more!)

Behind the counter, the clerk was nonplussed. “Twin? Course sir. We'll has you settled in comfy right in a jif,” and he went away flicking through a large green ledger; I closed my eyes, further resigning myself to a fate of listening to sing-song regional accents, sitting on shabby furniture,
drinking cheap alcohol served by brassy women – an example of which actually winked at me from her hotel door as we trudged upstairs! It was the world, base, undiluted, unrefined and real that Alec had led me down into.

Alec himself made the financial transaction – well, the booking entire - easier on me by disappearing “to the jacks only” as soon as we had crossed the threshold of the Hotel. I did not relish the idea of the pair of us looking for a room together – could other people detect the crackle of electricity between us, how we smiled a lot – oh that honeymoon period! - and looked so especially deeply into one another's eyes.

Moreover, I very quickly paid in advance for the week's accommodation – the clerked raised his brow not unhappily – before Alec came back and saw the opportunity to cause more chaos by once again fussing and fighting over the payment.

Remember how snottily he asked me whether I had paid downstairs after our wonderful night and terrible morning together in London, after the British Museum? Well, he had wanted to hurt me by leaving, and to twist the knife by emphasizing that he’d rather not be waylaid in his escape by the management, such was his self-righteous haste.

I can state that this was his frame of mind, because he later told me so. “I'd no scratch,” he said to me, “And.. and I were that upset about leavin' you, and you puttin' it all on me, the badness, with your silly pillow talk. I were ashamed I had no money and I wanted you to be ashamed for having some. Lots, even, I don't know..”

I assured him then that it mattered not, it was meaningless, money was of no consequence at all in the face of our love. And yet I wondered would our huge disparity in terms of personal fortune – or lack of – prove to be more of an obstacle than the fact that we were both men?

Because it had come between us, money – that is to say it was an issue, if only in my mind. After all, why did I tip the luggage attendant so very discreetly when I saw that Alec was ambling back over the foyer towards me?

And later, when we went out on the pier, “promenading” as Alec put it, and he bought a map, and postcards, and toffee that was now practically fusing my teeth together – I wondered if he was still using his wages from the day before, and if he realized he was spending just most awfully frivolously, and would he have to come to me eventually for money, and if so, when? Or would he at all? Of course I was willing – I wanted him to rely on me, for him never to know hunger or discomfort or desperation or fear.
But to have him depend upon me, to step into the place of Kitty and Ada? His pride wouldn't allow it, I knew. It was only now I myself realized, with red-cheeked clarity, how cruel and uncaring I had been to the girls, how I repressed them.

I hoped that in providing for them both individually, with no strings attached – signing over some of my soundest investments to their very names – I could rectify. They need never, ever thank – nor indeed feel thankful at all – but my own life had been nothing short of a shambles up to this point and whilst making a clean break towards the Great Beyond was a fantastical idea, selfish, idiotic, it turns out that I am human after all and still looked back on my old miserable life with the hopes of making amends, my mistakes of the past.

As to the future...

Eyes squeezed against the glare of the sun, hair blowing backwards, he had hopped onto the railing overlooking the sea. The beach was busy, considering the time of year; bathers, walkers, dogs and donkeys, children playing and squealing, colourful tents, booths, blankets, brollies. I joined him at the railing, resting my elbows upon it; Alec was perched up on the bottom rung of the iron barrier and still he was only barely taller than me in my stockings.

I'm used to generally being taller than others – it doesn’t' make me feel superior, however, only gangly and different and awkward – always had with Clive, built like a film star, me always his loutish ancillary, my lack of brains further compounding our incompatibility! With Alec – well, it's a different thing entirely, he's a whole nother animal. Stockier than Clive for a start, stronger, warmer – firm, honest handshake sort of fellow.

“God!” said he now. “That's some wind, I tell thee. Fierce! To the world.” He shook a little.

“Button up your overcoat, there's a chap. Else you'll take flight, like a kite!”

Alec did so – buttoned, that is, not flew – although he exclaimed that he was just about to anyway, weren't just followin' orders, to which I rejoined that such a thought hadn't even crossed my mind and we resumed walking along the pier.

Seeing couples, families, friends – people together, people grouped – did not turn me fraught with envy as it used to, now that I had Alec by my side, his rotten boots clumping loudly on the timber planks, our strides nonetheless matching nicely.
We walked slowly along the pier, admiring the amusements and displays. Alec took out his new map only for the wind to snatch it out of his hands, sending him crashing through a group of skittering schoolchildren to retrieve it. We found the Royal Pavilion but didn't venture inside; “It's day one,” Alec affirmed, “We're only putting the feelers yet.” Walking and the almost brutal freshness of the sea air, and the languid sweetness of the day, eventually exhausted.

“What shall we eat?” I was really, really, really enjoying myself. A most pleasant day was sure to get even pleasanter. What a feeling!

“Dunno... dead on me feet though. Let's get coffee and mull it over.”

I started. “Coffee? At this time of day? Before dinner?... You drink coffee?!”

“Our Fred brung some home from t'Argentine. Right nice once you add the sugar and milk in. Ran out a week or two ago though; we was fevered after it! I were tasked wi' sending more home once I get abroad, Mam'd such a particular taste for it ...”

We both needed a contemplative moment after that little story. It was Alec who led us into a cheap but clean eaterie, warm and friendly, with dado rails on the beige and brown walls, dark wooden furniture with red and white tablecloths, salt and pepper cellars of dulled silver, worn but scrubbed floors and seaside-themed prints dotted around... We sat at a window where we had a good view of the harbour.

Many of the other tables were occupied by more conventional couples – that is to say, by one man, one woman. In the interest of inciting the evening atmosphere, a waitress circled, stopping at each small table to light the candle in the middle, with a smile and a friendly word or two. Casting her eyes to see whether she'd missed any table, her eyes alighted on Alec and I; I wary and he cheeky.

As she passed we got a smile but no match, and quick as lightening Alec pulled a cigarette out of his coat, stuck it in his mouth and leaned towards her, arms crossed and eyes big and knowing she wouldn't refuse. Who could?

Buxom blushing, she lit his fag, waiting particularly to ensure it had taken. Alec inhaled luxuriously and blew out his first toke. “Ta luv!” As he brandished it.

She – she!! - winked at him. “Any time, sweetheart.”
Jarring, is it not, that this sort of playful, frivolous intimacy between strangers is accepted – nay, encouraged! (though maybe not so brashly in my own former circles) – whilst any measure of affection between Alec and I would be seen as scandalizing and horrifying and wrong – despite us being so very factually, actually and with every intent and purpose, a couple. A team. A pair. A right pair, as he would say..

My Look at him scathed. Or tried to. Confidence successfully drummed up, he propped an elbow in the table, the other over the back of his chair – bench, I should say. “Oh – a thousand pardons. Did you want a light an’ all?”

“No.” I said.

Alec, fingering the candle and leaning his face towards it: “Shall I light this...? Set the mood?”

“No!” I said.

“Ha! Ha! Only joking, only joshing.. Here ..” And he passed me his filthy roll-up. Smoking before tea? In public no less – but a suck or two on it did calm the nerves.

Alec examined the menu at length before looking around and spotting a garish chalkboard bearing the day's SPECIALS.

“Chowder? That's the ticket. Foreign but – seafood – the fishes are sure to be English. Fresh as you'll get, round these parts, we're right by the sea and all,” and he slapped the table as if to confirm this, perhaps unwittingly regaining the waitress's eager attention.

When she had taken our orders and wriggled away, Alec didn't stare after her – but I did: hard. Studying her bright blonde hair, rakishly piled, her soft arms, her (somewhat) pinched waist, her generous backside, her (presumably, under the skirt) curvy legs. Yes – very fine to look at. Very pleasant. But my admiration for her countenance was idle and fleeting – it didn't linger, didn't go anywhere. Try as I may have, in the past.

Whereas, there have been men and boys in my time where the images of their most merest smile, or ruffled hair, or crossed ankle, or sprinkling of freckles, or strong, long legs are everlasting, ever-warming photographs in my brain.
A beautiful woman smile at me, as they do? Of course I'll smile back, and even be delighted to do so. A beautiful man shoot me a grin – I'm more likely to jump, or break a sweat, or guffaw stupidly – in short fall all to pieces, and day-dream on him tirelessly, endlessly: a hundred lines, yes sir, for my troubles. For my sins.

With a jolt I removed my eyes from her – innocent girl. Representative, remote woman. Fortunately for the minute or so I agonized over her and myself, Alec was distracted by – actually pulling the curtain back the better to see – two seagulls out on the board-walk fighting over a dropped ice-cream.

Our class differences, our shared sex, our tumultuous beginning – all factors that could be used to argue against our tenuous partnership. That and, 'You hardly know each other!' Well, that was one aspect that I could and would readily remedy.

Questions, indeed, burned: What are we going to do, Alec? Have you thought about this? Why are you with me? Will you leave? Why are you so confident and comfortable sharing with other men? As well as women? Is that even possible – really? Perhaps I didn't want to know. When did you first realize you liked men – in that way? (Oh how I had longed to ask someone that! And get a frank answer, a comrade. Clive always played his cards close to his chest on that and indeed all subjects.)

I wished I could stop my thoughts racing, the same way one combats a hammering heart by taking deep breaths. I took a hit or two more and so inelegantly decided upon: “Alec.. did you *cough * like being a gamekeeper?” Alec looked surprised at this foolish question but quickly relaxed noticeably in his chair, ready, as it were, 'for a natter.'

“Sounds like I'm bein' considered for a new job! Ha! Ha!”

Maurice: “Um..”

“Do you like your job? Or – 'liked' – I'm sposin' – past-tense now..” Very tense, Alec. I hadn't officially resigned at this point at Hill and Hall – or just Hill, now – cowardly, nasty, sneak of me! Just upped and disappeared leaving the plates spinning – for all I had tried to conclude my own doings it was still most unsporting of me. Dash it though – you know?

“I liked it well enough. Just sort of – fell into it, really..” I said.

Alec took care of the thanking for our food and decided for us both that yes, we would be requiring more bread, tell the baker he has the 'okay', right love? To me, he: “Not a bad place to land then,
“It was always arranged so,” I said, “Even before college, for me to inherit my father's position at the company, to sort of – follow in his footsteps.”

“Oh! D'you know, that's interestin' – I very near did the same.”

“You – don't say. Really?”

“Aye – me da – he had me right apprenticed up, around about the time I come back from the harvest, when I were abou' – hm, seventeen, and he thought I looked about big enough at last, and so he got me doing all the basics beyond at the butcher's – carryin', weightin', choppin', dividin', mincin'... Even brung me over to the slaughterhouse a time or two and taught me how to eye up the carcasses, suss out fair price.. Right hard it got after a week or two; but the old man sure got a bang ou' of it though – havin' me round him, showin' me things, y'know...”

Stopping suddenly, he looked up from his steaming bowl. “Well... mebbes you don't.. your – da, and all..” This was something I was well used to talking about stoically and manfully; didn't have to flick back too far in my collection for that particular front.

“Never a problem to me, old boy,” I said. “Too young to remember him – and after all, can't miss what you've never had..” As I said this it finally dawned on me how untrue it was – after all, hadn't I spent many's and many's an hour – perhaps half my lifetime – dreaming of a friend I'd never had? Only now, my friend was watching me with sad eyes, removing a fish bone from his mouth and wiping it on a handkerchief.

He rescued me swiftly: “Anyroad, me career in the butcher's – takin' over me dad, like, come to a sharp end, in the end. Bernie – that's me brother, Canada – he got wind of it from my sister Brenda, she gushin' to all and sunders how well wee Alec were doin' (at long last) – she were still in Wiltshire at the time – right proud they all was, well, more impressed than proud, mebbes, that I weren't making a right haimes of it – doin' the Monday orders and everything! On paper!"

“Only, Bernie writes, see, and he's got the right 'ump – says I'd better not get too comfy behind t'counter – go adjusting the saws to me height, or sewing up the apron to my size, ha ha – on account o' him fully intending on comin' home and bringin' 'erself, and the skite of kiddies with!

“Well! You might've said, me mam replies. Like – he didn't let on – plans or nothing. But she's made
up, so she is – Dad too, Bernie were always the best of us for liftin' a shank! And a load of kids to show off round the village? Man's unrolling the red carpet as us speak. I weren't best pleased – I mean the work ain't great nor the pay – non-existent, just me 'keep' I'm told, I ask you – still I were a bit put out, shunted that way. Old Bernie, he used to pick me up by the ankle when I were a bairn and haul me about, for a laugh, and this seemed not so much different.

“Still – had to do summat, didn't I? If I weren't learning the trade, Dad still had the run o' the shop – still fair sprightly – and so it were abou' that time I fell in proper wi'Davey. He were already up at Penge, you know, sort of slunk in quiet-like with a group of gardeners fresh, keepin' mum so's they didn't even twig, at first, the Durhams, that he were Irish! I say, canny lad – falsified he name an' all!!

“Right little shyster when he wants to be... trusty though – oh, a good lad, for a Paddy. He gav' that right up. He say. So: I'm down the pub a lot – too much, truth – since I got the elbow – from me own da, mark! - and he jokin' and joshin' like, old Davey, always got on with him, I did, since he come, and I'm slumped there only – only, half engaged, like, so he notice, and left his lads brief, and brung me away, gav' us a fag and What ails thee, lad? Only – no, he'd've put it elseways, he'd say mebbes: What's on ya, buck?

“Told him my tale, I was in need of means; need a job or it's out on me ear or back to the mines and that's one winter I don't want to repeat, certain. Is that all! Says he. Well, I'll sort ya – no bother, no bother. Got an eye? I does. And a gun? Yep. Away I went with him up to Penge the next day and he slipped me in – Ayres weren't particular and his old lady, old Pam, she took a right likin' to me, if you joke with her, and there you go: I'm in.”

Here a pause for a great gulping breath. I was rather dumbstruck by this tidal wave of intimacy – ha, to think, I wasn't yet used to his ways. How he tends to rabbit on, and on.

“My word! That was – detailed...!”

“Pologies! I do bang on, I know it – God, pure starved now -!” And he took several consecutive spoonfuls of chowder, leaving plenty of room for the accompanying soda bread.

Still I marvelled. “I haven't heard such a – an uninterrupted speech since we did our Orations at school! Ah, that was where we recited pieces we had written, in Greek, and usually covered the usual subject matter; war, democracy, Utopian concepts, I – well, it's rather complicated to explain...”

Alec: “I am familiar with the Greeks.”
Had I been sitting in a chair, I should have fallen bodily out of it, on principle. As it was, we were in booths and thus I performed a physical startle more akin to jump, without leaving my seat. An over-reaction? Yes of course – but I assumed I had swapped Clive for his complete opposite – so if I should then splutter – I mean to say -!

Alec politely ignored my dinner-plate eyes and half-suspended forkful. He has twice my manners.

Continuing: “Well, one of ’em. That’s to say, they got brung up, now and then, at school, no more than yourself. Well, likely a lot less! When I were – oh, dunno, eight year’ old, mebbes, the Master we had then, Mr. Mellish – We’s called him Mr. Hellish, ha-ha, someone with more brains’n me come up with that one!

“Anyroad – maths, that were his line – numbers, y’know, sums and – he’d say, ‘Boys,’ and ‘Euclid’ – that were it, yeh, some old Greek cove – ‘Boys, you should all know and respect the grace, elegance and beauty of Euclid’ and it were - summat to do wi’ lines.

“Well, he might as well have been talking to the doorknob, as us lot, sat at our inkwells, all us thinkin’, what is he on abou’ now? An’ additional – even if we were to cop on to what he were spoutin’ – what earthly use were it? We were none of us goin’ to go on needin’ maths – nor English, History, the lot. I left school at thirteen and that were considered a pretty good innings – pretty far along, other lads my age having moved on and got proper work at eleven-abouts, mostly.

“Our Freddy, he stayed on till here were, oh, seventeen? But he were always the clever-clogs. By the time he were ready to leave, he were actually teachin’ half the school himsel’ for four shillings a week! He were teachin’ me and I couldn’t stand it so that’s when I cut out and joined the Carty’s – farming stock from betwix’ our Osmington and the next village along – for t’ harvest; quick money. Hard work though. Well, ain't it all..”

He grinned to warm up the conversation again. “So, there's your Greeks – I's not near as informed as thyself, I dessey!”

“They do indeed seem to have – infiltrated simply every facet of British society..” I said.

“Do you remember your speech?” asked Alec. “Giz a spiel of it – go on!”

Flushing: “No!”

“Arra go on. A line or two! It'd tickle!”
Stubborn: “I won't!”

“Alright, alright, as you like it, I'll not insist.”

“I couldn't recall anyway,” I said, composing, trying to control the redness of my face. “It's been yonks since I even thought about it. Foolish, beautiful nonsense.. I won a prize for my oration, as I remember it, yes..”

“Well done you. Be sure to mention that to any perspective employers.”

I side-eyed him. “Are you being sarky?”

Picture of innocence. “Wot! Me? Never!”

September was certainly establishing itself with gusto; at only half nine the sun was setting and Alec got his coffee, at last. Probably not the most sensible slug right before bedtime, but sleeping was perhaps the last thing on his mind – it was mine!

Greedily, I drank in Alec's every disclosure and off-hand remembrance; he had so many – of course someone so intelligent would have a good memory.

“Was school so very dreadful for you Alec – as bad as all that? Was there not even a bit of sport to be had?”

“Sports is hard enou' when half your break-time football-team go down wi' the scarlet fever overnight!”

“Good lord!” I didn't splutter, but certainly exclaimed. “Why – that's shocking, shocking stuff..”

“Aye, but that's how it were – truth. Besides! It weren't quite a full team – only fourteen of us, so not near enough for two sides... So after seven lads snuffed it that one winter, well.. not too many when you consider it.. Damned shameful though, as you say..” He trailed, and I looked for more coffee.
“But yeah! Sure! There were good parts.” Alec scrambled around and picked up the true intention of my clumsy conversation-starter. “Jokes n’ that – well, the ones that didn’t result in us getting a thrashin’. And the odd time we got a special occasion like – a speech, or summat, from the vicar, or some old passing cove what's been to Big School or London once – we got to do assembly, we got to sit in the same room as the girls. That were some excitement, I'll say that for nowt!”

This was taking an unwelcome veering but I had to ask: “You had girls at your school?”

“Yeh. Oh yeh! Me sisters, cousins all come up the same one I did.”

“I'm sorry.. I just thought – didn't you say it it had some religious – Anglican affiliations? Saint – er –”

“Edmund's. As in Bury-Saint – ha!”

My head throbbed: this was a village I had once or twice visited in college; now here was Alec casually mentioning it. The world is so interwoven and connected – so small and compact, really, yet open to all – makes the head spin.

“Ho-ho..” said Alec. “To think on it now... See, don't git the wrong idea. The girls, they was one side of the building, right, and we was in the other. They girls, they were closer to the stove – warmer – as of course they should be, poor wee lambs. T’yard too, what we played footie in – that were divided in the middle wi’a huge high up wall – us used to fair wonder what the lasses got up to beyond there, and they laughin' and squealin' – drive a lad mad – and of course there was scalin’, and sneakin’ – and – and God knows what – and then thrashin’. But that's kids for you, lads: you cannae stop it.”

Can’t start it either, if it’s not there; I sipped coffee rather glumly.

“I take it your school were all lads then,” said Alec. “Good n' proper n'God-fearin', like?”

“Mm..”

“Or no? Then – did you ever – you know..”
I knew too well, a wink'd be wasted. Inflating my nostrils: “Certainly not!”

“No? No boardin' school hockeystick-cupboard fumblings? I'd've thought... well... so the jokes go... he-he...” And he covered his mouth, pointlessly, with his hand.

Colouring, I spluttered: “What absolute rot! Not even remotely – di-didn't -”

“More's the shame.” Alec leaned closer, and with more husk: “Let's go do some of our'n, then..” And he trapped my ankle between his boots, under the tablecloth. He may just as well have slammed me to the ground in a half-nelson, and tossed my limp, pliant body over his shoulder, to be carried away at his will – such was his power, my enchanted acquiescence.

As it was we paid up and set off bedward, to beat the sunset back to the open Arms of our waiting enclave.

Could this room have before seen such scenes?? Though in this town – I should not have been surprised. As it is, Alec and I were certainly bringing our love and passion everywhere we went – and imprinting our devotion on the very atmosphere we breathed.

To state it more directly, the two of us arrived back to our wonderful hotel room and wasted no time shutting the fantastic door before racing to each other upon the brilliant carpet and wrapping our arms
around each other, lips meeting and melting, hands creasing and caressing.

Here we were again, a big bed right there just for us, and yet we stood, entwined, swaying this way and that, kissing and pressing. Alec made our stance even more precarious by standing on tip-toe to reach my ear with his mouth; I allowed him for a bit until it got too much – too tickly, as well as – and fought back, tilting down to kiss along his jawline, and he grumbled a welcome.

I kissed air suddenly as he pulled away, and led me to the bed; I made to hop on, even kneeling one knee on the blanket but Alec pushed me gently away, “Hold on a moment, now just you wait, stand here...” Trifle mystified, but not at all put out, I stood facing him, looking over at him then down as he lowered himself sitting on the bed, eyes locked to mine. He touched my hips, soft, appreciative: “Turn around..”

I allowed a laugh, for alleviation of my own nerves, and obeyed, so that he was face to face – well, that is, he was level with... he reached out and squeezed. “Mmm..” And then he leaned over, circled my waist with his arms, and nuzzled the side of his face into my behind languidly, sighing.

It should have been obscene. Does it sound so? Maybe not, the way I'm describing it. Or maybe it's absolutely scandalous. But Alec had a way of making anything I myself would have considered horrifying and sordid into something beautiful and sweet and loving – or maybe it was the case that he only dealt out loving endeavours. Certainly I never felt safer than in the cocoon of his courtship.

Sighing myself, I waited patiently for his next move, because surely.. and his hands, clasped, now released and moved down to the front of my slacks. Looking down, I watched him undo and slowly pull them down, and my underthings also.

This all was happening so very gradually, drawing out every delicious moment; what should have usually taken seconds was padded out over minutes. Alec made no secret of the fact that he enjoyed – quite vocally – the slow reveal of my naked skin. He was even humming a little! As it is, I couldn't imagine – for a long while – the idea of a 'quickie' a 'fumble', a brief encounter.

My clothes were pulled down to my knees, and again, I took the initiative to make as if to step out of them, and again I was wrong-footed – or in breach of Alec's plans. He squeezed my thigh. “Don't be in such a rush! Relax, come on, that's all.. just let me..” Blowing out a breath of impatience, I forced myself, looking up at the ceiling, to stay still as Alec slid my shirt-tails up to my waist, the better to see.

Seeing seemed to be all he was angling to do, just to stare at my bottom, chin on hand like The Thinker and drink in the visual, a thumb-nail no doubt being gnawed upon, and I waited – what for?
The – ooooh, oh my God, and Lord, and Angels, did I feel...? There again – soft, sweet lips, on the fattest, fleshiest part of my right buttock; a hand slid over the other, and I dropped my head with a whimper to feel Alec dot kisses all over my cheeks, soft and sweet and careful and combined with fingertips ghosting barely up and down my thighs..

Still I feared, as I hardened, and gripped the front of my own shirt for a foundation, for Alec's touch was ethereal, heavenly – I was at his absolute mercy and we both knew I was powerless against anything he chose to do next. Fear gripped my stomach; I was very wary and apprehensive and terrified, to be frank, of anything happening in that particular part of my anatomy, especially – well, anything, every thing; yet I knew I would not pull away.

Now I knew I needn't, because Alec would never do anything, nay, never even attempt something that might startle or upset me; something that would afford him his pleasure at the expense of mine. I inhaled sharply as he ran a fingertip very very gently down the cleft of my bottom but he did not try to breach. I think he was mesmerized, just by looking.

More soft kisses in lazy circles on the right – then the left, then up to the small of my back and he grasped my hips again and urged me slightly to sit on his lap, and his arms slid round me and I gripped them gratefully when I found them tightly wound around my body. His face rubbed against my upper back; eyes closed I leaned my head backwards to meet his and the back of my skull nudged his forehead.

“Better kick 'em off now..” He sought my ear and whispered, and so I smiled and pulled my trousers and underwear and socks and shoes all off, Alec waiting, and he rocked me gently onto the bed on my back. I reached up for a kiss; he gave me a short one but kept hovering a few inches above. “Roll over,” he said, “Onto your front, that's the way..”

Panic came coursing back tidally, most obviously in my suddenly enormous eyes and I felt my body turn to stone in defence. Alec saw this and leaned back sitting on his folded leg so as not appear as imminent, as intimidating; calming me further with: “Just to look! And – to touch, only, don't fret, won't try owt funny..” Hesitation still.

Alec ran a hand up my thigh to my belly. “Now come on – don't jump to contusions. I just want to relax you – no, not for that – look: sure your arse must be right tired, you've been sat on it for hours! Let me see you right – simply for you – it's only the um – wotsit – psychotherapy between sportsmen, ent it?”

“God's sake,” I said, as he blinked coquetishly, and won over, I rolled over. It was strange, I still had my shirt on but was all naked below; I felt very exposed even though I trusted Alec fully. He seemed to appreciate hugely the permission to look at and touch me. How he elevated me.
“Ah me,” he sighed, and I felt him, rather than saw him, my face in the soft pillow, my arms curled underneath it, the room dark but moonlit, crawl closer and kneel over my closed legs, and sit gently down on my calves. First order of business was to lean right over me and kiss my neck and cheek, when I turned to offer it.

Then he – well, he – drifted his hands from my shoulders down my back, to my buttocks where he gave a squeeze, and another, and fell to massaging; it felt so odd and outrageous and almost unbearably good, not least because I could feel him squirming about pleasurably on my legs, and humming again his satisfaction.

Every so often he would slide his hands up my back to my shoulders, where he would rub – quite hard, I'd groan – before pulling them back down, to my thighs and back up again, quite unhurried.

One could almost fall asleep, such divine ministrations – but I heard him just – grumble, and I knew it was with arousal, and only then did I realize the tension had been growing almost unbeknownst to me and I had been arching my hips up towards him with every sweep and attempting to kick my legs under his weight and twisting my body around and digging my fingers into the bedsheets which had come away from the mattress – oh he had relaxed me, relaxed me down into the warm wicked state of pure wanting.

“Alec,” I choked wetly, as I tend to.

“Mmhmm?” he said, fully aware but continuing to knead at my behind, a squeeze and a circular rub, and a squeeze and circle again, and again and again – slowly, leisurely – all of this lovemaking is so dashed repetitive, is it any wonder it has a hypnotic effect upon a perfectly reasonable person!

Shifting, repositioning, and arms slid around my pliant form from behind as he lay over me, his weight firm and manly and yet I was aware of how adorably he lacked inches on me: as he wriggled over me to reach his face to mine his toes brushed above my ankles. Still he rather laboriously managed to slide his chin over my shoulder and breathlessly: “Are you hard, pet?”

“Yes,” I breathed, and squirmed my bottom into his groin. Feeling a bit of a wally, because I could feel him pressing insistently against me, even through his trousers, I still wanted to contribute, to try and copy his seductive style: “Are you – darling?”

“Oh yes,” he chuckled, and pressed me. I wondered if he would continue thus, if that was how we would finish, which was fine but it was a bit difficult to breathe – he rolled off me.
I watched, glassily, as Alec sat neatly beside me on the bed, against the headboard, legs crossed as he unbuttoned his britches and, tongue in teeth, cheerfully extracted his prep. Glancing at me, he said: “Think you could get off?” And he gave himself a pull or two. Watching, I gulped out: “Y-yes..”

“Good man,” said he, and with his other hand, he pushed some sweaty hair along my forehead, out of my eyes. “Sit up, come on, let me see..”

And so I faced him, mirrored him, we worked ourselves as we watched each other; I morbidly embarrassed to show someone my most secret and indelicate self, but Alec was unselfconscious and steely in his concentration on me. Still I wondered if I could complete myself on my own, such was the tension – it was almost like a race, and one that I was likely to lose! Nearly – rather – almost I could have began to weaken, to bow out, to soften, but Alec reached out with his left hand and grabbed my shirt lapel and yanked me towards him as he threw himself forwards, our lips meeting in a crashing, crushing kiss, one of his legs suddenly tossed over mine, his knuckles moving frantically against mine, which were moving more cautiously, but it was plenty and enough and when he groaned his mess out I let loose likewise not a minute hence.

“Whew,” went Alec, and tossed his head, smiling. We weren't as worn out as we had been after previous bedroom (or boathouse) encounters. And yet it seemed just as – maybe more – intense. It was becoming commonplace. We were hitting our stride. My shirt we both used for mopping.

“That was nice,” I said, and because I am the last bloody word in awkwardness: “Thank you.”

Alec was already smiling, and so didn't call further attention to my idiocy. Or did he? “You're most welcome,” he said, primly, and patted my folded knee. “I thank you too.”

You see – why did I start with the niceties? Now what was I supposed to say?

Mattered not. Alec abhors silence, as I have said and will go on saying, such is its relevancy. With a yawn, and a crack of the neck, or back, or hopefully something non-essential: “Well. Roasting in here now! Shall I open a window, and we can tidy the sheets, and tend to us, and have some water, and kiss for a bit, and then go to sleep?”

“Alright,” I said. “I've no objections.”
Thusly did we live for a few days – completely away from all we knew, bereft of the familiar – except of course each other. And even then, Alec had been at this point in time only – only! - the absolute centre of my universe for not even three weeks of my life entire – it seems inconceivable now, simply absurd. What a fortnight it had been though. It would take thousands of words, books, series, libraries, to chronicle every swirling emotion, every change and powerful nuance.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing as they say; at this time I was so high and happy to be with Alec, for sure and certain, but simultaneously, very, very uncertain. I used the word high – an apt descriptor, because it was – he was – heavenly, and yet it was as if I was on the top of a high, impossibly tall precipice and constantly struggling to keep my balance and try to truly believe Alec would stay with me forever; for self-re-assurance I would claw around my brain for ways to ensure that he should. I could think of nothing that I could exclusively give him!

And yet here he still was, walking alongside, elbowing me, tipping his hat to strangers, laughing at the Punch and Judy, offering me Woodbines (only marginally less revolting than the rollies), and generally fulfilling the connexion he identified between us when we happened to fall into step and casual conversation with fellow-revellers on the pier, in the hotel, at the café, lounge, cinema: “Oh, us? Oh mates we is, old mates, we go way back – right Maurice?”

Some people clearly didn't believe a word of this, but no unwelcome-ness ensued other than a tight smile and a swift side-eye at us, the Odd Couple. Did we really appear to be so very contrasting – even just visually? As if we were of different races? Both British men we. Could people see, or sense our clumsy class incompatibility? Certainly as a couple we were unmatched.

All the same I put some effort into bridging the gap, if even merely superficially; Alec did scrub up very fine in one of my more everyday tweed waist-coat and britches outfit s – I don't think it was bespoke even, not sure where I'd bought it, possibly Birmingham – along with a clean pressed shirt. The hotel had a basic laundry service, and he looked well, dolled up in his irony, with new brogues I'd bought and persuaded him into even though they were suede and “reet nancy-ish.” I also on occasion pleaded him out of a scarf and into a tie and collar: “At least when we're in public” - “Oh, alright – go on then..”
And I admit that half the reason I so insisted upon managing his attire was getting to attend to his
dress myself; buttoning him up and patting him down and squeezing seams and straightening his tie.
Large swaths of bemused patience were employed by poor Mr. Scudder as I fusscd over him; his
only objections were – I presumed – jesting. “Not that billycock again... I am co-operating, Maurice,
I don't care for fashion, tha' knows that... I wouldnae mind, only I do look a right numpty...”

“Not at all. You look dashing.”

“I'll be dashing through the crowds, so I will, for fear someone I know'd recker'nise me... Cor, if the
lads could see me now I'd be sent up rotten forever and a day!”

Even as he grumbled thus he raised his arms and dipped his shoulders, the easier for me to affix to
him my Norfolk shooting jacket of green tweed; rather fancifully I thought it would suit Alec, man of
the land he, though not the leisure of it; it was more appealing to the eye on his fine form than any
sort of dinner-wear or other forms of pomposity.

“I thought the green would bring out your eyes, darling,” I gushed, and as I gazed in them he
winked.

I myself tucked my body into a navy Chesterfield with the black lambs-wool lapels; dressed thus I
felt we were finally to approach Brighton's evening entertainments, such as they were; all of our days
having heretofore exited the public arena just after tea so that we could race each other back to the
boarding house, career crazily up the rickety stairs and straight into bed, the mad heady sanctuary of
our lovemaking which was proving tiresless.

But there was more to our affair than mere sex. At least, I surely hoped there was! Took me quite
some time to realize that in order for there to exist a rich, multifaceted and therefore long-lasting
relationship beyond bodily desire, well, you must simply make it so: by talking, and doing, and being
and thinking – together, all of it. Building.

At the time however – Brighton. Friday night, early September 1913, air crisp, cool and dry, around
seven P.M., just before late dinnertime, (“Why'd we have to wait s'long? Me stomach's gone animal,
I'm that starved!”), E dinburgh Arms Hotel, Seafront Road, God help me, room number twelve on
the third storey: witness me open the door and usher Alec out, him clomping with deliberation the
polished patent boots I'd made him wear, over two pairs of socks to make them fit better. He was
more dainty than I in terms of foot – though he'd clobber me, or threaten to, or give me an earful
were I ever to venture this vocally.
He needn't have clumped so – he chose to. More apprehensive than openly objectionable, he waited, hands as ever in pockets (into which I could now confirm he'd transferred his loot, whatever accoutrements he carries around everywhere), while I locked the door and thrust my umbrella to the great and bustling night outside the window: “Jolly good! Let's!” It was time to see what we could make of the night. I grabbed his elbow; I could always release it when we descended the splintered hotel steps.

It hadn't been easy; perhaps a little background.

Earlier that afternoon, we had ventured out into the beach, passing down the rough-hewn stone steps leading down from the board-walk, then sliding and wobbling and clutching each other for balance between the windy, grassy dunes.

The beach was fairly busy; we wended our way through groups of families, children, friends all arm in arm with one another – women mostly, although I did spot the odd pair of men whereby one had his arm tucked comfortably in the crook of the other's, and I itched. I would have loved to attach myself to Alec in similar fashion, in fact I longed to – therein lay the trouble. It is all very well – even Society agrees, decrees – for two men to casually clutch, show superficial affection and affiliation, execute a very carefully regimented and to my mind limited array of physical interactions – as long as the courtship remains strictly Platonic, the sexual barrier not in the least breached, no, not even by a whisker.

Call me obsessive – do, because I am, fully I know it. I was so convinced on the strength of our chemistry – such was the ardour of our brief but so very loving gazes – that if we ventured to indulge in even a little affection – who knew that an arm, in relation to another, particular arm, could be so erotic? - the truth of us would become all the more obvious. We would glow, people would know.

Even on the beach that noon-time, as we strolled along, I kept my hands clasped behind my back demurely and Alec, as ever, tucked his into his pockets; a respectful distance we kept between us there on that corporeal realm, yet I couldn't keep a stupid grin off my face, for basic happiness. Had anyone looked closely, it would have been a dead giveaway, as certain as if I had seized Alec in my arms and kissed him, by that hot cake stand - one look and they'd acknowledge: “You are in love.”

Breathing in fresh, huge lungfuls of cold sea air, I accepted the cigarette from Alec.

“Cain't see France yet, not today,” he observed, and twisted round to look up at the pier. “Though they should have binoculars for to loo – see, somewhere – oh, there! Lookee! Oh but way back up the top of the arcade, up all them steps...” He stood with his hands on his hips, fag hanging, seemingly counting the stairs up to the rickety, paint peeling structure rising out of the centre of the pier.
“Hmm.. mebbes..”

“You're interested in France?” The idea took me quite by surprise. But that's changeable Alec for you. Living embodiment of jejune, careless freedom; a modern, manly Persephone.

“Not especially. But I likes to see the cliffs and all – stacks – not particular on the country...” Not particular indeed; he lost interest in geographical features in happening by a stick tangled in some seaweed and so took to scrawling in the sand like a child. In fact there were actual children not far off doing similar, scraping pictures with sticks and shells and decorating them with pebbles, and here at my feet hunkered Alec, intent on his artistry. Innocent boy, really.

A vivid memory came to me then with almost violent intensity; Sunnington, end of term, the near abandoned beach, the wind rushing in off the bay, the white-topped foamy waves, and Mr. Dulcie's etchings in the sand. Would it have occurred, just then, had I not seen him so surprisingly recently... Perhaps he meant well, well – doubtless he did – but his clumsy attempts to educate and enlighten me at fourteen only drew me even further into the dark with regard to the subject of love, adult relations and joining; I was ill-informed on the matter and worse, incurious. Later, even worse: adverse.

How well did I remember the chilly fear that crept over me at his speech. As a boy, I knew not the full meaning of his explanations, but I was aware enough to know I was missing something, reaching for but not, never grasping, overlooking some great significance that should have been innate, and I was frightened.


“I say, ah... Alec, do you remember when we were in the British Museum last week?”

He rocked back on his heels. “I'd rather not.”

“Oh, come...”

..E... R... And he hopped back up vertically, clapping sand off his hands. “You're not lookin' to get into that now, are you? Start a row, now, over my letters, and how I made a proper ass of myself, those things I said...”
He looked away, shaking his head but smiling. “I swear, you're as bad as me mum, rakin' stuff over, she's a divil for it. 'Alec', she'd say, habitual, 'Alec, do you remember that time' – oh, say – 'We was at the Crowborough Fair and you threw such a wobbler over the boiled sweets, do you remember what you called me?' and I'm: 'No, I don't remember, Christ!' - excepting I does, truth, remembers perfectly well – 'Wasn't we havin' a lovely time, Ma, a lovely tea and you has to go draggin' that up wasn't I only a wee bairn at the time, can't you -’”

“HO!” I said, “I mean – I say -” Sometimes it's necessary to interrupt my loquacious little lover, or he would talk and talk and talk until he collapsed from lack of breath and your own ears were all but bleeding from overuse.

Quickly, I specified: “No my dear... I've no intention in picking holes. What's done is done – a little confusion, but didn't it bear fruit! It's merely... I wonder, do you remember the man who accosted us, who claimed to know me, by the bulls?”

Alec: “I 'member the bulls. Great big yokes of things.”

Maurice: “Quite. Well, Dulcie was actually my old school-master, and he taught, or – tried to – um...” All at once, it stuck me (thoughts, particularly those of large and abstract design, being rather a sudden and violent assault to my usually torpid brain), at any rate, something inside urged me quite forcefully not to confide in Alec regarding the subject of my troubles and muddles over the female sex.

In fact, rather not bring up the bally topic at all; in base knowledge, and affairs of the heart and especially the body, Alec was and always will be my gleeful superior. Why, the dashed fellow had been with – shared with – intimate knowledge of – God only know how many women – 'only natural' – how could he possibly relate to or even dimly imagine my crisis?

I thought: “So be it; I'll not say anything. What do women matter now anyhow? I shall put it all behind me.” With my usual dull-headed determination. One cannot just think things away. Sadly.

“Ah, um. Never mind.” And thus I put a clumsy end to this feeble attempt at disclosure. Oh not to worry it would become full later; as Alec would remark these things – every thing – despite will or want would always come out in the wash.

Alec bestowed upon me one of his wide array of kind smiles. He held out his hand but I knew better than to take it – I might not let go. He was actually gesturing towards the stalls. “Toffee apple? My treat..”
I hardly deserved one, my courage having failed me so, but I followed the bonny lad over to the tents and wooden stands and stood deliberately between him and the choppy sea, so as to shield him somewhat from the wind, which was coming over the bay pretty strong and frightfully cold. Alec's curls whipped about his face and he cursed as he attempted to make headway into his treat, one of which I had refused.

“There were a toffee apple at school once,” he reminisced. “.. Brung in by one of the Masters' wives, at Christmas. Only the one, we all had to share it.”

Gloom descended on me. O, why, when I was in heaven at last, was I still haunted by the past? Perhaps, because I was afraid of Alec finding out more about me and further finding that the glow of his initial infatuation would then fade fast.

He sucked toffee from his fingers.

Were we doomed to failure? Would we only last six weeks – tops – would we succumb to Society: Alec, to tear away into the yonder, and me – complete disintegration? I grabbed the maddening, mocking, logical determinist within me and stomped him underfoot. If I was now in a dream – why waken? Alec was warm, sweet and sensual – real enough to be getting on with.

“What'cha starin' at?” He had finished his apple and was now chewing on the stick, hands back in pockets as we walked slowly down towards the rough stones of the jetty.

“Why don't we go out later?” I asked, out of nowhere.

“....We are out. Look about..” And Alec cast his arm around.

Warming to the idea, I particularized: “No, I mean, out to dine somewhere, decent I mean; we've been subsiding on scraps.” O how that described perfectly how I had been living my whole life until now! Crumbs, whereas now I was sat at the table. And wanting to make the most of it.

“Nowt wrong with the food we been havin', far as I can make out; fills to the gills fairly.”

“Theres's more to eating than ... eating. There's atmosphere, and culinary innovation .. I mean we
should go somewhere proper nice.” Goodbye, my grammar; just another weight anyway. “A-and, perhaps the theatre, make an occasion of it; oughtn't we sample the night-life, now that we are here?”

“Oh-ho-HO!!”

“Now – steady on!” And I held up my hands to stop his train of grinning thought. “Nothing – salacious, I hope you're not presuming.”

“Nope – weren't. Not a bit of it,” Alec lied. Masked his face in innocence. Nudging my shoulder with his as we walked side by side, he went on: “Has you some kind o' problem with the way we been spendin' our nights up till now?”

“What? Oh – Good Lord – no!”

“Because if you're bored already...”

“Anything but!!”

“Or findin' me lackin’...”

“Not at all – Alec! Surely you – yes, you are jesting. Very funny..”

“Ha! Ha!”

“I just meant – perhaps the theatre.”

Alec just brought grumbling.

“Oh the opera?” I suggested.

“Wot!” exclaimed he.
“Is there one?”

“I should bleedin' hope not! Maurice, folk don't come 'ere for the frigging h-opera – land. They come for entertainment. To enjoy they'sel. Not to hear some old hape of a woman a-shrieking like a bag of cats. . .”

“You've been, then?” I said.

Procaciously, Alec: “I've heard records.” Walking a little more briskly ahead of me for a few steps – but not too far, it was still clear we were companions – he then turned and with eyes enlarged, and a manner altogether more diffident, he went on: “Look – it's just not my cup o' tea, alright? I don't know owt about all that fancy stuff; I don't go much in for gettin' all tartered up and going about showing off. I'm not like you.”

This was a blow and to be confidential I swayed a little, and stopped. Alec blushed at what he'd just said but he could hardly take it back, could he? Not when it was so very true.

“No, indeed...” I managed to bear out. Capture your careering crashing feelings, Maurice...

We stood. One of us was about to apologize, but which and did it matter? I was so very unpractised and unproficient in human relations.

Here, I can outline my cares and concerns concisely and clearly, but please understand, as dear Alec would eventually, that at the time I found it so hard to express my emotions and thoughts, so accustomed was I to keeping them secret, like the pages in a locked book.

So, to truth, once again – I wanted Alec and I to test the waters of our permanent survival by stepping out socially – I suspected even then that I would never succeed in dragging him to a fortress with just us two; he was a bird you could not cage, without him becoming very unhappy.

And I wanted the dear fellow to be happy with me – a Herculean task, and one that required not strength of body, or class superiority, or money – but sympathy and mental fortitude. It was enough to send one's temples to throbbing, but I was resolved towards Alec, whilst I was certain that he was resigned towards me. How happily; I was wrong!
Alec: “I -”

Maurice: “My -”

A nervous laugh. Two of them.

I continued: “My intention was – is – merely for us to go somewhere for some leisure, diversion – some, well, fun... I fear you growing weary, it becoming tiresome...”

Alec opened his mouth indignantly but I hurried onwards: “And I know your normal practice must be to spend the evening down at the – pub -” Still unable to get a word in, Alec communicated with a mask of exasperation. “Whereas I,” I said, “would generally go down to the show, the Savoy, cabaret... or as I mentioned, most likely the Club.”

“Well, my boy’s club, I suppose,” sneered Alec.

I sighed. “How simple it is! Was! Now I pause to consider it. It was like a playroom, a nursery – just somewhere to go and be among one's own, unthinking, stagnating... Even if we were still in London now I could hardly bring you along. Much as I'd like to.”

“You would in your hat.”

“I should like to show you off,” I said. “What a prize you are, Alec!” I tugged on his sleeve, pleased that we might be coming round, the long way, to understanding. What a pity much of our dreams and musing lay so irrecoverably in the realm of the conditional. Should, would, if, had...

“I wouldnae mind takin' you down the pub for a few scoops. S'long as you tone down the plummy a bit – p'raps rough up your hair a little -” and he pretended to do so - “ - you'd pass muster. 'Sides – colour o' your money, that's all the keep'd be interested in.”

“I somehow don't think I'd fit into such a – bawdy – space. That's why I suggested the theatre – more my kind of thing. I suppose I thought, rather Alec be uncomfortable than I. Selfish, as usual...” And I turned away. Interacting is exhausting. Maybe I should seek psychological assistance. Not for sexuality, that's fine, that's squared, that's settled – but my damn communication skills! The brain – wires – mouth!
Alec: “Don’t! Look, I’m a spoiled brat, I know it – my folks indulged in me too much, Fred’n t’others always said that’s wot makes me so insufferable. A handsome gentlefellow offers to take a body out on the town! Why, some people would give their right **arm** for the privilege!”

“I merely -”

Alec barrelled over me. “But I wonnot become no toff for you. No more than I’d expect you to descend down to *my* level.”

“Descend? What tosh!” I said.

“Don’t make out like you wasn’t thinkin’ it – before, anyway. At Penge. When I were fit to toss your bags about and haul your bleedin’ rabbits but not worth shit on your shoe, really.”

I was horrified by these words. Why must he rake – why could he not leave well enough..! “H-how dare you! How could you? You don’t know..”

Alec circled me quickly as I stumbled away -

“I didn’t – before, but I do now. You liked me when you got to know me – land, I’d not have it otherwise! But lookit – we’re not exactly cut from the same cloth, now are we?” Even as he said this he surreptitiously held my hand, briefly, but his words carried weight and I felt it all.

“I wish we were,” I said sadly.

“Well, that'd be just too bloody easy, now wouldn't it?” said Alec. I had to chuckle. But I remained cautious. Constantly I worried that Alec's – sincerely – kind words were of course antecedent to his inevitable leave-taking, softening the sure blow.

Completely helpless now, I: “So..?” Don't go.

“So we'll meet in the middle.”
Ah. “The boathouse.”

“The boathou – is that how you saw it?”

“Neutral ground,” I said. “What a clever place for you to arrange us to meet.”

“Clever? I weren't exactly thinkin' wi'me brain..”

Beckoning me, Alec began walking back in the direction of the hotel and I matched his step easily.

Relenting, he spoke close. “Listen. If you think you can actually pass me off as a proper decent human being, what has class, and poise, and – manners – and alla that folderal,” - I snorted - “I'll go with you to Kingdom come.”

Maurice: “Oh, Alec..”

Alec: “But you'll not be able to.”

Maurice: “Let's go to the Opera.”
It wasn't as grand or old an opera as London would typically boast - “It's grand e-frigging-nough,” proclaimed one of our party – and perhaps, it was advantageous that there was a lack of prestige and pretension about the place; the Regent's Emporium – rather laying it on thick but however. At least, the air was so much more breathable than it would be back in London – for myriad reasons.

Mis-matched we were to a great extent, Alec and I, really – but superficially, we did look at least presentable enough for this understated and modest establishment. Alec was of the immediate opinion, once we were seated, that the show itself wasn't near understated nor modest enough. Leave aside the frigging this time.

We saw – or had inflicted upon us – La Traviata and though the raw material is of course top quality this particular production was a little lacking; volume seemed to supersede sweetness both in terms of the singing and the appearance of the players. Not altogether sure the leading lady could credibly performed her courtesan working duties to full effect given her stature, nor even crossed from one side of the Seine to the other. Well, yet.

But I had seen worse performances and there was something distinctly comforting about being back - however secretly and cruelly – in this milieu. Of course, my old life – weeks ago! - had been lonely, frustrating, excruciating; but it was my life, and I'd taken small comforts where I could.

My new, outrageous, larger than life comfort writhed and wriggled like a puppy; a time or two I was compelled to pinch his arm for to stop him shaking the seats.

“Do stop fidgeting, Alec! Suit your suit!” I hissed what we had been advised to do at school: that is, live up to your smart attire, boys. If you find yourselves doing something untoward, unseemly, unnatural (!), well, just picture doing it in your respectable, pressed-by-matron school uniform, and how such actions would begrime your scholarly aspect and by association, the school itself!

Try engaging Alec along these lines though; see how far you get. (Not very.) A laugh if you're lucky.

Alec gave a small wail. “Oo! How much longer?”

Maurice, placatingly: “Not much.”

Two hours later we emerged; even I was chastened. Alec stepped wearily and weakly through the
foyer and silently held the glassed front door open for me.

He was grimacing. “Just a bit of indigestion,” he assured me. He was in too much shock to launch into a tirade and thus just traipsed alongside me as we gained the mercifully cool clear salt-air of the bright Brighton night. Why, it seemed even busier now than in the daytime.

I lit a cigarette and passed it to Alec, who sucked on it like a lifesaver. I had to speak, break the tension, I couldn't help but jibe!

“Perhaps not the most impressive performance of the season..” I said conversationally.

“I dunno abou' that. It left an impression, alright, that's for truth, only -”

Quite suddenly a shrill voice: “My!! You liked it then?”

I jumped as two frightfully jolly people appeared, both of whom must have been inside the theatre we had just left, and on whose plant-potted entranceway we were loitering.

Both in furs – actually not so unlike the pair who had so sneered at Alec's appearance days hence, when he was wavering in front of the apartment building as I watched and stewed.

A measure of pleasure – the evening's entertainment and forthright friendliness made these two strangers in Brighton appear a good deal more neighbourly then my actual neighbours. Because:

The smiling woman waited, glancing at us both but mainly Alec, whom she had of course been addressing, although he now very deliberately busied himself with his Sullivan. He wasn't quite used to the taste yet, or the strength, or is it the smell, so maybe his coughing fit were – ah, was – truly genuine.

At any rate, I picked up the baton and delivered a harmless, genial reply: “Indeed yes, it had its moments.. though the set design might have been a bit more – nuanced, and the propwork! I don't believe it originally had actual bloodshed? Rather gruesome, what!”

The man laughed: “Yes, by jove it did give Honoria a turn when the tiff descended into fisticuffs –
though it was more that they got a little close to the edge of the stage for comfort!’ And he clapped my back – as I knew well he would do and so had my feet already planted firmly. One adopts a second nature to these customs. Dr. Barry would have done exactly thus, at this point, for example, and I would have laughed, as I did now.

Honoria closed her eyes, touched her fur lapel, and confessed: “Well, I thought the entire thing was just enchanting, start to finish. What absolute angels the Greek Chorus were – I do believe in the transformative power of music, don't you?”

Beside and yet skulking behind me, Alec grumbled under his visible breath: “Angels. For Chrissake. Angels.”

“Quiet!” I told him, from my brain to his. It worked; he affected to being extremely interested in his cigarette, in fact he seemed intent upon single-handedly creating a fug so thick that we would be unable to see each other.

Said the gentleman: “As for us, we like the sea-side well enough – Honoria likes to take the air, don't you dear? Good for the complexion -”

Honoria: “The complexion.”

“Yes,” continued her fellow, “Does a body good, get away from the city. I find the countryside a trifle too remote – I mean to say, getting one's papers at half past the twelve? With the morning half gone?! Coffee gone cold – by Jove!”

Maurice: “Beastly hard.”

“Couldn't you just? Therefore we find the coastal towns a happy compromise – close to nature – well, the sand, gulls, natives and such – but there is still a mere modicum of culture to be partook for the discerning patron like ourselves.” Here he waved at the Opera House – well, the brave building we were fronting.

Further confiding, as we walked slowly, the man: “… as it happens, I was just now informed of a certain establishment down the quay a bit,” - he rubbed an index on a moneyed thumb - “.. you simply must come along..”
“Oh, Edward!” Came the admonishment, “You and your vices. Isn’t he just too naughty?”

Undeterred, Edward winked: “If you chaps fancy a flutter? After we see you settled with a drink, of course, darling..” And simpering.

I commanded the whole interaction easily. There was no room for true apology, or the old oiling when, examining my smoke, I replied deeply: “Sounds a frightfully good pip – another night, perhaps?” For I could feel Alec's black clouds of objection – quite apart from the thick hot cigarette smoke – pressing.

I turned to angle a shoulder behind him and force him into the grind. “Rather fagged, this evening, are we not, Alec?” He started rather, and had at least the wherewithal to unfold his arms in the immediate presence of a lady.

“Aye. Er – I m-mean, I – do agree.. fagged.. we are that, at that.” In an effort to accommodate me, he was trying to tone done his natural nature-like tones; I had to twist and twitch to avoid a splutter.

Quickly I squeezed my smoke out in a finalizing sort of fashion and established: “Yes so, we've already decided we'll put the hat on the evening somewhere where one is guaranteed return for one's investments..” Brazenly – I should never have done so in front of Mother, or the girls or their comrades, or Anne, or Lady Durham – but Honoria seemed a bright-lipped, cheery, game sort of a girl – I imitated the raising of the wrist.

As predicted, Honoria turned away with a wave of a gloved and glittering hand and a cackle; whilst Edward boomed his goodbyes, wrung our wrists and extracted a promise to whist some evening this week when were were less “set on the bubbley.”

A promise isn't broken necessarily, if you never meant to follow through in the first place, what? If you were just keeping peaceable. After all, it was just so much idle apple-sauce – we'd never even exchanged names! And so it wasn't a proper promise. Not like between Alec and I.

As the happy go lucky couple tottered off to play snap I turned proudly to Alec. Hero was I! Having rescued us from the social treacle. Though it may have been me who led us in, initially.

I felt bolstered and buoyed, Byronic.

I hooked my umbrella in my right arm and candidly bent my left one to Alec. He wide-eyed at my proffered elbow with rather the same expression one would bestow upon the offering of a dead fish.
“Thusly attired,” I explained, “both gentlemen we,” - his face was Doubt - “it's perfectly acceptable. My goodness, when I was in school – it was a sought-after and prideful privilege to walk arm-in-arm with one's chum. Only a certain favoured faction of the Upper Sixth were allowed.”

“Is that right? And did yer? When you come up – sixth, what is it..”

“Well – no,” I admitted. “It was considered pure ostentation – my set wouldn't have gone in for all that.”

“And what did your set go in for?” Finally Alec was emerging from the fog, with the usual misplacing interest.

“To distinction, you mean? Well – boxing – I suppose. That did me well enough, in – in, that line..”

“That line, eh?” Alec grinned.

“You know – very well what line,” I said warningly, though my chest did thudder.

“That I do,” said he, and took my arm, that I had let fall, and he bent it back into position before slotting his own through where it fit most comfortably.

As we strode smartly along the pier, Alec knew exactly how to walk – a perfect matching pace – and exactly where to position himself – as close as possible – and what to do – chatter mindlessly and delightfully, and the confused envy and outrage I used to feel, watching those light-flanelled, high-collared upper-classmen at school clutching each other as they marched the quad gaily – melted, or evaporated, or blew away, or at any rate was gone, gone, gone. This wasn't just for show; this was pure affection, not affectation. What a difference a couple of letters doth make!

“Right,” said Alec. “Seeing as you got to decide how we walk – never mind draggin' us on the bloody h'Opera – it's my turn now to decide where we're going next.” And indeed, he was the one guiding us, almost unbeknownst to me, subtly but surely, like a leading dance partner; we were trotting down the well-lit, crowded promenade, protected from the gabbering melee by our costumes and each other, and the night.
Cold air puffed out when I tilted my head down those few inches to reach Alec's ear, hidden by the thick flannel cap I'd had him don – he'd outright refused any kind of proper hat. Fortunately one could get away without a topper here, naturally, it's not as if it were Covet Garden!

“Of course my darling,” I said. “That's only fair.” The night, the freedom makes one heady, I remember. We'd not drank anything since dinner and even then only wine.

Alec was thinking along the same lines. “Ee, that's great. It is, 'cause you got me thinkin' earlier – well you said it yourself, didn't you? We got arrangements already – go in for one or ten – raising of the wrist -” - this he did - “Lord knows I could do wi'it after that -” He couldn't even refer to the show by name. If even he remembered it.

But we were in tandem of temperament. “Then where are we headed?” Though I was in no rush to get there, where-ever. Stars sparkled in the sky, the sea rushed to our left, the feet of the many slapped the timber boards, and Alec Scudder warm on one's arm. Money in the happiness bank.

“You forget, mi'laddo, I have a map,” and he began rooting inside his (My! Our! His!) jacket.

“What! You brought that along?”

“Haha – no, only codding.”

“You great bloody gasbag,” I said, poking him.

“Hey! Careful with that brolly, Maurice!” And, before reprimand: “Look, no need on us for a map – let's just follow the merriment, that's the way. Down here! This looks healthy...”

It didn't, or else we have differing definitions of healthy. (Probable.)

For Alec then zestfully dragged me down a narrow, uneven, unkempt, damp, but nonetheless very crowded alleyway; we passed under a wrought iron arch and were soon among broken cobbles, open windows, loud music and even louder voices. Over-whiskered and -whiskeyed men hung onto many-feathered women – I say.
“Alec...”

Smartly ignoring this appeal, he looked around him, grinning, eyes round as saucers. In this capricious and vociferous environment, even Alec’s very posture seemed to basen; he stooped forward a bit as he peered at a lady – or well, a woman, displaying herself in an unduly ruffling dress and an enormous, outrageous hat. She winked her dark eye at him... Yes, yes, all very earthy and ribald. I jogged him.

“Is it too much to hope that this is just a short cut? Wherever are we going?”

Alec: “Gin shop.”

Maurice: “Ah. Of course.”

Alec: “Or... Penny gaff.”

Maurice: “Gaff, forsooth!”

Alec: “Hehe... Oh, God, anywhere where a fella can git just a fine, decent cider! Though unlikely. I'm right fussy about cider, so I am. It's because they makes it so reet well back home – all the apples around.”

Back home! To think – Alec and Clive share the same home – parish as it were. Wiltshire boys both, coming down to it. How extraordinary.

It would seem I possess a particular penchant for the pastoral.

“Ah!” Alec stopped. “Now – here: looks like we could cheat us way in! C'mon through this gap -” And with that, Alec pulled me towards a dilapidated but – again I emphasize – highly popular building, little more than a two-up, two-down number – with us less arm-in-arm now, more the hooker and the hooked. Oh true.

I, hissing as we descended steps: “Alec – it smells like - opium in here.”
“Yeh it do – hold yer breath!”

I closed my eyes too and just gave in to him; yes I was being sucked into a den of degeneracy – smelly, sweaty, loud, coarse – frightening – but I trusted Alec, would have followed him to very Hell and back.

In more practical matters, I myself was straining for a drink. Someone snatched my umbrella, and Alec grabbed it right back with a fierce and filthy word or two.

It was real, and really overwhelming; I thought of the Gentlemen’s Club but didn’t long for it, I imagine my membership is long revoked: it isn’t as if I’ll beget a son to inherit my armchair. Only Alec. My only family now. Though what kind of family member would usher a person onto a rickety stool in a dark, smoky, wire-windowed, seamy underground dive, and thrust upon him a dirty glass of beer? Well, I wouldn’t know! But I know how to drink a glass and feel the sweet alcohol shiver its way down to my toes.

Still: “Why this place?” I asked Alec. We had passed so very dozens, it felt like – watering holes that would have been much more reputable – er, I mean, comfortable – and the beer better quality, the music quieter...

Alec, loudly in my ear: “I reckoned we’d attract less attention, joint like this..”

“Attention..?” Only then did I twig that he had his arm around me as we conversed; I sitting on the high stool at the bar, he standing, one foot propped jauntily on the rung of my chair.

“Oh.. We shouldn't..” Though I liked it so.

“And we won't.” He removed his arm – slowly – and pinched another stool from the crowd behind him, tossing a coat off of it as he did so. “But I can't seem to stop myself grinning my bally head off at you,” and he demonstrated, pushing up his cap with a thumb.

He really did startle me with these frank admissions and displays – in quite deliberate public no less! - but I was beginning to get the hang of him. I tapped his arm admonishingly and allowed that he was quite unmanageable. He agreed on this point, and why not, after all he had no manager no more – ah, any more – and was a free man, we two, free men, to do as we please!
“And so why not head for the skeeviest bar in town? Ee – it'll be a right night!” And – amazingly – it was – no mistake.

Though the place was rowdy, it wasn't necessarily rough; there was so much shouting and laughing and singing and dancing and quarrelling and making up an absolutely breathless whirlwind of human profligacy that there simply wouldn't have been time nor energy left for fighting - though perhaps it was my ignorance, perhaps it was a veritable powder keg awaiting for one small spark – a spilled drink, a lost bet, a hand on a woman, a challenge for sport.

Alec and I had our own sporting little time: sat at the bar but facing outwards, legs crossed or swung on rungs and glasses dangling on knees, we were part of the crowd, of the night and yet protected and endorsed by our own secret refuge – our jokes and observations and Alec's arm – not around me, exactly, but stretched out along the bar behind me and fidgeting as if eager to be.

He airily but staunchly refused to wander away from me; said he didn't need to use the bathroom even. But I was not so physically authorative over my functions. Nor was I used to copious beer. And I didn't at this stage want the family silver, shall we say, to suffer any biological damage – especially now that it was being put to such frequent – and fantastic! - use.

I indicated to Alec that I was departing – the lavvy, you know, be right back – he nodded, nodded, said he'd “Get 'em in,” and I smiled my agreement, although as I wended my wobbly way to the corridor I was uncertain – no, factually I was quite certain – that I just couldn't manage another drop and possibly hope to retain my scattered faculties. Such as they were.

Alec had promised – he's such a bloody poser – to drink me under the table; well in this instance his boasting was justified – I was so far under I was on the other side, propped up on a kitchen chair watching wearily as he called for another round, another round.

Round and round did I go, on my quest for the bathroom – well a generous term. Less said about it the better: although I was to encounter and distastefully engage with far worse facilities in the future. Ended up divulging the contents of my stomach; the old meat, good meals, brown gobbels up I throw. Don't you know.

As I made my way back, whirling rather, and grabbing various walls, beams, door-frames for long-lost balance – such was the sea-heaving crowd and my own rotten head – I happened upon – indeed very nearly lurched into – a man standing at a craggy stone wall, smoking and reclining one leg high upon a turned-over beer barrel.

“Sorry. Oh! Do forgive me -” I hastened as I stopped myself from falling on him by grabbing a coat
that was hung on the opposite wall of the narrow, damp alleyway.

The coat proved unsound; the man jumped over and gripped both my upperarms to steady me. Grinning behind his cigarette, and his beard, he gained my grateful, nervous smile and grizzled: “Not at all, mate, s’no bother. In fact, it’d be right sweet, I’d find, for a body to be toppled on by you..”

Knitting my brows in abject panic, and smile frozen solid, I very deliberately stiffened my posture and he did thankfully let go, but didn’t back away; in fact as I grasped my chest with one hand and flexed the agitated fingers of the other, the rough-looking fellow leaned an arm on the wall right beside me and propped the other akimbo.

With thus perfect and unfortunately clear access to my personal space he continued: “How ’bout it chuck?” He appraised me slowly down and then back up to my alarmed eyes. Help I thought as he clarified: “I’m only ashore for tonight, but between we, we could mek it a good’un..”

“Aha! Ho. No, n-no thank you, ever so, but I’m – I’m with someone.” I all but choked out.

Most thankfully he dropped his arm and sucked on his cigarette again, calling after my bumbling back: “Lucky someone!!” With a clear smile in his voice.

I fled – or at least, increased the speed at which I was squeezing myself through the throng.

Shaking rather, and sweating, but still somehow cold, I reached the bar where I had left Alec. He was still there now in bright and brazen display; he seemed to have been attempting to keep my bar-stool for me by throwing his legs over it. Now he was grappling with a woman – practically a girl – in a tight pinched dress and garish pink shawl, paper flowers tumbling out of her ringlets and a delighted grin to match Alec’s.

She was pulling the chair away and Alec was impeding her by wrapping his legs around the rungs. As I watched, panting, he let her gain her prize a little, before drawing it back to him and her too, leaning, laughing. Lurching up behind him, I felt perfectly entitled to interrupt.

I tapped his shoulder and said, “Hey.. hullo.”

Alec, turning round: “Alright, tulip? Lookee – sit thyself down there, for this lass..” - and he raised his brows at her - “is intent on stealing your seat. Been quite a battle!”
“No, it's fine,” I said, and to the lady: “It's fine, you can have it.” And I picked it up and handed it over to her somewhat disappointed countenance. Alec said, “Ever the gentleman! Here, have my -”

“No!!” I very hissed. “Look – is this? Are we – out in the – in the passage-way there – there was a man, and he – he -”

“Hm?” Alec was calm, equable. Drunk, likely.

“He – made intentions. Towards me!” High hissing again.

“Ho ho ho!” went Alec. “Did he now! Can't criticize his taste now can I?”

“ALEC! You bloody – little – blackguard!”

“Ha ha!”

I dove in close to his good – right – ear. “Is that why you brought us here? Is it a place 'specially for -” I couldn't even bring myself to say it. Images of Risely and his set swam through my steeped mind, and a sudden, acute and painful jolt of longing for Clive shot through me.

Clive and I. Together: disastrous, temporary, fickle and fleeting as cottongrass – yet. We had been desperate, frustrated, suppressed, isolated – but we had been safe, hidden, protected. No-one else was involved. Now, I felt the whole world swirl about me: glasses, bare arms, petticoats, caps, boaters, beer.

“I don't know what it is!” said Alec. “I tol' you, I never been here a'fore. Mind you, if it was a place where there's – ah, discreet meetin's – wouldn't surprise me.”

“This place is about as discreet as a freight train.” I responded hotly.

Alec was indeed drunk and talkative; he babbles all the faster and louder whenever he believes wholeheartedly in his own entertainment value. Which is generally.
“We-ell, to be fair and frank wi’you, I haven’t been here ever – this town – but I heard on it. So, I were over beyond in a pub in Yorkshire – we all went up there one time we got a leave off work, and decided to race up for end of t’harvest – and, where did we end up waylayin' but Leeds! The crowd of us bloody bogtrotters in a big fancy city like that! I tell thee... I mean we actually had hayseeds on us' person!

“But anyhow I got to talking to this strange city cove and he happened to mention Brighton; that's how he opened the conversation actually, askin' had I ever been, he'd only just and it were a right rollicking place, way he made it sound – the beach, sea, fairs, pier – and – and -”

“And?!”

“Oh – he – just made out like it were a lark, like... bought me a drink or two... Then Old Davey come over to grab me and give me a slapping for a-talking to a feller like him!”

Parrot-like: “Like whom? Like..”

“Well, this stranger, I s'pose he were a bit – dandy-ish!” Giggles at this point were collapsed into and I felt less than reassured but pressed closer to him anyway.

“And just – Davey, always looking out for me, bless ‘im, though he do fuss like a ruddy old woman, sometimes, bossing me about, you'd swear I'd not a speck of me own sense.

“So: 'I dunno Alec' says he, 'Right fishy lookin' buck. Now you mind, don't get involved, cop youself on, stay away -’”

“And did you? Cop – stay away?”

“NO!!” And he collapsed, laughing, backwards against the bar; in my own inebriated state I had to move quickly to move some glasses out of his way, lest he – we – get into more trouble.

Alec was wiping his eyes, still sobbing his mirth. “Anything in a skirt! That's what they say'd on me! If only they knew -!”
“But not any-more?” I said.

“Hah?”

Desperation, panic – beer. “No more – skirts, or – or – otherwise, now that you and I – that we -”

Alec was immediately grave. “Well – of course not no more. Christ, I'm talkin' years ago, Maurice – well, months, anyroad. No – it's you and me now – truth.” He actually shook my hand. Like this was a business agreement. Perhaps it was, among other things. A sharp, solemn nod; then he looked over my shoulder.

“Now – who's been interferin' with my fella? What he do – get fresh wi'you? What he say sent you reelin' – I'll knock his block off! Filthy sailors!!”

Every so often, Alec is given to reminding me – usually when obnoxiously drunk – that he is, in fact, far from perfect. ('Maurice, now you know I'm no angel.' – 'Yes, I know.' – 'Never pretended otherwise.' – 'No. I know' – 'No airs and graces here. Take me as I am!' - 'Well, I'm only glad to.' – 'Oh Maurice!!' And variations.)

A propensity towards unwise impulsiveness – well, obviously, climbing in bedroom windows notwithstanding – and hot-headedness always leads to upheaval, unless I could intervene. There's the trouble. He's as determined yet as uncontrollable as an unguided missile. Moreover, he tended to take, at first, great exception to any reprimand, or suggestion, or friendly advice – short of my begging – more of his being, once again, 'ordered about.'

“There's the blighter – were it him?” Alec glared fiercely at an alarming-looking fellow, with a dangling cigarette, a large amber glass, a low cap, high collar and at least six inches on Alec. He was indeed watching us, but then so were several men, I realized with a gut wrench.

“I'll give him what for – and change!!” Alec hopped off his barstool delightedly and I deftly whisked him back onto it, grasping his shoulders.

“No Alec!” I hushed. “Not he – nor any – can't we just – I want to go home!” How true was this – a Thursday, I should be safely tucked up in my own familiar four poster, the usual smell of pines wafting in the window, perhaps gentle rain, the creak of a light woman's footstep on the stairs, servant or sibling, they careful not to wake me.
Not that I slept much. No. I didn't want to go home – I was home now, anywhere there's Alec. But he was so very changeable and unpredictable and therefore, so now was my life! Unprecedented!

Two beers had just been placed before Alec but at my words he sobered somewhat. “Alright, Maurice,” and he pushed some money over to the barkeeper, and more intimately: “Let's us go back to the,” - glanced around - “Let's just go. Come head!”

And he twitched my arm and led the way back outside, I his grateful trailer.

Even though he claimed he'd never set foot in the place – or in the town, entire – he knew a short-cut out and drew me through the ill-fated but now thankfully empty corridor, out to an enclosed back yard where he confidently found a wooden door in the cobbled wall, opened the latch and swung it open. Automatically I made to go before him – well, he had been holding doors open for me for the length of our acquaintance – but he put a hand on my chest to stop me.

“Nay, wait – I'll go first, just to see there's nowt.. it's safe,” he said, to my puzzlement.

“What does it matter which of us goes first?” I reasoned. “If some terrible danger were to befall you, it might as well just do me too. It's not as if I could do without you.” Alec pursed and un-pursed his lips a few times, before eventually giving in to a big grin.

I led the way and as we sallied it did occur what a rather strong statement I had just made; a frank acknowledgement to Alec - and to myself – of how very necessary he was to me now. Another tie bound. 'I love you' is indeed lovely, but potentially foolhardy; one can say it and simply wander off dreamily – or, indeed, race away, shoes beating the beautifully paved brickwork of the college quad.

But 'I need you' – oh, it's so much more basic, real, urgent – there can be no parting, wandering; only following. Powerful – frightening. So naturally I mentally checked myself: 'Dash it, Maurice, reign in! Don't scare him off – yes he loves you now, but will it, can it last?'

“I think I'm gonna chuck,” complained Alec; fortunately we were walking along the moonlit alley behind the rows of terraced houses and taverns, which were shadowy to our left, with a stream of water to our right. Sprawled over the railings, Alec deposited the evening's post- (and indeed, pre-) Opera indulgences with a splatter down the embankment. I applied my handkerchief.

The streets looking quite different at night – dark and wet and meandering – I was unsure of where
exactly to go; but Alec knew, and muttered the way, even though I was the one supporting him and his eyes were closed a lot of the way. A kind of in-built compass, perhaps? Jolly useful. I only wished that I could ever be of any similarly earthly good to him, and not a dead weight, an awkward, alienating albatross.

Soft and rumpled, the hotel bedsheets beckoned. Chilly air had filled the room in our absence from the open window; I sat Alec on the edge of the bed where he immediately tilted forward, elbows on knees, rubbing his head: “Jesus Christ. Me head is liftin’. Clean off me shoulder’n.”

I took to tending. I liked to, even. “Lie back, rest Alec. I'll fetch another blanket... some water...”

“...Maurice."

I turned back to him, with my woolly jumper that Alec had so favoured in my hands. He had scooted, was now sitting against the headboard, the Norfolk unbuttoned and his eyes heavy-lidded and hazy. He nonetheless held out his hand and I approached.

“Maurice.” Drunkenly. “You... this forest you mentioned. You want this – greenwood.”

Heart hammering, I cautiously: “Yes.”

Satisfied, he sank back into the pillows, closed his eyes, and said stoutly, “Then you shall have it.”
Umbrage, as it were, might well have been taken. I mean to say, Alec could quite reasonably have baulked at the weight of responsibility – for our future, for my happiness – that I had lately heaped upon him. For though the Greenwood was my outlandish dream, it was up to him to realize it. That was merely understood.

I had of course been concerned about – indeed, quite prepared for – him changing his mind, or even failing outright to remember his impassioned promise to me. Such, however, was the extremity of his hangover the morning after the Opera, that he never wanted to see or taste “another drop” ever again, and that he'd be happy to settle forever somewhere far from “noise and crowds and nonsense” - all the while massaging his head, his eyes squeezed shut. I took over after a while, knelt behind him as he sat slumped on the side of the bed, running my hands in soft circles over his head, combing his lovely curls and tutting.

“If I had a brain it'd be in pain,” he moaned.

“I do so hate to see you like this. Drink more water.” I expected him to jump down my throat, for fussing or – something – but instead he feebly obeyed, gulping.

“Let's get something in you,” I said, and at least this elicited a wobbly smile. “Breakfast, I mean, old man. You'll feel better.”

“The only way is up, at this rate,” he said, heaving to his feet.

Downstairs, the hotel dining-room, if that, revealed only a few fellow diners, lingering over coffee and cigarettes; Alec had slept – or been comatose – clear through half the morning before I was able to rouse him.
I myself had been too excited and agitated to sleep much; Alec’s highly provocative closing gambit, before he had drifted off to sleep, was echoing through my mind and was still, and as we seated ourselves at the window, with a view to the grey, rushing sea, I wondered how to broach.

‘How’ – maybe not as important as ‘when’ or, ‘under what helpful circumstances’; namely when Alec had a few rashers of bacon down him and was now stirring a third sugar into his tea. Waiting until he had had a sweet, revitalizing mouthful, I tapped the tablecloth in what I hoped was a rousing, optimistic way.

“So! Time again we made plans, what?”

“What?” said Alec.

“The - um – greenwood,” I faltered at the first hurdle. “You said, last night...”

“Oh yeh.. yeh. Last night! Land! Don’t talk to me!”

I knew this to be merely an idiom of speech; still I had been hoping he would bring some measure of enthusiasm to this discussion, assume the mantle rather. Maybe it was still early in his fuddled timeframe.

“No, I just thought – oh, thank you..” For the proprietress, a short, round, grey-haired woman with a very worn but clean apron had appeared, proffering the toast-rack and jam-pots.

I took both offerings and she nodded non-committally and carried on; surely she must have known, after a week and more of housekeeping, that Alec and I were bunking together (bunking off, he said wryly), and yet she seemed heedless. Perhaps there had indeed been a degree of foxiness which had impelled Alec to choose this particular town in which to make our initial getaway.

Taking care to busy myself noisily with the knife and the marmalade jar, affecting casualness, I recommenced: “I thought you might have some thoughts on the manner in which we could manage, live, out in the – erm, countryside. The woods.” Gracious Goodness. Even I knew how absurd I sounded. In my my embarrassment I put the knife directly from the conserve into the butter dish; the wrong sequence but too late now. The toast tasted the same. I crunched an inordinately large bite.
“You are fierce convinced that I am going to be the leader of this expedition,” said Alec shrewdly. "What makes tha' think I'm any more expert at livin' off the land than you?’

“Well, you are more more experienced in the area -”

“Hmm?”

“What with being a rustic -”

“Aha!!”

“What? What?”

Alec thrust the pointy corner of his toast at me. “I knowed it! You think I'm nowt but a simple-minded, countrified yokel what doesn't know anything but rollin' around in the mud!”

“Did I say that? Unbeknownst to me if I did. I simply drew attention to your particular heritage – and you think I'm insulting you? Alec, you wound me!”

Outraged, Alec goggled and made a few vain attempts to reply; with a finger holding the lid firm I poured his tea and he stirred in more sugar – one, two, three, four – furiously. I took out two cigarettes, ready for when we were finished and kept gazing, smiling.

Alec munched moodily on his own toast – so plentifully strewn with blackberry jam that his fingers were stained red.

“Happen I have an idea or two,” he said at last. “Happen I do know more'n you, useful-wise – why would I even deny it? You and your flaming Greeks..”

I was jolly. “See? We can partake in civil discourse!” I poured my own tea, more relieved than I was willing to show at his co-operation. Honestly. Alec plunges feet-first into some endeavours, yet with other matters getting his opinion or input is like pulling teeth, as Mother would say. (What would she say if she did see him! Words would fail. Her heart would follow suit. No, I would never do that to her.)
“Course we can. When only *one* of us descends down to childish name-calling,” grumbled Alec; I smiled beatifically. Truthfully I *had* meant my description of my companion as a veritable pastoral prince as a compliment, but to confess to that would be tantamount to inviting another tirade. Alec *enjoys* being prickly.

He finished his toast, licking his fingers but at least using a handkerchief to wipe the crumbs from his lips – roughly – but still, it boded healthy.

“Right. Here's what we'll do. Thou'rt that dead set on shacking up out in the forest? Then we'll has to go north.”

“Haw! Well, there's no other way from here!”

“Have a bit of cop-on!”

“Sorry, sorry... go on, please – North?”

Alec sighed. “I might know a person or two, prove to have an 'in' – could try and get in contact, coves I've worked with, you know, fairly sharp fellas too, and helpful – might be able and willin' to put in a word for us, or at least point us in the right direction, fill us in on where the work is.. What's on just now..”

“The work?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Work.. tha' knows what that is, please tell me..!”

“Yes, of course, but I – I had thought we could – live off the land, as you said. Be self-sufficient.”

I faltered. I hadn't exactly run out of words but had become afraid to say them. I needed a little from him then. Maybe he saw this.

“How so?” And he motioned his hand for a cigarette; I passed it over with the matchbox.
“We could live a-way out in the woods you know,” I said. “Near a river, and – and grow our own food, and have chickens, erm, shoot rabbits...”

Alec smiled: “You'd want to practice your aimin' from what I seen..”

I trundled: “Away from everything and everyone... Free from interference and judgement. Don't you want that too?”

Alec could have roared laughing. Should have! But instead he regarded me thoughtfully, puffing away, then rapped the table sharply with a knuckle. “A right pretty idea, that. It's lovely. You're lovely! But – ah -”

“You think I'm most awfully stupid.”

“No, no...”

“I know I'm being naive.”

Alec had one arm slung over the back his chair and fixed me with a serious look. “You are, a little, yeh, but – at least you'se being honest. That's what I like about you, Maurice – there's nowt in thee deceitful.”

I was taken aback by that. Hadn't I spent my life entire deceiving everyone, myself most of all? I suppose Alec was the first to see me completely stripped and frank and forthcoming.

Time for more coming forth. “Alec, I can still hardly believe in you. You are... The unlikeliest... not only that you found me at my darkest hour but you grew to like me, to – to love me!” Was it safe to say that? He'd said as much before, albeit in honeyed enclave of the bedroom.

Thankfully he coloured. “Aye, that I do... You know it, from first I laid eye, I took to thee..”

I leaned forward dramatically. “Then – take me away from everything. You think, perhaps, we'd be bereft, isolated, the two of us hidden away? Well, I've been surrounded by people all my life and I was dying from the loneliness. Just perishing away, sure as if I were afflicted by the 'flu, or
consumption, or starvation. And now, you're here, and I'm certain I'm terrified of Society snatching you away. I want it to be us two!!"

God he was so easy to confide in! I hardly remembered... Well, if I were to stop and actively do so, I could recall Clive in those early days, how unrelentingly and freely he told me all his woes about his religion, his position, his family, his future. Unfortunately it stopped just short of the personal. Still how I had admired him.

Alec didn't reel from the personal; he tapped ash and said excitedly: “That's what I want too! But understand – I'm not tryin' to throw in the wet blanket, here, only – we'll need sense, we'll need earnin's. I'm stony, and you've ruined yourself respectful on my humble account, and you say you gav' away the lion's of thy savings to thy sister'n – I think ever such a lot of you for doing so, by the way, you'se a true gentleman -” I smiled, wonderful, every penny passed was worth it.

“So that leaves us a bit lackin' – Lookit. Maurice. We could indeed just plunge us into the nearest woods, eat – berries, bash rabbits, frolic about in the sunshine, bathing, making merry. Only – how long'll that last till we're starved? Cold? Ill? Can't imagine you goin' wi'ou' your basic comforts, anyroad.”

I swallowed. Did I really come over the materialist so? Still it didn't feel like Alec was crushing, only disassembling. My head spun with his philosophy.

“I could manage! Er – roughing it.” I tried.

Alec finally allowed himself to laugh at me.

“Now really... Honestly, love, no matter what happens, you'se going to have to sacrifice livin' in the manner to which you been accustomed. And me and all! Land, are you going to scrub my unmentionables every washdee like me ma do?!”

My brain squeaked: “Must I?!” But thankfully my heart beat it to the punch and I managed, “If I must..”

“Ha ha, well no, you needn't. I kin do all that, done it afore. I were abroad in Wales, of all places, out workin' the barley, load of us lads, not a woman for ten mile' so we had to do the washin' oursel'. The foremen would send they gear off to a char in Swansea, but it cost a shilling a week for that and us fellas needed our spare coins to pool for whiskey.”
Tangent apparently completed, Alec scratched above his lip where a moustache was beginning to form; it furthered his appearance of ruggedness but I liked it rather, feels nice against one's own face.

“As a matter of fact,” said Alec, “That's the kind of a grind I'd have in mind for us – not the barley, mind, harvest in t'fields'll be well over, but it's September yet – they's always the orchards, tillin' o' course could well be goin' on depending on how many years the farmers have it fallowin' this weather...”

He nodded at me: ‘You and your woodcuttin’ – again that could well be a goer, although – would fellin' be best, or choppin', closer to production? Spuds o’ course! Diggin'. Not done that since I were a bairn but bet they's lookin’. I ought be writin' this down, I've a terrible head -”

And he began rifling through the Norfolk pockets, somehow knowing there'd be a pen clipped neatly to the inside seam. A torn open cigarette box as a jotter and he began again planning, slowly writing, tongue cornered.

It was reassuring to see concrete – or well, cardboard – evidence of our entire future taking shape, even if it was forming so very painstakingly.

I blew out a flume. “We shall be fairly exhausted if we take on all of those endeavours.” Personally I didn't like the sounds of any of them. Hitherto - “grind” “farmers” “field” “chopping” “production” - these were all just words to me, seldom used ones, and there in the morning-room of the ‘Arms, with strong coffee, fresh-lit smoke, the comforting noise of dishes clattering and serving ladies nattering – and most of all, my Friend – well, the practical application of Alec's ruminations seemed very vague and pleasant and far away.

Like my greenwood. Little did I realize, Alec's staunch determination – like a dog with a bone was he, when he got fixated – although of this I should have already been aware, given I had myself most recently been the very object of his obsession.

Alec tutted. “Not all of them at once, foolish! Depends what's on at the moment, what's underway, then we decide where to go, if there's a needful shortage of hands. Get clocked in somewhere, do that for a while, then move on.”

I tapped my own ash; Alec's cigarette had gone out in the tray, he'd quite forgotten it. “Move on?” I said. “But I thought we'd – you know -” Oh, hang it, just say it - “We'd set up home together. After a fashion.”
“Sure and we will,” said he. “But for labourin’ – casual like, out in the countryside, you has to follow the work. All rests on the season and supply of workers... And how the weather's been that year..”

I digested this. “Rum way to live,” I remarked. “By the seat of one's pants, as it were.”

Alec smiled up briefly. I wondered aloud: “And I imagine – the pay comes – daily? Weekly? And the job just – ends when the weather changes?”

“Or if it's all finished – all the corn brung in, example.”

“But there's no security in that,” I said. “How would one pay the bills – how could one, say, comfortably raise a family?”

“Is that what you're after? Bairns? I'm afraid you'll never git me in the family way, Maurice, although you're welcome to keep tryin'.” And he grinned wickedly.

“Oh my lord,” was all I could gather from my remaining wits.

Alec stood, folded his strategy, tucked it into his coat pocket, and buttoning, nodded to me. “Come on, you. Daylight's burnin’.” This phrase may have served to remind him of his cigarette, which he only now noticed in its extinguished-ness. He popped it into his mouth and leaned over to me as I shrugged into my own coat – without a second thought I lit it.

Curiouser and curiouser, the strange intrinsic bond between us, the silent solidarity. It was something removed from, yet harmonious with, the sexual union.

Love – we had named it. But it could be deemed otherly too – friendship, loyalty, just a plain agreement of mind.

A telephone – the procuring of the services of – was the first order of business. “Though how I'm exactly gonna git a hold of him – that I do not know.” And Alec went on to explain that one of the aforementioned “cove or two” who may just be able to advise us on the availability and whereabouts
of immediate work might just be where he said he last was, and therefore contactable. How to do so, exactly, was the rub.

Admittedly, I was pleased to be able to contribute some modicum of effort to our self-assignment. Some general enquiries led us to a phone at a bank; I had used similar facilities in London innumerable times when news of the Exchange reached us over lunch and a hasty retreat had to be beaten to buy or sell before one's fellows!

But that's all behind me now. Some irony perhaps to be gleaned from the fact that I was to embark on a career change that still related to stock, and risk, but at the far, far end of the spectrum.

Squeezed into the booth, I made the usual connexion to the general operator, and somewhat awkwardly asked her for a 'Pete Hazelwood' at various differing establishments Alec was struggling to recall.

"'E worked at ahm, a coal-ore place in Lancashire ..."

I relayed this to the operator.

"Oh but! Then I think he said he were movin' to Sheffield – though he's kinfolk's in Wales..."

"Alec – are you being quite deliberately obtuse?!"

"Oo! Get you! No! I'm just tryin' to place him – I think he might've ended up – oo – hang about – yeh! He were gonna head up north to apply at the car company, you know, makin' motors – Ford, that's she.."

"Ford Motor Company, Manchester, please," I spoke into the phone.

"Manchester?" said Alec. "How'd you know?"

I shrugged: "Oh, I suppose I just happened to absorb the fact.. Dealings with them down at the office – ah! Hullo, is this the Ford – ah, I'm looking to speak to someone in your employ – a Peter, Hazelwood? Thank you."
“He goes by Pete, only,” said Alec.

M: “Well.”

A: “Not a one call him Peter I remember.”

M: “It sounds more businesslike this way.”

A: “He'll prolly think it's the bobbies in his wake.”


A: “Some toff on the blower a-lookin' on him? Bodes suspect.”

M: “Nothing to fear if he's done nothing wrong lately, has he?”

A: “And if'n he has? Now don't git the wrong notion. Salt o' the earth, is old Pete!”

M: “Of course, of course.”

A: “Nah – a real diamond, he is! He were a collier when I knewed him initial – mind you – right intelligent, don't let that colour your view – hear?”

M: “I – won't? Of course I -”

A: “So if anyone managed to grab the bootstraps -”

P: “Hello?” Breathless voice on the phone suddenly. The very man. I held the earpiece out to Alec who took it, ducking under the wire as we clumsily edged round each other so he could stand at the
device. I made to leave the booth but Alec tugged my elbow so naturally I stayed. Comfortably I 
leaned on the velvety wall, ankles crossed near the hem of the curtain. Alec doesn't believe in 
secrecy.

“He – hello? Oh, Pete – alright mate? It's Alec Scudder here, from, oh, two year' ago over in 
Her'fordshire, you might remem – Yeh! Yeh, wee Scudder, ha ha.. I – yeh, yeh.. So how're you 
keepin' yoursel', Pete? How's Manchester? Yeh? Yeh, pretty cloudy here too.. Oh, it'll rain alright 
but only a spit of a shower, you can tell..

“Oh – Brighton, just at the minute, yes, really.. Oh – well, never mind that for now, I'll tell you, but 
lookit – haven't you done well for thyself? Ford! And what are you at – screwing nuts and bolts, is it? 
... Yeh? Y-yeh, oh I will, I'll let you get back to it, but listen, c'mere, I was just calling to ask thee 
some advice, like – I'm actually in need of some work, see, just at the mo', me and a mate I've got 
wi'me -”

Grinned in my direction; I was relieved to have finally gotten a mention.

“. On account of the position I were in – er – endin'. Oh? Oh you did... He said? Yeh, that's right, I 
were back home wi'the folks, workin' up at the Big House.. Yeh, mindin' game... How was it? Oh, 
Pete, sure you know yoursel' – nothing short of a total nightmare, they was ..”

Another glance my way and he hastily amended.

“. You know. Though it had its perks, alright.”

Smiling.

“So I'm at a bit of a loose end, now, and I were wonderin' – you used to organize the gatherin' for 
casual labourin' above in Her'fordshire, didn't you? And beyond in Lancs too? Heard that said, you 
used to spread the word, like, write fellas even, so I wanted to pick yer brain – what'd be on now? .. 
Yes, right now, I'm needful; I were thinkin' – tail end of harvest? ..

“Oh, anywhere's grand, as long as – as long as – it's near woods, you know, I'd prefer, s'what I'm 
used to – Mm, yeh... Mm... Yeh... Two of us, just a fellow I fell in with -”

Another dippy smile and I shook my head, silly boy -
“... You could? Now, only if it's no bother – oh, you're a star, Pete, you're a right solid lad, and no mistake, thankee.. Yeh, we'll be headin' up that way anyroad... We will – Yeh – Oh – Grand – Thanks – God bless! God bless! Bye! Bye! Bye!"

Alec had to bob his head around a bit before finding where the mouthpiece lives and * clunk * He turned to me, smiling, satisfaction: “Right! Sorted.”

Disbelieving, I: “Just like that?”

Alec swept out of the booth and I after him. “Yeh, it's all gravy. Old Pete is on board – we're as good as employed. He's sound as a bell, that man – you know, reliable.”

I resented this rather; because 'reliable' would have, up until recently, been on of my – in fact perhaps chief of my – attributes. At work, at home, down the Mission, various organizations, the other fellows – actually, my only ventures into the mire of neglectful indulgence would be mitching college to be with Clive, and somewhat more momentously, deserting my life entire to be with Alec. I suppose it now made me as much of a wanton libertine as any gypsy.

Still – it was a necessary jump. As Alec would have it, it couldn't have happened any other way: I might not have visited Clive until after August the twenty-ninth – Alec sailing away just as I miserably was greeted at Penge. I might not have – more or less – invited him to my window. His courage might have failed him at the bottom of that ladder (never!) He might not have changed his mind about Argentina... so many possible determinants. Alec says no. It were always goin' to happen 'twixt us – true. Mull otherwise if thy must – it's a done thing now, it's finished.

It wasn't. It was only cusping.

Back at the railings overlooking the sea, hats snatched to crowns and jackets billowing, Alec outlined. Pete, being a good sort, was going to scout around, ask a few questions and follow a couple of lines until he'd see if there was work going round his way – knew a lot of people, did Old Hazelwood, and always willing to help a chap.

M: “How very charitable of him.”

A: “Yes it is – very. Don't think I don't understand sarky as good as I speaks it!”
M: “Alright, alright – do keep your voice down, Alec.”

A: * attitude *

M: “So he's going to help us find work.. Where so?”

Alec turned away from the blustering waves, leaned his back on the fence, crossed his arms and looked squarely. “What does tha' think to Derbyshire?”

M: “I have no strong feelings on the subject.” Except that it's northern. Just awfully northern. “Though a little... far..”

A: “Staffid'shire then.”

M * sighs * “Very well..”

A: “Oi!! How about a bit of enthusiasm? This's your lark! I mean, my word...”

M: “Oh, I'm all for it Alec! Keen. As mustard! Just a trifle, oh, nervous now that it's coming to perhaps pass..”

A: “Nervous? With me to look after you? I'll see you right, darlin', don't you lose a wink over it. I know, you fret, you're a sensible sort of fellow, you cannæ help it.”

I smiled wanly, looking out to sea, leaning low over my joined arms on the railing. Alec put his arm around me – or, he patted the shoulder furthest from him. “Don't worry – we'll soon knock the corners off old Maurice.”
What transpired from there appears straightforward enough, on paper, factually – perhaps if I were writing a travelogue, and not a catalogue of my deepest intimacies, our treasured history. We headed duly north, where exactly I was not sure of at the time; it turned out to be on the border of Shropshire, a place I hadn't then had the pleasure of. Nor, remarkably enough, had Alec, despite the impression he gave (and liked to) of being the worldly-wise rambler.

“Where's the farthest you've been, Morrie?” When I told him Italy, and prepared for another barrage of questions, I was greeted only by polite, practised disinterest. Perhaps they had attempted the Romans at his school too which had left another classically sour impression. We'd get around to that – there was plenty of time.

Which was fortunate – I need hardly tell you that it took simply ages to get from Brighton up to Birmingham where, four days after the phone call, we had arranged to meet Peter Hazelwood. He must have been a jolly good friend. But then, who could know Alec even infinitesimally and not want to move heaven and earth for him?

We did less canoodling on the train this time however. Too risky, and the close proximity was near to driving us daft at each other – though I was certain this edginess was due to circumstantial factors like the smallness and sweltering-ness of the carriage, the other people – ever changing but never improving in quality; motion sickness, hunger. Not caused by a basic incompatibility of our personalities, oh never. Does something cease to exist if one fails – mightily – to acknowledge it?

On leaving London, we were obliged to pass through all manner of dull, uninspiring towns like Slough, Warwick, Oxford. Some of the places would barely even coax one out of the train simply for a breather or to stretch the aching pins.

However as we journeyed still upward, and the land got more and more unchecked and wild and woody, I took off my hat in order to press a little nearer the window. Pines, spruces – who knows – flashed by, a blur of green, brown, and grace.

I must have smiled, because he wandered over, having taken a stroll up to the drivers' engine for a poke-about, and now he sat down opposite me with a fresh cigarette and a pleasant disposition.
“Likes what you see?” he said.

“That's enchanting!” I was free. “The forest – the hills, lakes, simply fields of flowers, grass.”

“Aye – nice enough view, I'll grant thee. The day's being right kind on it – ee, grand stretch to the days still! Sun's still up would you credit!” Blowing smoke, he – *naturally* - stuck his hands in his pockets, even sitting, and nodded out the window. “So. Will it do? Not *here*, exactly, but...”

“Oh perfectly! I can picture it all. We'll get a cottage.”

“Oh will we; tha'll be lucky. And where, prey, and what sort of a cottage?”

Ah! I was pleased he had asked – it meant that he was interested in my plan and also possibly willing to adhere to it.

“Well, it must have six rooms, water indoors, a beamed attic, a walled-in garden, and it must be near a river. It must be in a village with shops, yet a little removed from the village. The village must lie five or six miles from the nearest town, in the opposite direction of the nearest officially sanctioned geographical and cartographically categorized mountain. The church must have a tower – not a spire – I've always hated spires. And we shouldn't really exceed ten shillings a week unfurnished.”

A: “Wh-WHAT?!”

M: “Rather detailed, I admit, but perhaps not so implau...”

A: “Ten bob a week?! We'll be lucky to pull that in wagers 'twixt the two of us!”


A: “And what are you bangin' on about – gardens? Church spires? Water? Well, tha' can say goodbye to all that – you's creatures. Land! You'd swear we was off on another wee sojourn on the bleedin' country estate – you hopin' on a second Penge?”
M: “No, of course not.”

A: “‘Cos I'm no second Clive!”

M: “I know that! As if I could forget it!” I hadn't meant to be so snippy but you understand, the – the packed carriage, the people, the hot, the noise, the – oh, dash-it, what else, ham-fisted, was I going to go on and say?

A: * grumbling * “Well we'll not be living pretty.”

M: “Alright, alright.”

A: “Racket Pete's got lined up? Hard work and basic needs.”

M: “Fine.”

A: “Out in the woods, just like you requested. Damp and squalid I'll warrent – Old Durham wouldnae come within an ass's roar of the place!”

M: “Do please forget about Clive!”

A: “I wish you would!”

M: “You brought him up just now!”

A: “Nay – it might just as well have been he bleating on about cottages and columns and fountains and draping vines -”

M: “I said no such -”

A: “When tha' knows full well I cain't give them things to you! Am taking them away from you even!” Red faced and furious, he pelted me with these bullets – but defence, defence.
Carefully, I said: “I don't want those things.”

Alec looked at me with surly disbelief.

Amending: “Alright, alright. I shall *learn* not to want them.”

“That sounds like no lark,” said Alec. “You'll never shake 'em – those ways you were brung up on.”

“Think what you like,” I replied haughtily. “You'll see.”

Alec sighed. “Just as long as we're together..”

“We shall be,” I said sincerely, making a mental note of my new enemies: affectation, grandeur, extravagance, comfort, all the frilly trappings of the bourgeoisie. Long time passing, lately gone.

In this down-home spirit, I therefore procured for us a room a mid-range, inexpensive hotel – examples of which were in plentiful supply in Birmingham. Quite recently, it had ceased to be a battle every time I attempted to pay for something; Alec had resigned the fight.

I suspected he must have run out his small supply of well-wishing money, all he had to his name since he came away with me. Far from feeling chagrined at finding myself responsible for him, I wondered how I could do more: he wouldn't accept money outright *still* – and was too wily not to see that my buying him things was basically the same kind of charity.

However if I introduced a *practical* bent he would relent – for example, the items we would need for outdoor living, working: warm clothes, hardy boots, tools, fuel, the basics... I enjoyed waxing lyrical about this impending pastoral idyll, while Alec had more of a realistic view. He'd given up attempting to rein me in; however: “*Don't* go on like that to Pete – won't you try and have a bit of cop-on?”

I said that I would.
We were sitting – if you please – in an Italian ice-cream parlour in a slightly dodgy area of the town – if such an area could be distinguished from the main. We were waiting for Pete, who had arranged this rendezvous.

We had – Alec had – taken the man at his word; I had - but did not verbalize – fears that we would get ’jumped’, set upon, duped -

“Hello there!”

Both of us looked up to see a slight, smiling, wavy-haired fellow shrugging out of his coat by the hat-stand at the doorway; clad in a bold red waistcoat and almost-decent pinstripe slacks, he approached our checked table. In greeting Alec leaped to his feet and I more lurched to mine.

Hands wrung, Alec grinning fit to split his face: “Pete! Alright mate! God, good to see you! H'ain't it been donkey's?”

Pete retained his smile throughout his talking: “That's the nature of the casual work, my lad! Like leaves to the wind! Isn't that the case? Flotsam and jetsam we – hello Maurice!” Here he tended to startled me, and I had to admit he had a decent handshake and a pleasant countenance.

Now – don’t misunderstand my reservations about this meeting; it wasn't only that I experienced a flare of jealousy whenever I was confronted with anyone in Alec's bosom – I was worried, as ever I was, about making a good impression, about following the social rules in an effort to appear personable and confident and yet not overbearing and supercilious.

Alec never worries about these things. People take to him like flies round the honeypot. Something of his ease I hoped was rubbing off on me.

“Hullo, Peter, how do you do? I must say, it's jolly good of you to come all this way to see us, I – I mean, most awfully decent..” Faltering, I saw that my voice was not only raising Pete's eyebrows but was attracting a look or two from other bowl-scraping patrons.

“Well, aren't you a fish out of water!” said Pete, giving a strong squeeze before releasing my hand, and he glanced at Alec who smiled benignly.
He might have said, “This your mate? (Really? This?!)” or, “You can-not be serious!” Instead he clapped his hands and said with enthusiasm: “So! These are my lads.”

I wasn't sure what this meant exactly, but seemed right enough.

Seated, Pete prattled on – putting even Alec to shame. “Nice place, ain't it? Glad ye managed to find – I know them what runs it – hullo, Marie – my dad helped them settle here; come over from Wales on account that there were too many hi-talian cafes! Ent that great, ent it grand? Thrivin' now, as you see – that's the spirit we need more of, Britain. Well it's there, but not visible – yet! Yet! Our best times are just around the corner and no mistake!”

A fog of confusion prevented my reconciling his words with my mind. It seemed like more than mere small talk, but not really definitive enough to constitute actual information.

Alec shared my views and cast elsewhere. “Champion, Pete, that's champion. Here, hows 'bout a sundae? They look great in the pictures.. Here, Marie, what's good?”

As the two talked with speed and enthusiasm about where they had worked before, and who they knew, and what had become of them – much of it mere gossip and speculation – I registered my discomfiture by ordering only a (very good) coffee. Alec bested me on this standmaking – as usual – by ordering for himself two ice-creams and then affecting to be unable to manage both: “Oo! Oh, I'll never find t'room for both of these, me guts wouldn't allow for; cain't save it for later though – here, Maurice, why don't you...?”

It was strawberry and quite delicious.

Pete found this exchange most amusing. With a half-smile behind his cigarette he said, business-like: “Right – let's get to the meat o' this meeting. To work!”

“Work!” said Alec, and he clinked his dish against Pete's, and mine. It does take extreme effort and stony diligence to stay irritated at him. I generally don't bother.

“How now chaps,” said Peter, “I understand ye have come all the way from – what were it? Wiltshire? Somerset?”

Why not. “Yeh,” said Alec.
Pete looked at me and I nodded, flushed. He: “And ye are lookin' to find work up this way – outdoor labourin' – tha' right?”

“Tis.”

“Grand so: because you're in luck. I asked around, and rung and wired a bit and contacted a fella I know in a place, he's fore-manning a section of a Forest Park they's – they's working on, and it needs doin' sharpish, fore – well, and a fair crowd of lads is just after leavin' – a couple of 'em gettin' married -”

I fiddled out a cigarette.

“... and a few got the brass together for to emigrate.”

“My word,” said Alec. Didn't even look at me but he may as well have done: it's very easy, when you know a face very well, to ascertain when it is simply bursting to smile.

Pete took from his satchel a sheaf of papers. “So natural, ye donnot have to apply or nothing – only land at this place – this estate, here, see? - in the next couple of days, when they's starting up again. It'll be no bother, if ye look right enough, ye'll get taken on..” A note of doubt crept into his voice and he looked somewhat uncertainly at me, which give me cause to pause with the spoon halfway up to my mouth.

With a scratch of his jaw and a sympathetic look, Peter: “You might want to..” And he indicated my – well, me; my whole self countenance, fitted hounds-tooth waistcoat, starched collar. I flushed, sure and knowing this wouldn't work, we couldn't work, together because of me.

“Oh don't fret on that,” said Alec, “We'll get all kitted out suitable, don't thee worry.” Whilst he reached over and grabbed my wrist to make me recommence raising my spoon, that I'd sagged, back up to my mouth.

Peter leaned back in his chair, arms folded, and contemplated us again. “You'se'll do.”
Our destination – I wasn't even sure it had a name, being so countrified, lay on the Shropshire and Derbyshire border. I was amazed at how quickly we had managed to find work – although I mentally checked myself. It was an opportunity for work – no guarantees. How often had I used those words to clients in the far distant past? The risk now was greater, more – human – but the reward was heaven.

Peter arranged to accompany us on the train, despite Alec's vehement protestations: “Oh no! No! No! You've done more'n enough, no – get away with you!”

“Stop – stop Alec, will you let me get the ticket you bloody pillock! I have to go over that way anyway on business – see?” He took from his bag a folder of loose papers, with FORD printed on the cover and the details of the mechanics of the engines its contents. Rather interesting; he let me read it for the journey.

We passed through town, village, wide expanse of rolling hills and forests and moors and more – I should have to get used to it. Peter, across from me, read a paper I'd bought and passed along. Beside me, Alec slept, his head thrown back and legs up on our trunk, hands folded on his belly. If one were to remember, despite oneself, other, harrowing train journeys, well, they only served to make this one all the more enjoyable.

So much journeying in the last few weeks; I felt I was in a comfortable position, had I only the literary lilt, to compose a traveller's guide-book on Rural Britain. But who would want one? When these outcrops, free-holdings, boglands, basins, marshes and mountains belong to those that tend them, are of them; that environment which I was attempting to transition into. If country-fy is a verb that can apply to a person, then to do so was my aim.

When I first knew Alec, oh: when I first loved him, it's the same thing, I saw his class as an impediment to our companionship – and my own even more so. But now I didn't merely revere the delicious simplicity and earthy honesty of his heritage – I wanted to become one with it, adopt it, and was to.

From train, to omnibus, and finally to our feet – it was actually a relief to walk despite the weight of the luggage, mostly mine, we all shared – Peter lead us along a road lined with enormous trees, their leaves gently falling, and the hedgerow healthily overgrown. I was both excited and trepidatious; it had been half an hour since we'd last seen a building, but now one loomed into view.

It was a two storey, red-brick house, perhaps once handsome; covered now not in ivy but bushes and briars, flanked by trees, in fact almost obscured by them, turning autumn orange. What was most notable about the scene was what was standing just beyond the building: a towering column, one of
a pair, about ten foot high, spouting grass between its large crumbling brickwork, yet still performing its task, that is to hold up – alike its twin – a pair of large and intricately wrought-iron gates.

Top and centre of each gate – both of which were haphazardly swung and stopped in opposite directions and stuck fast in the long grass – bore the letters O. G. B. In other words, it was an imposing display – or would have been, had not the structures gone so clearly to very wrack and ruin.

I glanced at Alec. He was shielding his eyes from the sun: “If that's the gate-lodge, then how bi-”

“That's only one of them,” said Peter. “T'other's over yonder...”

“Another!! What is this place?”

And where Peter had been pointing, no house was visible; so the other gate-lodge must have been a good mile or more away. What indeed! I nudged and looked questioningly at Alec and he mirrored the look right back.

We followed Peter up the driveway, which curved up between unmistakably overgrown lawns – not wild enough to be part of the wilderness or farmland, but uncultivated and uncared for to the extent that the topiary, once cone-shaped was expanding circular; the pansies and roses shared their bedding with thistles, nettles, dandelions, daisies, dock leaves. Alec touched my arm and nodded through the trees at a huge, ornate fountain that had grass and moss filling its many cracks. I could tell what was coming but all we could do was to keep on cracking gravel.

“Not too bad of a place, and not too far 'till the cottages -” I perked up a little at the word but not at the pluralization. Peter continued: “I were here myself – Spring last year, that were choppin' and as you can see there's lots of that left to do..” Pause. “Though of course it were a lot different then..” Certainly it must have been; nervously we passed a pond that was covered in green mildew but still had silvery fish darting about.

What I am trying to convey, in my incapable way, is that the surrounding landscape, aside from being new to particular us, had the strange atmosphere of life and death. Life: because the trees, though autumnal, were strong and healthy; the grass grew long, green, wantonly; birds sang and squirrels leapt about. And yet something sometime essential to the place was clearly coming – or had already come – to a trickling, sighing, strained and exhausted end: exactly what became clear when we emerged from the trees at the top of the hill, and Peter gestured to the left, where looming into view was a huge, imposing, grey and red-brick manor – with towers, turrets, windows innumerable, maybe four huge floors!
“Crikey!” exclaimed Alec. “Ent it a castle!” It might have been, rather a small one; there was a medieval aspect about the architecture. Though, the gloomy air that hung round its ivy- and vine-covered façade was more decidedly Gothic.

“Might've been, once,” confirmed Peter. He sounded like he had further feelings on the subject but kept mum – I was in a similar position.

Alec arm brushed mine and he passed me a look. He knew. We'd both had our own particular dealings lately with country estates – one specific – would we ever escape Penge?!

My jaw set with anxiety, but Alec wordlessly willed me – practically throbbing – not to say anything untoward and disparaging in front of Peter, and cause undue embarrassment. You'll get yours, I thought. Once we're alone.

Trooping for quite twenty minutes, our feet gaining damp, we came upon a group of out-buildings, again in various states of disrepair, but as Alec would say, “There's life” - horses stood within stables stamping, tossing but generally quiet.

“Bit of a trek to the Lower Downs – south and westward – see?’” instructed Peter. Alec nodded, and I was glad, because I was not particularly directionally gifted. I could read a compass, though I did, back then, still tend to circle... But I learned. Had to. All we.

Peter said: “Grab one,” - the horses. “You'se'll be exhausted, and they'll enjoy it! Look at ’em. They'll be brung over anyroad, for the carryin’. Living quarters, as I say, south -”

“And westward,” said Alec. “No bother.” And he keenly swung open a half-door with a squeaky hinge, and began ducking at and reaching for a black horse. “Where's the gear? Oh here – grand, I'll get it hauled -”

Dancing out into the yard, the horse did seem receptive to Alec's laughing and soft touches, and he had the bridle on her in a trice. I suppose if Alec has a seductive effect upon animals – what indeed does that make me, and happy to be.

“Good lad Alec, you see to that,” said Peter, and I, stood idly by, he beckoned. I followed him over to the gate, where a path led further uphill through more trees and into darkness.
“Very well,” I said, all business. “What will it be?”

Peter looked quizzical.

“How much?” I was reaching inside my coat. “For services rendered?”

Peter said, “What! What service?”

“Well – recruitment. Isn't that -”

“No! No, not – ha, ha..”

“Your line?”

Peter grinned hugely but seemed incredulous too. I was getting rather tired of being mocked and refused when I offered money; it would be some relief when I had none of it left!

Friendly but firm, Peter closed my hand around my wallet and directed me to put it away again: “Oh – not at all mate! I mean – yeh, I do a lot of it, fetchin' work for fellows – pair of you'se were dead right to contact me, I'm only too glad – but it's – er – not-for-profit, like.”

My pause betrayed my lack of understanding. “Then why...?”

“For the likes of youse!” He held a fist aloft, yes he did. “It's hard enou' bein' on the lower end of the social scale, you know – well, you mayn't -” - I stiffened - “But – but can't you see, we all have to band together, brothers we, help our fellow man! I'm good at connexions. That's how I help.”

I flapped a helpless hand. “Then how do I..?”

Peter's earnest, rebellious eyes softened, and he took my arm and tilted me towards him, glancing over his shoulder at Alec, who was in the yard, weaving the reins and swearing good-naturedly while the horse nosed him curiously.
“Look after him – eh?” said Peter. “He’s an awful blower, I remember. Tends to let himself be bossed around easily though.”

“Does he? Can't say that I've noticed.”

Peter chuckled and patted my arm again. “Behave in front of the others – eh?”

Silence, though my heart increased only minimally in speed. If I don't acknowledge...

“Good luck then so: though I'm not worried. Hai, Scudder?”

Alec was clattering a small cart out of an outhouse towards the yard; I hurried over to help, even though it looked like the smallest bump might smash it. Still we attached it to the prancing chestnut and tossed our gear in the back.

“Right – I'm away, laddie,” said Peter, and clapped Alec on the back.

“Oh -oh! Grand! Oh yeh – God, we've kept you long enough, us and us’ nonsense – thanks a lot Pete mate, just ever so good of you.”

“Put yer thanks away. Hey – keep in touch,” and with smiles and hand-wringings, tweaking of flat-caps, and salutations, for some reason, he turned and departed back down the leafy avenue with an unhurried gait.

Alec turned otherly and began climbing the cart, one foot hooked on the spoke of the wheel, to my worry, because the horse – even though it was chewing grass with its eyes closed and one foot curling into a rest – could bolt. That's my inclination, to think the worst. Until I began to forget to!

I watched Peter stepping around puddles down the drive.

“Ought we – would it not be better if we were to bring him? In the cart? All the way back to the village?”
“Hm?” Alec looked up from his fiddling with the reins. “Oh – nay, nay, he's alright, he'll have a lift waitin' for he at the gates, ten-to-one... He knows people in all corners, does old Pete.”

Still a trifle discomfited by the strange, cheerfully retreating character, I stood; Alec flapped the reins and the horse awoke and began walking – startled, I watched and turned as Alec had the horse and cart circle me slowly, round the courtyard. “Is you is, or is you not, coming aboard?”

“You blackguard,” I said, and he grinned and tugged, the horse slowing to a stop by me. Huffing, I climbed the cartwheel myself and slid along beside him.

“Got ever'thing?”

“Yes.”

“Shotgun? You'se protecting me, now -” He pointed at me importantly. “Remember that! Anything come along – BANG! BANG!!”

“Hardly necessary, surely?” I asked, fagged.

Alec sighed and flicked the reins and off we went along the trail. South-west.

For some time we trotted comfortably – well, the horse did; on the cart-seat Alec hunched forward, elbows on knees and reins loose, a cigarette dangling. I sat back, and sank right downwards, my freezing hands jammed between my legs. Rain dripped down; the patches of sky that was visible through the trees was grey and uninspiring. I shifted, my seat damp. Alec glanced over – almost daring me -

“Well? What does tha' reckon?”

“Hmm.”

“That the best you can do?”

“S'not... quite what I had envisioned..”

Alec threw his arm out in an arc: “Wot! Christ but you're fussy. It's woods – ent it?” He grabbed a
leaf from a branch we drifted under. “It's green, innit?” The leaf was yellow; green in a pinch.

“Yes, but...”

“It's the work, ent it,” said Alec, craftily. “You just really didn't think on us workin’.”

“No! I mean – yes! I did of course – only more, for ourselves, not among – oh, I don't know. I'm going to say the wrong thing, either way.”

“Oh that tha'art, I don't doubt it.”

Hands burrowed further into my coat, I slouched right down on the rickety, splintery seat and stuck my legs out dangling over the front of the cart: it was rather refreshing to no longer have to adhere to social decorum – although some habits I would hang onto ferociously. Just that now I had the freedom to pick and choose them.

Alec swung his feet out beside mine. “Look, I know you'se worried abou' fittin' in with the other fellows. The ones still there – what hasn't emigrated or married.” He smiled at me.

I just looked at him helplessly. How did he know that it was exactly this that was bothering me – when I'd only that second, at his words, realized it myself? The prospect of not only meeting, engaging with, and working alongside strangers – but strange strangers, working men, sons of the soil, perhaps even rougher than Alec, whom at least was born, to the best of my knowledge, in a house...

What would they make of me – some awkward, inexperienced middle-class duffer – hanging around Alec, whom they would no doubt immediately welcome as one of their own? Until they might discover – or even suspect – the true nature of our alliance.

Between gnaws on a fingernail, I imparted all of this to Alec, who listened, nodded, but stayed stubbornly positive: “I know, I know, but honest – it's not so odd for fellows to go about the place lookin' on work together. What's the alternative after all, going about alone? Nah – fella needs mates, it's only natural – useful too – foreman would prefer to see a glut of workers arrivin' together instead of trickling in singular. And the truth –” He pointed at me, then himself: “- is our’n.”

I actually felt better, and said as much. “Thank you, Alec.”
He shrugged and smiled wanly. “I know full well this set-up ain't quite what you was hopin' after – and certainly not what you're used to – we needn't stay forever, you know... Casual work, as I said..”

“Well, now that we're here – no harm in giving it the old college try, what?”

“Eee, that's the spirit!”

After all, why should Alec have to carry the burden of buoyancy, be the constant reassurer, the driving force and the energy? It would wear him out eventually and I certainly didn't want to accelerate his disillusionment with Us. Which, at the time, I was still convinced was a sure likelihood – until it didn't happen, and still hasn’t, and I'm having to really exercise the full extent of my memory and imagination to recall my days as Doubting Thomas.

And so, though I remained unconvinced behind my cheery, inane grin, I was rewarded for my show of enthusiasm with a pat on my knee, which would serve to suffice until we got to the house.

House. Well, really. Cottage, I suppose? I would describe it as dilapidated, but that would serve to imply that it was ever in a state of decency to begin with.

Mud, and stones, grass feet high, puddles, wet and patchy thatch, rusted buckets and tools, crumbling chimneys, tiny windows, unpainted doors, the size of a storage shed – need I go on? (Need I go in??)

“Well – go on then!” Alec gestured for me to disembark. “I need to settle she sheltered, take off t'cart – you can go ahead, get comfy.” Without a shred of irony.

Still I aimed to amene; I slid onto the path, reached over the back-wheel to grab a trunk, and a bag, and another, and brought them to the front door, which was ajar and clinging tenuously to its hinges. Very carefully I elbowed it in and broached.

It was hardly less damp within than without – a steady rhythm of raindrops dripped from the ceiling onto the dirty, muddy floor, strewn with sodden newspaper pages, old and worn furniture, and damp mouldy boxes. I was presumably looking at a kitchen, even though I had only come in the front door; there was a fireplace – no stove; rickety looking chairs, none of the arm variety, and certainly no sofa, evidence of children – broken toys, bricks, sad, abandoned dolls and bears; no bookcases but shelves – filthy with dust having wetted into grime. I grimaced.
I had no desire to set the bags down anywhere – leave alone apply myself to any part of the room or its contents. Despite the cold – the tiny window looked jammed open – I broke into a horrible hot sweat under my clothes – oh it was awful!! This plan was a failure right off the bat – we couldn't, simply couldn't stay here, unthinkable, uninhabitable, impractical, impossible -

“'Scuse me – can I get by? This one's big -” Alec jostled me as he edged in with the heaviest trunk. I should have been helping him with it but I just blushed and stared and felt the cold as never before I had done.

He set down the trunk with a grunt and then looked about him, pushing his cap back for a better view. Circling the room slowly with his gaze, he finished at me and a tentative smile.

“Ee.. decent size, eh? This'll do us right nice, you reckon? Most especially when – HO!!” For a scratching noise from the far left corner of the room manifested itself into a small racing shadow along the skirting-board – a rat!! - and quick as lightening Alec snatched the nearest thing to hand – a long-emptied milk bottle off the table – smashed it and the critter all to pieces with one hurling arm.

Frozen, bags still under my arms, I could only stare at the (further) mess while Alec panted with exertion, then nudged at the red remnants with his boot: “Not to worry. We'll put paid to the rest of 'em easier (the rest!!) wiv' some poison, else I'll smoke 'em out... or get a hold of a terrier somewheres, be no harm, about the place – eh?”

Again, this wasn't fair, Alec having to do all the talking. I opened my mouth, if only to offer a banal platitude - “Ah yes” “Jolly good” “My word!” - but first, a creak issued from the roof and a steady stream of water poured onto my head, down my hair, my eyes, and I leapt aside spluttering, dropping the bags and shaking my head like a dog.

“Never a dull moment,” remarked Alec, who looked only a trifle apprehensive – not of the house, but of me.

“I like dull moments,” I said. “I've grown rather accustomed to them.”

“I'll bet you have,” said Alec, and I glowered at him. He glowered right back, then shook his head with arms akimbo.

“This is some fuckin' do, ent it?”
“It's that alright.”

“Still. Cain't say we weren't prepared for what it'd be like.”

I found fault with this; in fact I recalled clearly Peter's assured tones when telling us that we'd be “perfectly comfortable.” Perfectly!! A rather unnecessary, spurious use of adverb, there.

“C'mon, let's see what we can do 'tween the pair of we. Git the rest of us' gear for firstly, in case it pours – you'll admit that it is somewhat more sheltered inside than out?”

“Somewhat,” I assuaged, with supreme generosity.

“Jesus God,” said Alec.

And so we set to restoring the shack – hut – house – home, excuse me – to its former, well, not glory. State. Its former state, when it apparently housed an estate labourer and his family, or mates, or collection of pets, given all the fur blowing up from corners! Alec tasked me with tidying – or, with collecting just about everything in one place so it could be decided what was keepable and what was rubbish. I opted in virtually every case for the latter.

“Bollocks!” came the voice from above; Alec had climbed into the attic and was plugging the bigger ceiling holes with old clothes and bedsheets. I'd started to say -

“Yes, pet, I know they isn't waterproof or nothing, and will fill up wi'water heavy and are no sort of solution really – but they'll absorb enough tonight, alright?”

“Alright.”
“Good. Now, see that chair int’ pile you've made? Break her up into kindlin’, then set the fire. We'll need to scrub the pots, so's we can have cleaner water.. I'll be down in a bit to go to the well.”

For he delivered this litany of instructions through a hole in the ceiling, him hunkered down balancing on two wooden tracks, I with my head bent back regarding him awkwardly.

Of all the new things I was having to adapt to, this... Going from being Head of the House at home, and being left to my own more than capable devices at the Office – now here I was taking almost constant direction from Alec. What galled wasn't so much the errands the set me – even I could see that he was being kind and careful with me, taking the heavier and harder tasks for himself – but his complete confidence in my yielding obedience! How the tables had turned.

Well – I knew what to do, to re-establish. Alec was in charge now, because he was accustomed to and au fait with this kind of rough, external, close and crucial environment. Therefore, it stood to reason that he would dominate, oversee proceedings. Hadn't I begged him to?

But I wished to be his rescuer too; a tower of strength and not a mere dependent. And so I would learn, as he taught. What – what had he just said? Water? Something -

“You listening? Cor but you're away with the fairies today. The chair, I say, down to pieces and we'll get the fire down first and foremost afore we frost us' nuts off.”

“Ah!” I agreed. “Quite right, quite right..”

A state of extreme exhaustion was what we mutually worked, and carried, and broke and scrubbed and swept and hauled and pulled and threw and moused and moved towards all that afternoon and evening. (I say 'extreme' for alliterative purposes – or is it assonance? - at any rate, on reflection, inaccurate. The inner realms of tiredness were yet to be reached.)

By eight o' clock that night, the darkness was falling and the place looked passably cozy, if you're not too particular: candles were lit, fire crackling, dirt and mess mostly in piles in the garden, kettle steaming constantly and we licked our fingers of glistening, greasy rashers and thick, haphazardly buttered bread. 'Slops' of apple cores and tea leaves we tossed directly and carelessly out the door.

We had of course, as Alec pointed out, just “bags of time” to see to the house, clean her up pretty. We would need them – bags upon bags! All the same it wasn't such an unpleasant chore, to make the place clean, comfortable, pleasant, homey – the two of us, grafting together... Seemed rather
romantic even, as we both sat, spent, in front of the fire and the cottage grew cautiously warmer as the temperature crept up degree by degree.

Alec yaaaaaaawned: “Best turn in, early enou' tomorrow. Although we'll not have to compete, I'd say; we'll get our places s'long as we show up lookin' half-way able – and half-way'll have to do!”

I wasn't sure whether he was referring to himself – a mocking self-jibe – or to me: a realistic appraisal of my lacking labouring abilities. Perhaps a combination of both!

Tossing a fair amount of logs on the fire, he then rattled it with the poker and placed the fire-guard: “I'm absolutely bushwacked.” And I was too, although a little shy now; we'd been on our own plenty, but not quite this alone, and felt all the more pressingly intimate.

In the bigger of the bedrooms – the other, smaller, cupboard-like one had been once possibly the children's – Alec took off his clothes, pulled on clean underwear and a pair of my pajamas, before tugging his outerwear back on and hopping into bed. I did likewise, more slowly; I brought the oil-lamp over to the bed and in the absence of a bedside locker I left it on a chair.

The bed was very small for two men (perhaps they deliberately don't build them to this capacity), and it rocked around rather as I tried to find place between Alec and the edge of the mattress for all of my limbs.

Even though I was in bed with Alec, and here we were, more alone than ever, and more wedded together, yet I lay frozen with nerves, cold, anxiety.

Alec for his part was sleepier than anything. It had been he who had smashed most of the chair in the end. He rustled round, reached a hand out to my cheek and kissed my lips. “Night!” And he rolled over onto his stomach, a curious pose but before long his breaths evened out. I lay on my back, clinging to the bedcovers, disquieted, turning and churning with -

“Alec...” Some breathing.

“Alec?”

“Hnnn...” More breathing.
“Alec,” and a soft poke in his side.

“What?”

“I have to go... you know,” I whispered.

“....What?!”

My face very burned; of course it couldn't be seen in the dark but perhaps I was emitting mortified heat. Romance of the pastoral -!

“You know.. I have to – use the facilities.”

Finally Alec opened his eyes. He pushed himself up from the mattress and leaned on his folded arms, facing me. “There ent any facilities.”

“I know that...” I said. “Nevertheless, needing them is the – state that I'm in.”

Alec reacquainted himself with the pillow. “Just go up against a tree. I did earlier, when you was beyond in the clearing shakin' out the sheets.”

“It's not the sort of thing you can do up against a tree.” I was growing hotter and more desperate and completely sprung from my element.

Alec raised his head again. “Ooooh...” He rolled around, dislodging himself from his comfortable position, then raised himself standing onto the bed, stepped over me, jumped onto the carpet and picked his coat from the hook on the door. I watched him as he threaded it onto his arms, before plucking my own coat from the door and holding it open for me. “Come on then.”

I was still embarrassed, for having woken him at all, but I had been in simply an awful way, quite the state of discomfort, you may appreciate, and being unaware of the protocol.

All the same, I deliberately didn't look at him as I tugged on my coat; he hovered holding the lamp,
He took my hand – not my elbow, my hand, fingers firmly interlaced – and led the way out the back door of the cottage down the 'path' and into the dark, cold, windy woods. The lantern swung and he swore. “...Best not go too far...”

We came after a minute to an indiscriminate spot surrounded by some half naked trees, the leaves fluttering down and around us. Some hedgerow flanked our left.

“Alright. Will this do?” said Alec.

“What!! Right here? In the open?” I was aghast. Although, what else could I have been imagining? Humiliating hindsight!

“It's no harm in the forest, love! In fact it'll help the growin' grass: ha! Ha!”

“I mean.. It's so exposed. I don't...”

“Lookit – it'll do for now – alright? I'll dig yer a proper hole tomorrow.”

“A hole!! That's hardly better.” I grew more and more agitated by the second – by the word of our conversation.

“Don't row, you flute – or if we must, let's row later. Look – I'll go away a bit, give you some privacy. Want me to take the lamp so's you know where I am? Or let it here so's you can see what you're doin'..”

“I'd rather not see what I'm doing.”

Alec laughed: “As you wish so, I'll wander just beyond the bushes there – see? Got hankies? Here have mine – oh don't worry, just fuck 'em away when you're done, no odds, we'll get more, there's many a hanky...” He retreated.
Despondent, humiliated, resigned (yet relieved), I set-to and remembered Clive objecting so feebly but fervently to my helping him similarly, even more intimately, when he took ill at Mother's: could I almost relate to him now? Would I rather a nurse, a stranger, a blank, to see me like this?

But unlike Clive, I had just taken my friend's assistance simply, at face value, as my due; I was Alec's comrade and as such he tended to me as a sense of soldierly duty, owing to the harsh realities of our new life, together with an instinctive, almost maternal loving impulse.

Again, these insights came later.

I hauled up my pants and stumbled towards the light, towards Alec, I moving even as I still fastened them.

“That better?”

“Yes – thank you.” The wind whipped around so that it was difficult to say anything of gravity, such as imparting how very grateful I was to him for his understanding.

Alec didn't feel so vocally restricted by the gales, thinking them rather a challenger.

“Tell you,” he roared “ - You'd want to get regular, like me. Eleven o’ clock ever' mid-morning – near about! Always workin' hours – that ways you get paid to do it – ha! Ha!!”

“Anything 'regular' is right out the window by now,” I said. “Lost to the ages.”

He looked askance. “Thank God!!” I called, and we made it back to the house in one piece, two pieces, no – actually – one.

Back in bed, shoes once again discarded, Alec put his arms around me.

“You feel a lot happier now. Shouldn't wonder!”

“I'm sorry...” I sighed.
“Sorry! Not a bit of it. When you has to go -!”

I specified: “I mean, I'm sorry to have woken you, made you come along, I should have just gone myself, only... the dark, outdoors.. Oh, it's too childish of me.”

“Aw, don't... It would have been more childish of you not to tell me, to bring us along, that's what I'm here for. What if you'd run into summat dangerous, or tripped and fallen and broken a bone? Or got lost? In your state, I'd've dragged you along too. That's why there's two of us. It's perfect sense.”

On this I slept soundly, deeply, all that windy first night.

Chapter End Notes

Flippers, just had to do a quick edit, some of the formatting didn't copy across; just some of the Italics! For emphasis!
The Quarrymen

Chapter Summary

Don't worry old Maurice. There’ll be better days in England!

In the past, as you can surely relate, there have been many first days. First day of work, for example, at one's first position – hallowed Hill and Hall! - first day at college, and boarding school... For some reason however, as I stood on the precipice of my first day on the job in Shropshire, in the woods, with Alec, I went past all of those beginnings right back to re-visiting the sick, intense nerves of my first day at primary school. Suffice, I hadn't been as apprehensive in nigh on two decades.

First day on the job – if we got the job – Peter had been absolute, but – if so, what would it entail? It wasn't clear; as yet we waited, dotted around the outside porch of a one-time hunting-lodge, we waited for a manager, a supervisor, a man-in-charge, or some kind of authority to defer to.

“Don't worry,” said Alec, for perhaps the several dozenth time since we'd met, “Once t'foreman comes along he won't be long in dishing out us' duties.”

“That causes me more worry,” I said, although it didn't, particularly; I was more nervous about the other men gathered around the clearing: leaning on tree-trunks, sat on steps, arms folded, smoking, talking, mulling, the odd laugh, cough, yawn. Clothes almost uniformly brown and coarse and corduroy: big, warm, worn jackets, hobnails, caps, neckerchiefs, beards.

Alec and I sat side-by-side on a low stone wall, he with his hands tapping on his knees impatiently while I had my shoulders hunched against the world and my hands tucked into my armpits.

Others were arranged not dissimilarly, I was thankful to see, and though I was still sweaty with nerves I felt somewhat reassured that our dress was appropriate for the impending situation. Alec had gone to considerable effort to ensure this.

That morning, we had gotten up well before sunrise, to bathe and eat and fuss over clothes; not unlike my former City routine but with marked difference, the clothes, oh the clothes!

Having pawed through, audibly despaired over and discarded – onto the floor – all of the articles I had brought with me – some rather beloved! - Alec finally kitted me out in the outfit exact he had
been wearing when we had reconvened in the boathouse – his only outfit in fact.

“It's the tattiest bits we can find,” he said, adding the grumble: “You look too fine in ever'thing else.

“Mind you -” and he took a step back, arms akimbo, appraising my prone form in front of the breakfast table - “You look pretty well in that, too.” For I was wearing his bobbley brown pullover, which clashed horribly with the bottle green waistcoat, in which I had plenty of room; slacks, the suspenders on which we had to lengthen, my own socks and boots, all finished by Alec's patched and cuff-frayed faux-corduroy coat.

I tipped my cap to him and he slapped his knee and pealed – what a picture – no, that's wrong, a picture's silent, static – what a memory, a living, moving dream he made, doubled over cackling in his (my) long johns and vest.

“You absolute nutcase,” he said, and I just smiled helplessly at my inexplicable ability to make him happy, as he then quickly tugged on some of my less flashy gear; brown pants with small plaid, with cruelly clashing yellow socks, blue shirt and woollen black and yellow college jumper.

“I thought we wanted to come across as seasoned country-men, not blind ones,” I remarked as he banged shut the back door behind us, tugging on a navy military-style jacket which wide flapping sleeves, severely square shoulders and cream braid piping. Actually, when he had it toggled closed it did show off his waist more attractively than his usual garb offered.

“Give over,” said Alec as we set off along the trail to the lodge, passing the backs of the other cottages. “Happen you could tell my roughness a mile away even if I were dressed in top hat and tails.”

“Oh tut.” But I didn't necessarily refute.

“Well, I can hardly show up wearin' one of your immaculate-matching do-ups, now can I? I'd come across like as if I were tryin' to sell insurance! Nah – I've cooked up a suitable story, see? I'll let on that I were doin' time, and only just got let outta the clink, and I got gav' these mish-mash togs from the Mission -” and he tugged proudly on the lapels of his coat, the cuffs of his sleeves. “Thort I'd reinvent mysel' as a toff.”

“Oh – don't say that, Alec – don't.” It was just imperative that he didn't. I mean to say – he was no gentleman, true: but just as certain, he was no criminal, common thief, grubby little oik.
(There I go again – process of desperate elevation. If Alec had been even lower down the social ladder, nowhere near respectable, and yet still in his shining beauty had come in my bedroom window and claimed me, saved me – would I have fallen in love with him any less utterly?)

“Ha-ha... Of course I wonnot. Although, if this get-up is taken to be my usual costume, likely they'll take me not as a delinquent but a dandy!”

I just smiled tightly.

“And they mayn't be too far wrong – hey, Maurice?”

Shaking my head I tried to revisit reason. “We shall have to say something about our circumstances, why we're here, hmm... together...” So very strange and ridiculous to consider that the one simple answer was the truth: 'Because we love each other’ – and yet it was the very last thing we should disclose. Ah me, the world is absurd.

“Not to worry – believe you me, by the time we're done workin' today, the ways foremen go at you aggressive right from the off, no-one'll be left standing up straight, never mind up to gettin' down to chit-chat.” He was chewing a wisp; I my lip.

Back at that junction – I had – oh, my dear, I can hardly believe it, though I remember it – such was my hubris that I could not literally, actually, even conceive of the kinds of back-challenging, genuine hard work that the labouring classes had to endure daily – I mean, leave quite alone and atrocious the very concept of ever having to lift something heavier than a thick fur coat or a brimming bottle of wine myself – why, at home and at the Clubs, and Clive's, and simply everywhere, I eschewed extracurricular physical effort to the extent that I'd not even toss my used matches from the armchair into the fire, preferring to leave it to the servants. It was their job, after all, was it not? They expected to do it and I expected them to. Best leave them to it. It wasn't even deliberate disrespect – it was ignorance of the working-class humanity.

Sat on the wall, shivering beside Alec that morning, was it any wonder I had avoided Reality so? If to be human is to be alive, to be real – then this was all too real to me. As it was impossible for me to clasp Alec's arm and burrow my face into his shoulder, and close my eyes against it all: the cold, the wind, the starting raindrops, the male grunts and shuffling feet – I fumbled my cold hands around inside my jacket for another...

“Don't have too many this early,” said Alec, predicting my actions. “Us'll need our puffs for the
work, I'm guessin'... More than I thought, I should think.”

“What will we be doing?” I had asked this question several times and in several different ways. I knew Alec didn't know, so it much have irritated him so, but he'd wave my words away, with his own: “Won't be long now.”

“Hullo there!” A voice called from the forest, and from the trees emerged a figure striding confidently but awkwardly, arms full of boxes, rolls of paper, tools... He had a cap – clean – on his dark hair, a green jacket and waistcoat, light coloured jodhpurs, shiny boots and an earnest, anxious expression surrounding his upturned nose.

Grumpily following was a far more capable-looking fellow: bigger, older, sterner. We watched them make their way though the crowd and over to the clay-piles beside the lodge.

The younger attempted to stand centrally and prominently on a pile of earth; however his authority was undermined somewhat by the fact that as he faced us, smiling, he appeared to be slowly sinking down into the clay. People got up slowly.

“Hullo there! Good morning! Well – good to be up and about this early, make the most of the day!”

Alec was maybe the first but certainly not the last member of our party to fold his arms, lean heavily on one foot and set his face to sceptic.

This damp, collective response was not lost on our public speaker; some nerves crept into – or out of – his voice as he went on: “Ah – um – well! Good! So! My name is Montmorency, Harold Montmorency, quite the mouthful so Harold will do – some of you know me already of course... Those of you new – thank you for coming! I – promise this will be a mutually beneficial arrangement, as long as we all – er – get on...” Faltering. Sullen stares.

Behind Montmorency's twitching frame, and the load of boxes he was loathe to set down in the mud, the stocky man coughed into his fist in a readying sort of way and barked: “Questions?”

HM, relieved: “Ah – yes! This is Vincent Lee, our foreman...”

VL: “Vinnie.”
Alec didn't raise a hand, but waited for a natural lull in the proceedings. “Question then so – what are we at?”

“Yeh,” said the lanky, dark-skinned fellow to our right. “Same as? Shiftin' trees?”

“I thought you said there were a moratorium on the trees..”

“A wot?”

“Y’know – a ban, like.”

“On choppin’? Whyfor?”

“Fellows. Fellows!” called Montmorency over the din. “Now we'll make everything clear. Yes, correct, we're restricted from tree-felling just at the present moment. Be too visible anyway if they were stripped away – they do make good cover..”

Alec and I exchanged glances, for reasons unknown to us both.

“Yes and actually – now this, with the earth-piles here – is in much the same vein, in that it entails clearing away. Do – do you see the heaps of earth? The stone and rubble behind us?”

We saw. It as quite clearly the remains of a building of some kind, laid lying; bits of wall here and there still struggled bravely skywards and a chimney flume could be picked out. What was singular was this: the edifice had obviously not crumbled and crashed from the ravages of time; the blocks were grassless, cut too cleanly, the soil around fresh and wet. It had been rent asunder.

Sweat prickled, and not in anticipation of labour.

“Well, this small pile – piles – not a lot to them, as you can see, not a big job! - they have to be moved from here -” Montmorency pointed towards a gap in the trees - “to the Westward Copse,
where they will be redistributed on the rougher land. Might flatten it out a bit, haw-haw... Though actually some of the rocks are rather large, now I look."

"Those'll want to be cracked, sir," said Lee.

"Ah, yes..."

Mutterings rose from the men beside Alec and I. "What a do's! I don't see enough equipmen' to shift all that lot. Just spades and a load of clapped out aul' knackers..." A glance at the hovering horses, half-dozing.

"I know that, Kenny, I dunno I'll be signing, to be frank wi'you."

"I dessey..!"

And more murmuring along those lines – a decidedly quiet and covert dissension.

Alec nudged me, and nodded towards the hopeless-looking manager and his grim foreman. "I like the way they talk – ey? 'They stones will be moved' – 'The ground'll be flattened' – like as if it'll happen on its own, by magic!"

"It is rather passive of him," I said. "Probably an attempt to deflect the responsibility of giving orders."

"Oh I'd say he's well used to giving orders. Posh twa- er, that is – ahm – b-bossy know-it-all.."

Our mutual, inborn distaste for each other's class was expressed so frequently that it as weakening in force, hardly worth being insulted over at this stage. Rather like the way pals will, for reasons unknown but sworn, rib and tease and badger one another with jibes over background, peculiarities, religion, associations – the colour of one's tie! Between good friends, everything's on the table, ripe for roasting. And if nothing else, Alec and I were good friends.

Mostly more.

Alors – I skimmed over his present slip of the tongue to ponder: "What I find curious is, for what purpose was the building demolished?"
“That'll be tax,” said Alec.

“What?” I was surprised.

“Blatantly, they's runnin’ out of money, old Harold... The fancier a place is, the more the gov’ment charges thee to live there... I been at places where they've fucked down towers, marble staircases, whole entire wings.. And any number of outbuildings.. Cos they can't afford the 'fancy-dues' no more. Just another way of squeezing scratch out of the 'Quality'; I s'pose they's not immune neither... I'd feel sorry for 'em if they wasn't such a shower of rich bastards!!”

“Not for very much longer, they won't be, at that rate,” I remarked.

“We can only hope.” I was unsure as to whether Alec was gleefully anticipating the impending fall of the Gentility, or if he was championing some kind of radical social equality.

Or if he was paying any mind at all to what he was saying. Biting a nail, he was back looking at the impromptu podium. I did likewise – minus the nails – though I had and do have nails of course, I mean I wasn't biting – oh, anyway – only after taking note that we were being noted, by some of our neighbours. Had they heard my confounding accent? Seen through my disguise? I itched to inch nearer to Alec but resisted mightily, opting instead to roll on my heels.

Alec was astute. As always! We weren't long to wonder about the particulars of the job – nor were we sent home to mull over the intricacies of the instructions. Montmorency clapped his hands, congratulated us all (!) and grinned foppishly before more or less melting away.

No sooner was his stammering speech concluded than Lee took to barking; dividing us into groups. YOU here and YOU'S there – and before you could say Jack Robinson we were put to Work.

At first I was twitchy – in terms of what, precisely, to do. But all too soon, it was all too clear. The group Alec and I had joined were directed – shepherded – towards the pile of rubble, and were to load rocks, perhaps the size of your head, onto carts with our hands, bare if one didn't have gloves. Fortunately we two had; unfortunately they did not make the load any lesser: merely postponed the cuts and blisters to a minimal degree.

Much to my surprise, however, once the job was clear and we were underway, I found myself enjoying it! Was hard, vigorous, physical labour not the most natural thing in the world for a man –
aside from the other? Was this not making the most of one's God-given youth, strength and abilities? Was this not truly living? Certainly it was – for about three quarters of an hour.

Oh, if only one could bottle and cap and keep the innocence, naivety and optimism that spurs at the very beginning of a task! Rather reminds me of spilling all the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, and picking out the corners with pleasure, and fixing pieces together with high excitement, until the joy becomes a task difficult, draining, arduous, and – inevitably – abandoned.

Not an option now. It was so absolutely new to me, this kind of work. It couldn't have been simpler: the stones were heaved onto the carts which, once full, were driven off my the horses into the thicket of trees towards the far side of the estate. Once one cart pulled away, there was always another empty one either waiting, or trundling nearer as we gasped and sweated through our pause.

As I say, at first it was endurable. Companionable, really, as we all stepped around each other and got into a rhythm of picking up, walking, throwing; and if someone grabbed a particularly heavy stone, another would notice and take the other end to help, unasked, unspoken.

Actually there was very little speaking at all: what there was a lot of was grunts of effort (from, say, Alec), and wheezes for breath (me).

Trickier than it looked. Initially, I powered through the pile with pistoning arms, large arcs of swinging stones landing with loud and frequent bangs into the rickety cart. Alec hissed, “No! You'll wear thyself out too fast and show everyone else up for their pace!” I nodded, panting, and opted to move slower, only for more than one fellow to growl at me to move out of the way, and my hands hangin’... In the end I copied Alec. Not to closely. But he probably noticed.

By mid morning I was a changed man. What had started out sporting felt now like the direst and most onerous punishment. For the crime of wanting enough just to get by!

Whereas before – in the dawn – it had seemed like we were all comrades, brothers, working together towards a common goal, now we more resembled relentless, tortuously ongoing cogs in a machine. Except machines don't get tired, do they? Presumably, nuts and bolts will wear and tear – but it's not felt, and parts are easily replaced.

A cigarette break – not sanctioned, just taken, and, indeed, interrupted and discontinued by a passing, barking Lee – nonetheless passed by in a headache-infused blur to me.
By the time lunch snailed around, the backs of my thighs, hitherto dormant and content, had awoken from their slumber and were screaming in protest. I could have wept.

Instead, I followed the others, to my eyes none of whom were nearly so heavy-footed as I, to a yard about ten minutes away, with stables, store-cabins, and a large outbuilding we filed into. Chatter resumed somewhat; Alec was near the front of the crowd and shot the occasional look back at me even as he talked with his mate. I felt no resentment, jealousy, annoyance. I felt nothing. I felt like nothing.

Slumped onto a bench, I could not even fathom the energy to examine my surroundings and reach a conclusion about some peoples’ idea of dining quarters. I shall be stark and honest now, with typewriter and time: it was a hayshed. Or had been, quite lately.

Feet shuffled and stomped on the floorboards, voices gruff and high and all between cacophonied; with all the more scraping of crockery, talk grew louder and more convivial: I wanted to lay my head on my arms on the table and sleep.

“Not too bad a do's, is it?” A plate was pushed in front of my drooping face, steaming with stew. Alec swung his leg over the bench and sat beside me, placing his own dish in front of him and passing me a spoon. He waited patiently for me to whisper a thanks and take it.

“Look,” he nodded at the far end of the room, where the people crowded around the food-counter under rotting beams. “Actual women! Serving the nosh. Now, that's the sign of a quality operation.”

For sure, the odd sweep of long hair or pinned-up bun was visible in the throng, and aprons, and ruddy red hands holding plate and ladle; even more unmistakable were the high female voices and the following, delighted male laugh.

I didn’t care.

“'Ey, you got a fair amount of meat in yours, you!” said the man to Alec's right.

“Send the cook a wink, it'll see thee a long way,” was Alec's advice. In the ensuing chuckling, he whispered quickly to me: “Eat, will you.” I ignored him, robot-like, until he said, higher: “Please?”

Oh his eyes... imploring and adorable. I wanted to convey to him that it wasn't base sulkiness, and
anger, and righteousness, and objection, but fatigue and... fear. Yes, fear, acute, agonizing that this work was ongoing, forever, would beat me down and leave me floundering behind him, wrecked, weary and worsted.

For Alec, however... Shovelling in some lamb and – I'm told – dumplings, I was determined to be dissatisfied, but it was actually quite good, I being the most ravenous I believe I had ever felt. The broth was thin but the torn chunks of bread were replenished aplenty.

To my surprise, but the ease of everyone else, the atmosphere grew festive, jovial; I concentrated only on eating and ear-wagging but Alec joined in with the comparing of sores on fingers and scars on arms and legs with barks of laughter.

Only for this conviviality to dissipate somewhat as I was ravenously chugging a tin mug of milk. A figure sat down easily opposite us on the bench: “What ho, lads! Great feed, isn't it? And well earned, by Jove!”

Silence. Harold was not heralded.

Looks were shot between the working lads when Montmorency – hereafter known as Harold, to save on my fingership – peered around hopefully. Eventually: “Yeh.. it's – right nice. Ta,” said Alec, with a fraction of his usual warmth.

Harold, with mouthful: “Not at all! Not at all. You must not thank me – though you are most welcome – and most deserving – and well earned it is!”

I slurped my milk; Alec scratched a sideburn, looking away: “Er.. yeh. Ta..”

“A great start to proceedings, what? Don't you all think? Just imagine, at this present rate, (oh horrors!), from what I calculate, we shall have the foundation established – in a rudimentary, rather Lloyd Wright style, what we favour – why, well before Christmas!

“These grounds – don't you think, have been up till now wasted..” Was Harold aware that he was getting no verbal response but a few curious stares? “...You might think, or well – imagine, given what it looked like before – when the – the – previous owners were managing – that is, they were failing to – Oh just look, the overgrowth, the grasses high, buildings in ruin, the ostentation run to desuetude - but ah, it isn't yet run wild enough! If one were to invoke the landscape stylings of Capability Brown...”

“He's clean off his rocker,” muttered Alec to me. “Why's he eatin' here, wi'us?”
“I suppose he means well,” I sighed.

“Insufferable man!” Alec takes no prisoners.

Harold continued, quite un-dampened, to his ambushed neighbour: “Nature and culture in Harmony, you see – ah – what was your name? Ah, Patsy... Well you'll observe the wildness and artifice, all in one perfect territory!”

“Berk,” said Alec, and his seat-mate laughed.

“What was that? Do you agree, or wish to register some argument? Would you place higher prominence, especially given recent times, on outward, fickle beauty than practicability, or, ah -”

“Luke,” said the laughers. “And – well, actually, sir, we was just wonderin' if they'd be swapsies after lunch – if us that's been loadin' could have we a turn drivin' – the carts like, for a bre- er, for a change.”

The table was a sea of wide eyes and expectant countenance; Luke looked upright and bold, while I could practically hear Alec's heart beating. What grievance?

Harold looked taken aback, certainly. “Ah – well – yes, that would make a kind of sense, would it not? For a fair distribution of resources.”

Smiles, serene, disbelieving, began to ripple.

“Yes, it might be easier for you loaders, shall we say, to take a turn at driving the haul to our quarry beyond. Yes, I'll talk to Lee. And there we go! Half-past the one! Musn't be late now, must we!” Clattered his cutlery onto his plate, he began clumsily climbing off the bench.


“No indeed,” said I, speaking for the first, as we all wiped and rose. “We seem rather caught between Scylla and Charybdis.”
“Exactly!” said Alec, glaring at me; the others staring.

“Sorry – what was that?” Harold paused in his energetic struggle into his coat, but with unusual social dexterity, I sped off.

After lunch: all was ruin. My spirits, I mean. Couldn't remark on anyone else's – Alec's, even. I had become all reduced, now naught but my own ongoing bodily misery. If the morning had been grim, ghostlike, shovels, wheelbarrows, constant carts, men in your way, others too far away: the afternoon was all this and worse.

Rain poured down cold, mingled with hot dirty sweat as the horses trotted over the rocky, rough terrain, and we got to see the final destination of the stone and rubble. The site was surely a one-time paddock, now lately a quarry; a vast hole dug – mercifully previous to our employment – with simply mounds of stones at its base. It was but half full.

My blisters broke long, long after my spirits had. By the time darkness had fallen fully, and it was for knocking-off, I felt barely able to stop, step: it might have been easier and more relieving to keep working in the hope of hastening death.

“Bushwhacked!” said Alec to Luke, who shook his head for agreement. When Luke turned to wring his cap out, Alec shot me an agonized look, one that I was too delirious to acknowledge, return, or be grateful for.

Tea and drinks and other weary distractions were mentioned; but Alec, and some others, begged off, citing exhaustion, home calling, fire and food.

None of which interested me. Amidst shouts, waves, stubbed cigarettes and tipped caps, Alec led me away through the woods towards the cottage, hooking my arm firmly when were were out of eyesight, and the moon led our way.
Though finally alone, and relieved of the work, the wind, the rain and the others, I felt no satisfaction at the house, indeed no change: a numbness. Alec took to the fireplace, began striking matches towards the tinder he had left ready in the morning.

Something in me stirred, watching him, and I inclined rightwards, towards the counter, perhaps to see to the breakfast things, clean them, put them away, but Alec said, “Sit.”

Perhaps I had become completely accustomed to following orders all day; maybe it was his sweet insistent tone. Or it may have been my legs' own decision. I trudged over to the table and lowered myself into a chair... My utter exhaustion was such that I merely listened, staring dully, blinking slowly as Alec went round the room, tasking: setting the fire, draping clothes, then he was out the front door and back again, into the bedroom and round the kitchen, over to me and removing the coat and cap from my listless frame.

Tired and all as I was, I was still all tension and anxiety; Alec worked around this, bustling round the room quietly, without the affectation of chatter or whistling, so careful of me I wanted to...

Tea, toast, eggs were placed in front of me; I could summon only the energy to thank him, and almost fell asleep with my face in the plate.

Tentatively, the meal was removed, untouched, and Alec spoke for the second time that evening. “Why not go and lie down, you're fair done in.” All was equal and nothing to me so I retired without argument.

Curling up on the blankets, I tried my best not to think about anything. I knew that above all, I ought to sleep, but I was too miserable, too wound up. Drifting...

Clock 11pm. In another six hours I shall have to be up and do it all again, and again and again and again, how shall I bear it!

Alec appeared in the doorway and regarded me momentarily; I looked unfocusedly at the wall. He bit a fingernail, before leaning over and pulling off my boots. “These'll dry in no time square at the fire; the mud'll be easier scraped off on the morrow when it's dry. Here, I better has your britches too...” For they were similarly caked, and summarily removed.
When he adjourned to the fireside with my things, I bit a knuckle wretchedly. I knew I was being silly, sulking with Alec, wasting our few precious hours alone together all woebegone and worthless, but... Oh, the matter over mind.

Lying on the bed I felt so heavy as to sink down through the mattress to the ground and down, down..

My body felt completely used and withered and weary, and my soul followed suit.

Faraway clangs issued - the poker in the embers and the fireguard being placed: he reappeared and I closed my shamed eyes as I felt him gently climb over me, the mattress sinking and rising as he folded himself behind me, and slotted his body into mine so that knees tucked and his arms around my waist and nose at my nape so that he was spooning me, even though he was shorter, his toes clasping at my ankles.

We breathed together for a holy moment before I sobbed, and again, and again I sobbed, and covered my face with my hands in mortification, and he held me fast against him, saying nothing as I wept with an energy I had not had since mid-morning.

At length there were longer gaps between my whimpers and wet gasps. Sliding his hand firmly from my shoulder to elbow, up, down, he: “Shhh.. now.. It's alright, it's just fine pet... Shhh... I know, I know what you're feelin'...”

“You don't,” I sniffled, groped for a hanky. “You couldn't.”

“Yeh, I do, I ent so old I don't remember what it were like! First time I done a full day's labourin'... Lord... Pickin' mushrooms it were and that sounds like a lark but it were from six till six, Lord... by the time we were allowed back to the bunkhouse, no-one was fit to talk, I were sore and broke-hearted and 'most ready to cry, and nothing to do only collapse into bed and dread the next day.”

Soft did he stroke my hair now as he spoke and I turned my head slightly to hear him better.

“Couldnae quit. Needed the bread. Couldnae call on Ma and Pa and get them to come save me – far beyond all that. No – had to make do, tough up and act as if it were all perfectly fine, just like all the other lads were doin’.” He ran a finger along my ear. “Tain't easy. So don't feel ashamed.”
“Yes but.. It isn't.. I mean to say, how old were you when you started working? Didn't you say – quite early in life?" 

“Oh – well, abou' thirteen, I'd hazard...”

“You see – I'm ten years older than you were when you first took on the manly mantle, and I'm still unable for it, I'm being a bigger juvenile about -”

“Hush! Don't talk soft.” He jogged me, kissed my jaw, make me drown in him, weak for him, but somehow stronger in the world.

“Who cares about ages and things. You'se're only startin' now, and the bright spot is that it'll git easier from now on. And it won't be forever... Just until, well...”

“Alec,” I said, “That foundation to be filled is the size of a football pitch.”

“Not our problem,” he said quickly. “Leave that to the bigwigs. We'll do as we's paid for, day in, day out. I tell you, tomorrow be better, all round, you'll be more steeled.”

Rummaging around, he tugged the blankets up, wrapped them tight around us, laid his chin on my shoulder, sleep to steal over. Everything he says and does is right, and sound, and just -
...Correct and accurate. But absolutely. Of course he was. Wonderful boy. Darling fellow. Fortune-teller, forest-dweller, sayer of sooth... That first day was all weary and woe-ful, but, when one considers it, the optimist would observe it was also correspondingly chock-full of potential. Thank Goodness I had an optimist to hand!

Yes, that first day of labouring was grim. I think I made that clear last chapter. Beastly hard on the body, and worse on the spirit, because all I could surmise from the shock to the system was that it would only get harder, I would get weaker.

Not so. This did not occur. Well, truth be told, the work did get more arduous but we – Alec and I, and in fact all of the crew – simply had to pull together, grind the teeth and keep going, with little option but, at least, clear focus.

Strength in numbers: number of rocks hauled a day, increasing; number of rests needed – less, number of curses in one's itinerary. Shocking.

Creatures of habit are we. From this vantage point now, I can say, that if the Fantastic signals the start of an explosive love affair, then the subsequent onset of humdrum routine is the test, the clincher, the true permanent joiner. As long as that routine still includes spaces for explosions. Not, I should think, in the morning, though, where I shall begin this set of remembrances.

The morning starts far too early – and yet it's always Alec up before me – that internal clock still wound up daily. At least, he constantly managed to awaken before the blasted alarm were to bellow out at five, at he would leave my sleeping form, ease from the bed to rattle the embers, turn the clothes on on the 'horse, visit the well for water, empty the chamberpot.

(The existence of which – discovery of in a cupboard – I was very grateful for; whereas Alec hooted at the very idea of bothering with one whilst living out in the sticks.

“Very well then,” I'd said, “If it's so superfluous and quaint and unnecessary, and only I use it, let me be responsible for the disposal of its contents every morning. That's only fair.”
Alec merely laughed in reply, and said more things about how very precious I was; I never once got to see to the pot.

Though I told him time and again to wake me when he rose in the morning – I was never such a heavy sleeper as then, but then: never had I worked so dreadfully hard before.

But no. “I like thee nice and warm and sleepy when I come back for a bit.” For when he had stirred the fire, put the kettle on to reach a slow boil, fed the blasted chickens – all in the dark, cold quiet of the A.M – he would kick his boots off again and slide back under the covers to wriggle near and steal my warmth. That usually roused me (“Your feet are like ice!”).

So despite having spent the morning sleeping, creeping and honeying so, we generally still ended up having to leave the house for work at a gallop. It wasn't as if there were a whistle, a klaxon-bell, a punching-in card. But one was wise to arrive in good time, whether on shifting duty – so as to get a good sheltered spot with mid-sized stones – or, if one was that day driving, be early enough to get a decent animal and not one of the infamous 'clapped-out old nags'.

Thus after a quick splash, outer gear pulled on, sometimes directly over pyjamas, gulps of tea and rude mouthfuls of toast we'd rush and race and muddy-run to the Couch House (now Rubble).

It was always dark and generally wet. But the way was clear and our path was set, so there was that purity to the day.

I can't say anything really positive about the labouring. I likely would have waxed poetical on the joys and righteousness of Good Honest Work, yes, once, before I had to get my own hands dirty!

'Hard work breaks no bones.' Cheery, but a damn falsehood: I witnessed within the space of only a few weeks a broken arm, several crushed toes, a dislocated shoulder, dozens of squashed fingers and daily banged shins.

I myself sliced my hand open – through a glove! - from wrist to fingertip, on a piece of glass buried within the rubble. At least it was but a flesh wound. Judy the tea-lady appeared with bandages and reassurances and it was quite alright; stopped bleeding after a week or so.

Of course it was not shock accidents like these which proved to be the most injurious; it was, as Alec predicted, the bodily consequences of the normal, relentless carrying out of the work itself that really rendered one threadbare.
That is to say, a good, successful, worthwhile day's labouring (in the eyes of the foreman), was one that left one's limbs in ruins. If, on that first day in September, I had considered the contortions, the horrendous weights, the mindless drudgery, the skinned hands and thumping headaches to be the worst of the worst, I was to be proven duly wrong – by the second day. Only then did my slumbering tendons truly awaken, shrieking like the Banshee in pain and outrage; what body parts that did not writhe in agony stiffened into wood.

Hobbling into work that day was an undertaking marked by pure terror and anxiety; I couldn't beg off my very second day on the job, yet I feared if I turned up in my enfeebled state I would prove to be all but useless at any form of fetching and carrying.

Alec said airily: “Don't fret. Everyone'll be feelin' it, some degree. Take us all a while to find us' stride.” He was half right. About half the other fellows were stooped and torpid as I; empathetic looks were exchanged. Alec was among the hardier, but as I say, the differences were soon barely discernible and anyhow irrelevant. Rocks got moved – Lee was happy – well, quiet – that was about the sum total.

At lunch, I generally sat (read: slumped) beside Alec; too tired and hungry to wonder or worry over the frequency, or intensity of our association. And as it transpired, so was everyone else. I had been, of course, on the look-out for – well, funny looks (or even just second ones), whispers, questions, stares, sneers. Would they know about Alec and I? Would they guess, or even just idly joke? I could bear none of the three!

Alec: “No sod'll suspect anything! Everyfellow'll be all wore out and woebegone on him' own troubles. Tha'll see. Don't worry.” Sometimes I think Alec uses the constant platitude Don't Worry because he is too polite to say Do Shut Up!

Casual chatter rang over the dining table, yes, but disclosures on the personal subjects of family, background, fortunes, acquaintances, travels, achievements were few and far between and for the really cagey, like we, practically non-existent.

How this flew in the face of the social gatherings I had been used to! Where one's family, very ancestry was of supreme importance and intrigue, and where social connexions were paramount, and very quickly and obviously rooted out.

In the mess hall, however, at Yalbury Lough (for that was the name of the estate) talk usually would start on the state of the work, and the food – both condemned equally. Then which such topics as: the weather, football, the nags, detailed accounts of boozy nights out and accompanying conquests of courting (both real and - must be! - imagined) – well, the sort of prattling that Alec was fluent in, and
It suited me more to play the listener, the quiet type, the dark horse; for any time I opened my mouth to, say, reply or good-bye I was met with expressions of surprise, wonder and suspicion. Often these expressions were verbal as well as facial so I kept momentary mum, speaking only to Alec if need be.

He was different among other people anyhow; even more boisterous, coarse, friendly, frantic. I still admired him of course but he did intimidate rather too; he teased others so mercilessly I was strategic in avoiding his public attentions too – school all over again, except the worm had turned, and I am become the sort of boy I would myself have thence bullied! Quite a deserving turn of events – I'll brook no argument on that point. No Alec, I've said – entirely fitting. If I were quietly humanizing – it was not before time.

Occasionally, the general complaints about the workload, the hours, the conditions, the pay, and such delved into the realm of the Social (never quite the directly political) Question: was it entirely fair that those denied an education and a fancy-pants upbringing and all the essential benefits in life were thus relegated to performing the country's grunt-work, forever and always, father to son and the odd daughter too.

I could have mentioned the onset of the burgeoning Labour movement, the Trade Unions, the factory Acts, the Proposals for more regimented hours and basic minimum wage; I had absorbed some information and even some measure of compassion from the odd meetings I was dragged to at college by Clive or some other robed progressive oddity.

But I sensed that my quarry colleagues were not particularly interested in discussing the possible positive aspects of industrial employment; at least not in the middle of the working day. What they really wanted to do – and didn't they do it! - was complain, en masse, in a circle, about the unfairness, the authorities, the backbreaking, the lot in life. Quite companionably and enthusiastically they did so, I must say, and, fully doubting my own abilities at such rude rustic ribbing, at first at least, I stayed well out of it.

You see? I was learning, and for it, surviving. I was more or less accepted, because it was understood that no sod would voluntarily opt for this kind of work unless he was right doo-lally; I was equal because I was equally suffering.

But was I? Yes – and no. What a truth: pain can be completely erased by pleasure – later.

For – after lunch, there were some hours to go, and collective energy was sapping, seeping – a fact
felt keenly by the working man and resented by the helmer.

“Come on lads, Gawd almighty a gang of kiddies would have this lot hauled days ago! Don't think yous can shirk just because it's raining! Makes no difference to t'hole what needs filling – what a useless shower!!”

And a dozen rocks mimingly but menacing aimed at Lee's head as he turned and lurched muddily away. And yet on we'd go, till the end of the day.

Yes. The end. For if the days were straining, and heaving, and all toil, and the plane and the lathe, as it were, well, what made it all completely agreeable and endurable were the nights, the Nights.

At last, we two, alone. We two – together. Gaining each other after the long day and nothing to stop us. It was the stuff of Stories!

Once we left the site, called our good-byes (or simply limped away, if it had been a particularly trying or wet day), we would walk to the cottage, anticipation growing with every step, making for that cottage – our cosset.

Our sanctuary, our castle, our home, because we were there, and we made it so, we left and always came back. It made the long dark arduous working day worth it – in fact it was a perfect balance. For the harder the day – the drudgery of lifting, the near-constant rain, the injuries, the sometimes volatile tempers of our mates and indeed we ourselves – these adversaries made us all the more eager to rush home and climb onto and into each other.

That is not to say that we launched upon one another the instant we closed the back door, hands tearing clothes and jumping into wrapping arms and caps knocked off and furniture thrown onto. You might have been imagining that, but it's simply not the case. But you may go on imagining it if you like. I'll continue as you do.

What I was learning was the following: the basics of the body supersedes all, and that is not a reference to the sexual – it's possible to plunder to further fundament. When Alec and I let ourselves wearily into the house, we may take a moment of pause just to lean on one another, or squeeze hands, or pat a shoulder. Rugged up in layers of wool, cotton and corduroy as we were, there was no point smiling, leave alone attempting to kiss.
What I hope to impart is the COLD COLD COLD of living and working out in the forest. Oftentimes I'd not see much of Alec all day, even mealtimes, if our duties were divisive; and as such my longing for him would grow continually and acutely. All the same the first thing I wanted to do upon home arrival was peel off simply pounds of mud-caked clothing.

One early occasion found me in a state of high panic and deep distress when Alec let us in after work. My hands were in a condition of such aching and overwork that I was near terrified to take my gloves off, for fear of what horrors I would uncover.

“They'll be alright. It's just the cold, that's all, what's got into 'em, must've been near freezin' all day! Just wouldn't let up.”

“I'll have done permanent damage.”

“Not a bit of it.”

“It'll be chilblains.”

“Chilblains! And thee a young lad in thy bloom?! After only a few weeks' proper work? Do me a favour...”

“If it is the cold, it's bally done for my hands. My fingernails have frozen off.”

“You – what?!”

“I can't feel them anymore, they must have .. Oo!! I can't bear it!”

“What absolute cobblers! Here, show us..”

And I consented, as I would likely never to any other, to his very slowly easing off my filthy gloves. Was it just me, or was there trepidation in his manner too?

All my nails were intact, but almost blue with cold. I made to hold them over the fire, but Alec
swooped in: “No, don't do that, don't make 'em too warm too soon, you got to bring 'em round gradual or the pain'll stab...” And he held my hands in his, considerably warmer, ones, rubbing them slightly before wrapping them in a scarf and whirling round kitchen-ward to fetch me a cup of tea.

This seems dramatic (because of my carry-on), but was indeed typical; not of incident but certainly of dynamic.

Quite usually, once inside the cottage, we would, as I say, disassemble ourselves from our workwear and quickly and automatically see to setting up the stage for another wonderful evening together: performing the most perfunctory domestic chores had an enchanting resonance but then again, I'm sure it's thus for any new honeymooners.

Alec flung himself directly on the hearth, his agitation at being away from the slowly extinguishing embers all day evident. Leaving him poking, blowing and cursing, I would don anything dry I could find and go back outside to the garden, to the woodpile and chop enough logs to get us through to the next morning.

It was the time for relaxing, and yet we raced around that cottage like messanger-boys in a state of high ambition, collecting fuel, scooping ashes, draping wet clothes, scrambling about tidying yesterday's mess, having a quick bathe, then chopping bread, cracking eggs, warming pans, boiling water, brewing tea.

Couldn't help it you see – so eager were we for the evening to be, again, perfect; just as the one before, a constant re-creation – we rushed to flushed position at the kitchen table like actors, prickling with healthy nerves, readying for the raising of the dusty curtain.

We would slurp tea with tiny, frugal amounts of milk; clinking saucers, spilling and swilling. Day in day out we would eat bread and dripping (foul but cheap and constant), eggs, occasional ham, a culled chicken every second Sunday, gammon or bacon every other one.

Only weekends brought huge pots of Alec's floury mashed potato, and something tinned for a treat. Fish on a Friday – not for reasons of religion, but borne of habit and tradition, so warm and revered that it became sacred. We revelled in the predictability of our lives: what more could one ask for than everything you ever wanted, day after day after day?

Sated and satisfied after the food, it was over perhaps the third cup of lazy, chattering tea that a foot would graze another's ankle, or a wrist gently gripped, a biscuit fallen in the wrong cup, a longing gaze held just the precise amount of moments so as to be regarded as insistent. Maybe eyelashes flashed closed, a bottom lip bitten. My God, we were coy! But it was part of the play, the scene, the
At last, we would come together, the spiritual tension between us would reach its undeniable zenith and convert naturally to the physical. Making love was reward and renewal: for the hard day’s work and to again, endlessly, sanctify our vows.

It was a celebration, rather than a base justification, of our bond. It was wonderful and – wicked – and it happened every night, without fail, in the middle of the woods on that ancient, abandoned estate, with no-one to bother us and all of heaven and earth’s joys to gain from each other.

This is true, more or less, with some daily adjustments; life is not a clear and exact reproduction after all, there are varieties every time. One can face and adjust to these dynamic elements as long as one has his constant companion.

Afterwards, we would, oh, hold each other for a while and molly and murmur; touching skin perhaps more delicately than the earlier sexual process would allow. We would talk more intimately and yet more playfully than we had over tea: the state of nudity stripping bare the covers of conscience also.

But we’d stir, awake of hours we still had to enjoy before bed; we’d get dressed again – we had to, as you’ll see – but more casually (if even that were possible) than even work gear. Layers upon layers of corduroy and cotton and wool and impractical tweed; mountains of shirts, jumpers, cardigans, scarves in the acute cold; fingerless mitts that would allow a fingertip to be licked and a page turned.

For Alec had – yes! - taken to reading, and was, with furrowed brow and strong, sweet, constantly topped-up tea ponney, frowning and squinting over – that term? - *Swiss Family Robinson*. Oh how I laughed when he chose this title out of the case of books we’d brought from St. John’s.

“I say – really? This one?” I watched him open the rich, red-cloth covers and flick through the pages, sat cross-legged in front of the fireplace.

“Yeh – why not?” said he, pausing at a picture of the boys and their tree-house, before leafing again to look at a map.

“It’s a children’s book,” I said. “Funny that you should pick it.”

“Funny that you should still have it in your flat, long after the nursery,” he shot back. “Why did
“It's – it's quite a nice edition, that,” I stumbled, “And a marvellous story, come to it!”

After all, who was I to judge? I was reading Dickens again, despite the fact that – to my shame – I had bought but not even half-consumed the traditional oeuvre, the Cambridge Canon – beautifully bound volume upon volume of genius, of importance and great weight – quite beyond me, unfortunately.

I'd only read *The Mayor of Casterbridge* twice, and I'm afraid I stopped right in the middle of *Middlemarch*! As to poetry... Locked door. All of these great works one is expected to read – no, expected to *have* read, coupled with texts for actual coursework, married to the tomes Clive piled into my arms 'for a pleasant respite, Maurice' – it was enough put you off the printed word for life.

No-one minded whether or what I read now, however, which made it more appealing, recreationally. And it was hard to fetch the paper every day; as time trickled on, novels became more germane to our dreamy new existence than the big, wide, worrisome news.

It was blissfully companionable and cozy, the early Winter evenings with the rain pelting the windows, lamps lit, blankets huddled, the wind whipping the fire, Alec sprawled on a low arm-chair with no legs and a terrifically flattened cushion; we'd rescued it from one of the empty cottages and stuffed it with bedcovers. Took on a rather lumpen aspect as a consequence, but then, what are you going to do, as Alec observes, but throw your arse on it?

Generally I would have – oh, I better change, and exit the unreal past, so as to get back to straightforward chronicling and encompass the entire True History: I sat, on this typical evening, on one of the surviving kitchen chairs, and let's say – no, I say – I was scribbling out a shopping list on a scrap of paper, puffing on the pipe that I'd lately resurrected.

It wasn't long after tea, so Alec contented himself with chewing on his fingernails as he read, the biscuits being carefully rationed to last the fortnight. What self-control we learned with regard to food and victuals; how it stood to us later. How funny that the greatest and most coveted indulgence – sex - is free.

It's more than that actually, the more you have of it the better it gets, you get, he gets, oh what compound interest, what remuneration is reaped!

Crackle of the fire would not have been disturbed by the sounds of his pages turning; well perhaps by one revolution only. For Alec had determined to read exactly one page per day of *Swiss Family.*
He was unaccustomed to large tracts of text and as such didn't particularly enjoy it; brow at a cautious, constant state of near-furrow. But he persevered.

“For improvement of the mind?” I'd asked.

“For pure thick-headedness,” said he, and I was left to ponder if both our reasons were the truth.

Occasionally I was asked what this term or that word meant, and I was happy – eager! - to assist.

“What's an ah-ah – abode?”

“Why – we're in one!” Smiling, I spread my arms out.

“Wha’ – a cottage? Above in a tree?”

“Well, it refers to any kind of a home. A tree house, in the Robinson case.”

“Oh..”

“Good book?” I said. “What's happening now?”

“God but they'll eat anything,” complained Alec. “Even the dogs eat other dogs!”

I chuckled. “There's a life lesson there.” Adding: “And speaking of things who'll eat anything..”

“Hm?” He looked up at me showing the scrap. “Oh – donnot forget the cheese – won't you?”

“What happened to 'basic needs' – living frugally?” I laughed.

“We do - God! We only get a poncey ounce of it, no amount – cheese..”
“Cheese,” I said, adding it. Chewing the pencil, I murmured the calculations. Er – summations. “That was sixpence-worth, I recall..” For I was making an itemized list of provisions – if one wants to make a 'shopping list' sound more manly, although Alec wasn't bothered about this; at this stage still referring to a visit to the village as 'doing the messages.'

How much of his mother was coming through in this domestic sphere. And mine in me? Yes and no; emotional, flighty – and yet, brave? For she had no man whereas I do.

I suppose I was hers.

Howbeit...

1 pound butter.....1s 2d
1 pound sugar.........3d
Loaf bread.............2½d
1 pound bacon.........9d
Pint paraffin.........1½d
Swans matches........1d

...I glanced over at my big strong fellow, his legs thrown up on the mantelpiece, feet jiggling beside the clock. I did my secret smile.

12 pints milk..........3d (we all but lived on it)
Cadbury..................1s

For it was my intention for us to live as comfortably as possible within our means, which were more than Alec had darkly predicted on the train – possibly because we were working harder and longer than he had anticipated.

And now housework too! Never again did I – nor will I – sneer at Women's Work. The weight of keeping an auspicious home! The love of a man that sustains it!

“Raisins..” I muttered, adding and totting. “Porridge.. flour..”
At first, Alec elected to do the cooking, claiming to be a dab-hand. Whilst he had advised me on what to buy, and once kitchened, it was surely he who set about preparing - “Cookin's a dodle, it is. Simple application of heat is all!”

Yes, Alec, certainly it is, but it is of course of equal – if not more – importance to subsequently, sometime, remove the food from the heat. For he did wander; for I did leap and flap and grab and rescue sizzling, smoking, bubbling and burning pots. And so I took over mealtimes; Alec's nails are so bitten down that he can't properly shell a boiled egg anyway so it makes sense.

And it's working; we're alive, and only last week I managed to serve up some carrots that didn't need to be scraped from the bottom of the pan! Well, not all of them anyroad. Anyway.

Alec: “Does tha' think -” KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK – went the door, or rather the knuckles on the door, or not exactly, but it signified the arrival of -

Oh, well, here they were now, letting themselves in, perfectly candidly, again; I suppose they considered the knocking a formality by this stage as Alec or I always called, eventually, “Yes?” “Do come in.” or “Oh Christ! You again!” The cottage was so small one was never far from anywhere so there was no need (nor inclination) to physically see to the callers at the door, as would have been proper.

Tonight we were blessed with the company of Luke, Patsy and the Joxter. And no, you needn't read again or doubt me; those are the correct names, I have a fairly good memory and, it would seem, an intensely detailed and pedantic flair for memoir. Poor you.

I suppose Dickens would furnish the reader with some distinguishing feature or other of the newcomers for narrative purposes; though no writer I, I shall attempt to ape.

Luke, I think I mentioned him previously; tall and dark and sensible and brash with it. No inclinations.

Patsy was the youngest of the group as far as I could make out, certainly the smallest of the crew entire; looked barely old enough to shave yet was seen lugging around rocks half his size. Ought, to my mind, to have been learning his Latin and rolling marbles.

The Joxter – yes, the definitive one – was Scots of course, and laid-back to a fault. Which was a
pleasant characteristic socially but a damned nuisance to the fellow-worker. It really shouldn't be possible, surely, to 'casually' or 'sleepily' push a wheelbarrow weighing about ten stone, so one would think; until you chanced to see the Joxter, rolling slowly by with eyes half closed. As to the other: a cypher. You wouldn't know, but one would doubt he could configure the energy...

Now here they were, in our home, laughing and pulling up chairs and jostling and jibing and being; Patsy sank onto a footstool by the fire and rested his chin on his hand heels, elbows on knees. He was a quiet one; this made him distinctive, all but unique.

“Alright, Scudder?” said Luke, formal at first, and he warming himself over the fire. He glanced over his shoulder. “Hall..” Always the wariness and reticence in my direction. I sent the sentiments right back with cautiously raised eyebrows in greeting. My own home, I reiterate, I ask you...

Alec wriggled his toes in his mantelled socks. “Grand.”

“Good book?”

“This sentence I'm reading is terrific.” Alec gave the impression of the interrupted scholar. In fact I'm sure it was with great relief that the visitors alleviated his finger, that had been slowly following the words along the page.

He plonked the open book upside-down on the mantel, although I had suggested numerous times that he might like to use a bookmark. I could hardly say so at this point in front of others, now could I? As he well knew, and shot me a grin. I let the smoke twirling from my pipe speak for itself.

“Got any more backy? Thankee,” The Joxter sat beside me with his feet up on the table; upon my shopping list actually which I twitched out from under his boot and left under the jug on the side. Why is it that some people consider a table, a shelf, a mantel, an arm rest, chest-of-drawers, a bookcase and any number of objets de mobilier to be sitting in wastage unless they have feet thrown up on them? And why do I know so many people who indulge thus? So uncouth! And murder on the lower lumbar. Yes, I tried it. Once or so.

So there's the Joxter contentedly leaned way back in his chair with his own pipe-smoke swirling, Patsy paging through the Swiss, Luke warming his hands over the fire. Alec threw me another look, bemused this time. This lot! Time and again, like stray cats!

(Two of actual which were wont to appear periodically; Alec, as a self-proclaimed 'dog person', had
said most emphatically that they Could Not Stay: they would pee everywhere and reproduce abandonly and menace the chickens. Despite, he inexplicably named them Julia and Smudge, and could been seen on occasion chasing them about, not bad-humouredly.)

Luke leaned farther over the fire and examined the bubbling contents of the pot hanging from the hook. It was blackberry jam, or was on the way to becoming so.

Another of Alec’s schemes. We had been ambling around the far reaches of the infinitely overgrown estate, climbing around intertwining trees and heaving through hedges and getting our socks and slacks quite sopping, when Alec was overjoyed to discover hoards of huge, juicy blackberries, crop after crop in the copse, all along the path to the Old Chapel, down low among the dandelions and swaying high in the breeze with the leaves.

“Rain kep’ the earth damp a’growin’, but it’s the sun what brung ‘em out!” explained Alec, turning to me and beaming himself. “They wasn’t there last week, in the dull. I tell thee, one good day’s dryin’ is all you need! They been waitin’ on it! Here – do you have anything we can use? My jumper, help me yank it off .”

Something I was at this stage already quite proficient in. And with that beginning, of course I was just as enthusiastic as Alec. What I didn't initially realize was that blackberries grow on very long, vicious, thorny briars, that actively seek to scratch the skin and pull threads from clothes even when one is trying to pass innocently by.

Now, imagine what it is like to deliberately engage with these horrible thorny growths and attempt to steal their berry bounty, and what two asses would do so. Well you needn't wonder on the latter.

We two reached into the bushes, tore our arms, hands and faces bloody, filled Alec's jumper, which he carried over his shoulder in the manner of the jolly swagman, with glossy purple clots; we emerged, at once triumphant and beaten, into the clearing: the ancient, overgrown path to the Chapel, whereby we trooped in the softening Sunday-evening sunshine back home to pick leaves out of the cache and thorns out of our fingers.

Alec's purple face lit up as he crowed over our stash; yammering rhapsodic even as I mopped blood from his arm and despairingly applied ever-reddening bandages. Could I possibly have anticipated what an initiation, a baptism of fire this would be – the whole Yalbury tenure in fact!

What appears to be survival was, in fact, the highest reaches, the very riches excesses of living. For both of us. Sheer unrestriction. We were gluttons for each other and the life we had created together: so pat, and domestic, and drudging to the abstract external observer, but which was, in reality, giddy
and exhilarating, bounding, boyish, flinging back bedcovers, yanking open doors, wolfing down food, chopping wood, tossing ashes; racing bedward and wrapping warm, desperate limbs. I was quite suddenly Alive, it was a rebirth, a Renaissance, a regeneration of the earth's base essentiality and We Did It. We were doing it.

I boiled the kettle that night while Alec cleaned the berries and put them in a huge iron pot along with our entire sugar supply for the next fortnight - “This'll cook right handy, all you need's a bit of water too – just a drop, here we go, and keep a-stirrin' it constant, it'll thicken up proper nice and wi' the sugar? Oh! Hah! Land! There won't be owt in t'village grocer's that'll draw drinks to it – truth. Blackberries ain't so common as other preserves, and they's right difficult to gather – well, tha' sees that...”

I let the fact that I was nibbling a thorn out of the pad of my thumb to be my non-verbal reply. All worth it, I was assured, when we had the jam all prepared, glassed up, muslin'd and twined, and brung to the village for a pretty penny.

That was to be my part in the proceedings – I was not the only one to formulate ideas and foist them upon my mate! Alec asked me to do the actual selling, said I was more likely to charm 'em, with my voice – a touch of the businessman exposing itself in he. I agreed, and went on to foster a fruitful (!) relationship with the local shop-keeper – don't let on to Pete Hazelwood, mind.

And do you know, the jars shifted, alright. Alec knows what he knows and will show it plainly.

But if I may back-pedal. Or rather – loop around. Luke, as I painted before, but not in great detail, was this night poised over the pot of jam and one could not really blame him for his curiosity; the room was filled with the warm, sickly sweet scent and the fire spat sporadically with drops dribbling over the side. It would be absolute hell trying to scrape it clean later but I made some headway.

“Give it a stir, Luke, will you, now that you're near it?” said Alec the opportunist, rolling his stiff shoulders after his preposterous posture for reading. With the sticky wooden spoon from the plate on the mantel, Luke stirred the dark concoction, raising the spoon and allowing the jam to gloop tantalizingly back onto the surface.

“Eat any of it and by God that spoon'll folly the jam down thy throat!” said Alec amiably, rising to his feet and coming over to the table; he hopped up on it and settled cross-legged beside my folded arms. I knew if we hadn't been deluged with company that he'd have taken the pipe from my mouth for a puff; so to compensate I reached for the tin on the side and began to roll him a cigarette.

“You wouldn't want to eat it, or to touch it at all,” I said to Luke, who had taken Alec's vacated seat.
“It’s jolly boiling, hot as tarmacadam, I should think.”

“O should you?” Luke's posture was casual but his tone goading. “Happen' you think a lot, Toad of Toad Hall.”

“Watch it,” said Alec warningly, as my rolling fingers fumbled over the doubtless unassuming use of my family name; the Toad component I had no gripe with.

“You keep a civil tongue in your head when you cross this threshold,” said Alec importantly, adding, “Here, pull thyself over here and we'll set-to.” For he had rummaged the playing-cards out of the dresser drawer behind me, even while being perched on the table – it really was a very small abode.

The dozing Joxter was removed to the fireside and the rest of us lined the tablesides, cards laid out for me to try – again – to teach the party how to play Whist.

There wasn't even the excuse of alcohol to explain the shoddy gameplay and juvenile cantankerousness; comfortable and fed as we were, it wasn't possible to indulge in drink freely and daily as we used to (well, I used to).

We could only afford to drink whisky at the weekends – making them all the more anticipatory and sweet – and as such, during the week, evenings such as this Wednesday night found us knocking back copious amounts of tea, pot after pot, cup and saucer, mug, ponney, whatever was handy.

“Here, Joxter, you lazy git,” said Alec. “Fetch t'kettle back over the fire. You're not doin' nothin'.”

“I'm sleepin’,” came the drawling reply.

“That's nothin'!” chimed Alec and Luke. I itched to see to the kettle myself, and I should think Patsy did too – oh for the quiet life! - but we were thrown murderous glances, and finally some books and balled-up socks thrown in the Joxter's direction and roused his muttering form to its feet.

Luke went to the door to fetch the milk bottle he'd left on the step outside to keep it from running warm inside the house. This thoughtfulness – or duty – was a consequence of our stream of 'guests' initially calling round quite empty-handed and -stomached, presumably to enhance the casualness
and impromptu nature of their visit, like as if they were merely strolling by at nine PM in the pitch dark, during a storm.

All very well – except that it wasn't remotely – these hoards of hungry hoodlums thronging the house, raiding the larder – oh it was too much, and I felt only I, of us two, noticed and despaired! Ie. That Alec was only too happy to play host and give advantage.

I couldn't possibly risk making myself even more unpopular by objecting or even lightly suggesting, “Oh, Johann, would you mind ever so not eating – quite so very-half of that entire loaf?” That wouldn't win me many fans.

Fortunately this clearing-out came to an abrupt and riotous end when Alec discovered of a morning that there wasn't a drop of milk left in the house for porridge – nor porridge neither – and promptly did he storm to the worksite, telling every lad peripheral – even ones we didn't know very well – that if they even thought about calling around again of an evening with one hand as long as the other, then they could jolly well jog on. Might be my own paraphrasing there.

“Have us pure 'et out of house and home, they will,” he grumbled to me.

“I suppose they mean no harm,” I sighed. “At least they agreeable enough, which makes things so for us. It would be worse to be disliked.”

As with so many bland observations, this only rang true – conditionally. Contextually. Ie., it was grand being on decent terms with one's colleagues, ones fellow-fellows; however at work I was – unless I could escape, evade or avoid – absolutely badgered by Harold, whose dealings with and attitude towards the quarry seemed perfectly aimless – unlike his beeline upon spotting me.

“I say!” he'd say, clapping me on the shoulder, even as I was moodily and arduously pushing a wheel-barrow laden with stone-chippings. “It's really taking shape, wouldn't you say, Hall? Or – well, regarding the stone-pile – losing shape, rather, and positively so – Haw! Haw!”

I'd smile tightly; those wheel-barrows would wobble something terrible when they were right full.

Harold tried again, or tried further. “Is mean how it's – getting smaller.”

I noted his supremely wide-eyed use of the passive. “Yes it surely is,” I said. “Almost disappearing overnight of its own volition!”
“Isn’t progress a thing to admire!” He beamed, but had to leap aside as a cart with rocks clattered past - (“Scuse, sir.”)

“Certainly is. Most. Well, must toddle on,” and I twirled the handles of my barrow.

“Oh. W-wait! Hall, I meant to ask you – w-well, some of the fellows, really, but as you’re here, how would you like a night-cap sometime? With Lee – oh, he isn’t so bad, really, and a couple of fellows I know from school – quality surveyor, engineer, you know, up to take a little peek at the place for me – oh but awfully decent chaps with it, we shan’t be entirely talking shop! I have this rather good whisky, twenty years, only popped her yesterday -”

“Erm -,” I had been trying to find a natural break in this jabbering speech but was forced to interject: “Sounds frightfully ducky, but I’ll say no. I wouldn’t dream of infringing, thanks all the same, sir.” And I doffed, and quickly raced on crazily down the hill with my encumbrance.

“Inferring! Why, it wouldn’t be at all -” Calling after me.

“Sorry! Can't get away! Goodbye!” And top speed.

If I was moody and exasperated about Harold's soliciting, Alec was like a bear with bad news.

As I tipped the wheel-barrow, he ran over and 'casually' began spreading the fresh wet grit with his shovel.

“Off to dine at the captain's table, are thee?”

I oughtn't even to have acknowledged his nonsense with a rejoinder. Still. “Maybe it's you who should go. After all, weren't you about to become a seafarer yourself only two months ago?” I teased.

Alec leaned on his shovel. “If I had, I'd likely be still on the boat now, doo-lallyin'..” He continued to glare.
“No, I'm not going anywhere with Harold, nor anywhere near him!” I said, and stomped my boot heavily several times at the edge of the foundation so the smaller rocks fell between the crevices, thus creating a more stable base.

“I seen the two of ye nattering a'fore. Thick as thieves.”

“Just idle chit-chat Alec... I don't think he knows what he's about, round here, to tell the truth. Quite flighty.”

“Ain't just idle – that it's you he's givin' the glad-eye to. He's ferreted you out – he's found one of his own, up here in the doldrums. I mean...” And he reddened, to doubtless his own frustration: “You'se are the same sort.. fancy, well-to-do, educated..”

“Please,” I said drily. “He went to Bangor. I mean, really...”

“Oh still! As if I know the difference!”

“Makes no difference, true,” I shrugged. “I suppose, as a manager, he doesn’t find it easy to mix with the men. And as I'm so ridiculously polite, he sees me as a bit of a soft touch.”

We walked in silence for a few moments; Alec bit on his nails distractedly, before he grabbed his shovel from my empty barrow, whispered in my ear: “Only I oughter know about your soft touch” and loped off back into the forest.

When I termed this chapter as a ringing endorsement of the rich, bountiful, long and loving Night, I
probably ought to have mentioned the Sanctity of Sunday also – as a sub-title? - not because of 
solemn, religious observations, but because it was, more often than not, a day off. This was due to 
the fact that toiling all daylight hours, and dark ones too, with little in the way of breaks and the sizes 
of the stones slowly, steadily increasing, well, these factors tended to tire and render us quite fit for 
nothing after a certain period – roughly six days.

Harold was very confident and encouraging in our abilities to endure, but even he had to admit that 
by Sunday we had, en masse, slowed to a crawl. Workplace accidents and injuries were apt to recur, 
to the extent that one would almost suspect a degree of outright intention, when yet another hand was 
smashed under a stone, or a wheel, or a friend's shovel.

Such is the extremity of human exhaustion. The soul, of course, is much more tenacious and strong 
than the shoddy body; all the same when bone doth ache and flesh throb, the spirit does begin to fray 
somewhat around the edges.

Hence a lack-of-productivity. Hence a grudging clemency. Hence Alec and I, wending our way in 
the long grass, some October Sunday afternoon, arms full of food, buckets, blanket, gun, hats on 
head for the rare sun, trouser cuffs tucked into socks. Such was the vastness of the estate that we 
managed to give the others the slip, and head due East according to the compass.

Our plan was to deliberately wend our way into the wildest, lushest and therefore most interesting 
part of the grounds – “The undiscovered countryside!” This involved rather a lot of scrambling, 
scratching, climbing, catching, vociferating and rescuing, until we came upon a trail that maybe had 
known trodden foot this side of the Century, and gratefully followed it.

In the relative clarity of the path, Alec took the opportunity to try and blast some coneys; but when I 
went woodward to fetch them for him, I came up lacking.

“Look harder!!”

“Really – there isn't a trace, Alec. They must've run off.”

“And they dead?!”

A caesura.
“.... I must not've hit them, this time. Little beggers!”

“Probably just as well, we have our hands full as-is..” For Alec had folded his gun over the crook of his elbow, and with the compass in one hand he flapped the map with the other.

We passed by a large, overblown – and by now overgrown – folly. Beautiful in its lonesome quietus.

“Never could see the point in them,” said Alec.

“There isn't one,” I said. “That's the point.”

“Well..” And he pencilled in a note of it on his home-made map anyway. Complete with a relief of little trees, walls, and the way we were wending.

“You know,” I said, as we trooped, “There already is a map of this place, if there were some particular spot you were honing in on.. Should show the buildings, the meadows, the lake, boundaries...”

“There is?”

“Yes, Harold showed it to me once.”

Alec threw daggers.

“But – of course it's nowhere near as marvellous as yours, Alec! It won't have the important stuff, like... erm... like..”

“Like t'way we come today.”

“Right!”
“So's we can come a different way next time.”

“We will.”

“And have the whole place sussed out.”

“You're very naturally curious, darling.”

“Yeh, been told that afore, alright!”

Breathing in fresh chestfuls, beaten down by the sun, blossoms falling on our shoulders, and birds chirping all around, we swished through grass and bounced over moss. We climbed over dead trees. We skirted ditches and hopped precariously over stones through streams. Back to the Garden, no serpent to spoil.

“Isn't this jolly,” I said, “To be by ourselves for a while. Why, even when we're not at that blasted quarry, we're still plagued by the others daily! I do wonder why? I can see no earthly reason.”

“I can see the attraction.”

“Hmm..”

“And whass'more, so can they.”


“You know. Our – like – our -” Alec said, still swishing.


“No -”

“We must gather our gowns and go!”
“Ha! Ha!”

“I’m quite in earnest! If we're rumbled – although, dash-it, I thought we had been discreet – maybe too loud when we assumed we were alone?”

“You plank! No-one's cottoned on to us, Maurice, I swear. Think we'd be stood here livin' breathin' if there were?!”

He twitched my arm to encourage me to walk again, then slotted his own through comfortably.

“Don't worry. They don't know; or, they don't want to know. Look – has you been to any of the other fellas' cottages?”

“No,” I said, keeping quiet my wonder, why on earth would I?

“Well, I has, a time or two, called in of an eve when I happened to be walkin' home wi'the others.. Luke's in wi'Mardy, and Finn's bunkin’ wi'that blonde bloke from Leeds – oh, Andy, and Patsy's squished in there somewhere too.. See, everyone doses down wi'someone or other, no-one goes off alone though there's loads of room, they gather together, they ain't particular, they're just like us.”

“Not just.”

“Well – no. Ha.”

“We are very particular, I hope!”

“Right. But that ain't all, distinguishin'. I mean like – their places like, their houses, they're right grotty. Like ours was at first, only they've made no effort. Dirty hearth and chim'ley, so's the fire never takes good, greasy windows, tattery drapes, crummy dishes... Strictly just a place to doss down in, no more. Not too massive welcomin', you get in from work...

“So, they see us – see us as mates like, nowt fishy, good mates – it appeals, you know? Like at
school – you want to be around the friendly folk, right? Gangs form around 'em – I seen it. And we're always walkin' together, talkin', you laugh a lot."

“Yes, at you -”

“WELL, and look at our house. We always got the fire down, and the place reasonable kep', you got your gear clean and your hair neat and tidy."

“Oh... Too much? I, well, I want to look decent for you..”

“I like it! I try the same.. And we eat pretty well, never run out – actually cook!”

“I want you to have the very best we can afford!”

“See, that's it – we do well 'cos we're livin' for each other. Other lads.. they're driftin'. Singular, like. Lost. Mebbes they see us – sorted – dunno why but – they come along to bother us 'cos they're – homesick.”

“Homesick?! You mean – they see us as – parents?!”

“Well!”

“No!”

“Oh pah. I'm only codding – a bit. They can see we're good friends, and they want in. Who doesn't want to be part of a gang? If a wily one among 'em suspect there's any more to you and me? They dasn't let on; lest folk'll think they're funny, having brung it up. S'long as you don't grab and kiss me and pin me up again' a tree in front of 'em -”

“Hey!”

“- they'll just toddle on ignorant.”

“Ah! I see what you're driving at. Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur.”

“...You sound like a priest.”
Bees, butterflies, branches; presently we found some difficulty in moving forward comfortably – the bushes and hedges thickened around us and the leaves above began to obscure the sky.

“Looks like we've gone off-trail,” said Alec.

“Will we press on?” I asked.

“What's that?” He pointed between two huge old trees. Just visible to the squinter was a high wall of large, moss-covered stones. (More stones! On one's day off. Busman's. But at least we were under no onus to move them!) Alec dropped his cargo and dove into the foliage to investigate; I puppied.

We threaded through to meet only wall – where visible, it stretched off to our right and left, ten foot high and so covered in plant matter and miniature creatures so as to be practically a living organism itself.

“I do believe we've reached the boundary!” said Alec.

“This place is simply huge,” said I.

“C’mon, let's follow it along.” And he beckoned me to lead the way to the left, walking alongside the wall, inching and fighting through sapling and shrubbery all the way. Now you may appreciate why slack-cuffs were crammed into socks.

After ten huffing, clammy and claustrophobic minutes, Alec cried: “Ooo! Ooo, lookee!”

Such vivacity was warranted; we stumbled out of the trees to confront a curiosity, a large, spare stone edifice – again, apparently half-tree – tall and rectangular in shape, almost a turret, with a large,
round-topped entrance, and smaller windows, thick with leafage, on the third floor.

So humid and calm was the day that the trees barely stirred, all noise were the birds. Even they seemed far away, in time, so did this, so did we.

“An old Roman Fort,” I pondered.

Alec chewed his wisp and stepped a bit closer, peering intently and cracking twigs underfoot.

“That might explain the high wall. A strongholding.” I mused – or lectured – as I followed the path he created. He waited for me, holding a branch back out of my way: “Looks like a watchtower.”

“It does, come to that: how clever of thee to surmise as much, Alec! What would you say is the indicating feature?”

“That,” said he, pointing to the top of the building, where, poking out of huge swathes of ivy and beech, was a neat wooden deck or balcony, with what was, quite unmistakeably, facing East, a pair of field binoculars attached to the railing.

Alec did more surmising. “Weird.”

“Certainly is... That's not Roman, or ancient, at any rate. Looks like this park isn't as deserted or disused as first appears, what? What on earth do you think they're for?”

“Spyin' on the neighbours?”

“There aren't any.” At least, we had travelled with Peter a long way past meadow and wood with no hint of human habitation until we had reach the gates of Yalbury.

“Well is it any wonder. Who'd live near crumby Peepin' Toms like these!”

“Should we go up?” I was all for the spirit of adventure, but remained, as always I had been, school-yard to present, a follower. I adhered to my dear, and it was a blessed relief and a comfort, because I
was convinced and confident – and correct in doing so – that he would always do and decide what was best for me. Which was best for both, us being always together.

“Nah,” he said now. “Let's leave she. It's enough to have come upon – I'll make a note in the map.”

And he did so, unfurling it on a flat rock and pencilling away while I circled some stones, arranged twigs and got the fire going; set the ponney to heating, very slowly, for tea.

I unfolded our sandwiches and mandarins and ginger beer, and we sat around the small smoking fire to eat. Innocuous sardine, cucumber, piccalilli tastes so much more delicious, nourishing, satisfactory when taken out on the fresh afternoon sunshine – I do suggest you try it, weather pending, if already you have not.

In any case we ate ravenously, could have been the bracing air, might have been the hours of walking, may have been further to the way we were hungry for everything, all the time in those early germinating days.

“Look over yonder,” said Alec, pointing inelegantly – he had a sandwich in each hand - “See them orange berries in t'bushes?”

“Yes?”

“Rose-hips... Not seen 'em so far this Autumn.”

Munching, hopefully, I: “Are they poisonous?” The bushes looked very spiky.

“No! Not a bit of it!” said he heartily. “Let's crop 'em!” Snickering: “Crack 'em open and stuff 'em down the back of Luke's gansey and it'll itch him like the divil! We'd do it at school all the time!”

“That's your objective? Ragging?”

“Well – that and we can make rose-hip wine.”

“Ooo!” And I got to my feet, brushing crumbs and wiping fingers on corduroys.
By the time we had gathered some several dozen rose-hips – and had about as many thorns in our fingers – the water was finally boiling enough for tea, which we took, appreciating the sun slowly sliding westward.

I lay on my back on the soft, thick, mossy grass, with my arms folded behind my head and one foot popped over my bended knee; Alec crawled over army-style on his elbows and plopped himself heavily on my chest to use as a pillow. Drowsy and free of fancy as the lotus eaters.

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” I lulled out, “To build up the fire and remain here while darkness fell all around us... Birds quieting but the night-creatures stirring, just you and I for miles and us watching the stars twinkling?”

Alec, as always, saw holes and poked them playfully: “We'd freeze to absolute stone-ice, is what. If that's your idea of nice.”

“Build up the fire, I did say.”

“Still and all. Doesn't it be right bitter at night even inside the cottage – the pair of us havin' to go about in tandem to get anything done!”

This was ridiculous, but true: oft in the chilly night, such was the cold that even before bed, when we were sat on the battered sofa we'd snaffled from another empty bungalow, that we were obliged to sit closely together for warmth and shivering base survival.

Unbearable and unwise as it was to leave the cocoon, we would stay enfolded in the bedcovers and each other and walk clumsily together like a two-headed beast to lock the door, or log the fire, or swing the kettle, or peek out a window at the rain.

“We'll come another time, maybe summer, set up camp.. Get a tent mebbes although” *yawn * “- Excuse me, if it's warm enough.”

“Mmm,” said I. We dozed.

I suppose this is the kind of scene that you, my patient reader, might picture when I (the author
terriblé) seek to describe a setting of beautiful, blissed-out, bucolic days of heavenly Halcyon, with dashed, dizzy, desirous young lovers skipping about gaily before tumbling down onto the earnest green earth to rest and re-energize and renew their vows through all they can touch upon.

Have I succeeded? I jolly meant to.

So lustily did Alec snore that I slept only nominally, hazily; merely drifted in my mind.

Just as I was thinking of rousing – the sun sinking and drawing all its heat with it – a CRACK of a gunshot rang out, waking Alec with a start and he instinctively clung to me tighter, pressing me down: “Wh-what was that?”

I slid up into sitting, curling the poor sleepy boy closer to my chest. “Someone shooting; I should think one of the other fellows, it's Sunday for everyone after all.”

“But it's near dusk. Visibility'll be right down be now, and the conies all scrambling under. No sod'd do it this time of an evening.”

“Well, maybe who-ever it is is banking on the rabbits presuming likewise – that no-one would be out this late o’ clock and they are thus safe to frolic another while.”

Alec gave me a pitying look. “Only you would ever suggest that a rabbit could 'presume'.”

I doused the fire with cold tea. I stood over Alec and offered him my bent arm like one would to a lady in an armchair. But Alec was no lady, and he was lying on the ground, like a lazy Waterhouse recliner, not perched daintily on the edge of cushion: so I more heaved than helped him to his feet.

“Can we find our way back?” I asked, both of us laden. It seemed much more important that we make haste now, in the dying light; earlier we wandered aimlessly but now we both felt keenly the Call of Home and Hearth.

“'Course we can. Think this here map were only a lark?” Again unfurled. Though it was a bit hard to decipher, and not just because of the dwindling daylight.

Owing to a detour or two – a dead end or three – here and there a toppling, blind, down a hedgerow into an overgrown maze – it was quite black as pitch by the time we emerged, leafily, from the
woods to the path leading to our front door.

Only for us to be met by simply a gang of the others, leaning and slumped, smoking and kicking stones round our two-foot garden wall, all inquiries about our day and injured feelings that we'd gone without them.

“Next time!” lied Alec smoothly, while I edged past everyone to put our things away, kick the fire back to life, light the candles so the windows slowly glowed, swung on the kettle.

“Hai, none of ye were out shootin' this eve, were you? Heard some' at it,” Alec said.

“No, when?”

“Bout an hour back, roundabout.”

“Be well dusk by then!” said Luke. “Only a-one right foolhardy'd go out then – no sunlight, and lamps no good yet.”

“What'd I say to you?” Alec nodded at me.

“Just that,” said I, and I leaned on the door-jambs with my hands behind my back. “But it was certainly something. I heard it too.”

Curiosity roused and little mysteries seized upon.

“Heard what?” said Patsy.

“A noise very like the crack of a gun.”
“Mebbes it were a car back-firin’?” said Andy.

“A car! Round these parts? Sooner be a Zulu warrior firin’ a poison-dart!”

“You’re all daft – it were a rock fallin’ on another’n. We hear ‘em all the live all long day!”

“Yeh we do – and so we’d recognize that sound, you dipper.”

“Oh, eh! Could’ve been two stags crackin’ antlers!”

“It ent matin’ season.”

“So.. they could’ve been rowin’ over summat else. Personal, like.”

“Strewth...”

And further devolving. As you see. Anything out of the ordinary was the focus of great and sporting attention. So naturally it was only a matter of time before I – well, we – that is, Alec and I – our twosome – our novel relationship – became subject to scrutiny. After all, had we not so very cleanly and spectacularly out-run the mill?

Saturday night, the local watering-hole, with neatened hair, clean hands, best gear – all out! Even though there were no women, or very few and they knew it, there was still posing and postulating and drinking contests. Rowdy loud music, but still an atmosphere of geniality and fun and potential.

“...then you agree?” I was saying to my wary seat-mates. “There’s something rather – strange about the place? How it was once so clearly opulent and now severely neglected?”
Finn snorted. “It ain't no mystery. Toffs o' the manor run outta money, as they do, and scarpered. Simple.”

“Scarpered... It's apparent that it was abandoned in something of a hurry – windows half smashed, carp still alive, topiary only just running overgrown..”

Alec appeared with fingers spread around several glasses.

“That's what you surmised, wasn't it Alec? That the to -er, the occupiers will have moved on and just left the place to disrepair.”

“Oh yeh.” He sat opposite me.

“And windows simply smash themselves..?”

“Oh that were probably one of the wrecking-crew – anybody from the quarry, I mean, not us particular – done it myself as a lad, aimin' for the old manor with us golf balls -!”

“How uncouth!” said Luke with shocked affectation, and there was laughter, and I felt uneasy.

“Not anymore I wouldn't though!” Alec objected. “It were prolly some of the young'uns. From farther up north or – well, they’l let any race and creed though those gates!” And a significant look at Kenny, first name, incidentally, Seamus.

“They will, to be sure,” said Kenny without a beat, and he looked at me squarely from under his deep brow, then switched his gaze to Alec.

“You two, for one. Ye come here together? So how the crikey do ye know each other?”

“School!” said Alec.

“College!” I said simultaneously. More laughing, tension slowing back down again (along with my heart-rate) and Luke said still: “Don't get cute, I been wondering too. You'se are right out of the
usual – what's the story? Are ye on the run?"

My mouth was full of beer already; I resisted the urge to shock-chug the lot. As always, my impulse when panicked, afraid, under attack – to seek Alec's calm, impassive brown eyes.

Yet ought I? Would they see – could they realize what lay between us, invisible but strong and unbreakable as steel? The chemistry, the sparks, the blushing affection, especially as they were apparently now tuned in enough to be hunting something 'untoward', 'fishy', 'extraordinary'?

Upshot, I shot Alec a frankly terrified look, blooming idiot that I am, and he responded with a smile of soft sympathy.

“Alright fine – smart-arse. We're not childhood chums.” He coughed, and leaned back in his seat, and pulled thoughtfully on one of his own curls while everyone shifted all the more attent for him to continue.

“Truth bein' – we're both ruined, Hall and I. Happen it weren't no coincidence we met, both so – well, fucked, and runnin’, tha'rt right, separate, but the two of us ended up in the same place, funnily enough.. There were a night-train. Leavin' London for Birmingham..”

Again he stopped; all around were hanging on his every word and didn't he know it. A pause was quite deliberately drawn out while he took a smiling slug of his beer. What was going on in that head of his? I must trust. I did! Alec would never land himself and me, his most beloved, in the soup!

“Hall here,” he said, gesturing towards me carelessly, “for starters – yeh, he got his secrets.”

Never – not – ever! I do – I trust him – but my brow prickled-

“Thought as much,” said Luke, side-eyenig me. “Knowed I could see alla that blue blood 'neath alla that hair -” And he tugged on a forelock; “Ow,” said I, swiping him away.

“What did you do – murder your missus?”

“Sell state secrets?”
“Try an’ pilfer the crown jewels?”

“No! Not he! Not Maurice!!” Red-faced Alec shot to defend me – or, if you didn't know any better, regain control over the fracas.

“Nowt untoward – well, not by you yourself, right?” To me.

“Right!” said I, hoping I sounded convincing. It's so hard to lie in the dark!

“Our boy here,” continued Alec, “Well he were indeed a highly successful desk-jockey beyond down in London. He worked in – er – like a bank, but – erm, investing. Tellin' folk how to spend they money, like.”

My eyebrows raised – not for communicative purposes, but all on their surprised own. Had I detailed my old job to him? Of course I would have done, over whiskey. Had he remembered my ramblings? Of course he would have done, to add to his store of me.

“How to spend they money?” Kenny peered at me incredulously. “Who needs tellin' that? It goes on rent, and food, and booze, and food – and – and that's abou' it.” To general grunts of agreement.

“Well, it's more – er – I -” I faltered, audited.

“Will you show the sense you don't have!” said Alec. “And don't be thick – obviously I mean rich swells, what has more money’n brains, like bored old inheritees or daft young dutchlets on they daddy's shilling!”

“So, old Maurice here is going about his business, good as gold – see? Letters to read, papers to sign, dockets to stamp, sums to add up -”

Leaning back in my seat I crossed my arms and laughed. “You almost make me nostalgic, Alec.”

“Oi! So, that's grand, only, some cove come in with some dealin's, wanting to – er – invest his money, that's dandy, except for the cash he had, he got illegal – right? Conned it out of his workplace.”
“Do you mean embezzlement?” I said, then: “Er – that is to say – Yes! That's what it was, embezzlement.”

“What?”

“Oh.. well, stealing of a kind, just that.”

“And,” expanded Alec, “This fellow were hopin' that Maurice here would buy summat with his ill-got gains – railroad shares, Chinese spices, I don't know – for to hide the hot cash and make himself seem all above board.”

“So what?” said Kenny to me. “You didn't pilfer, so why would you care where the dough come from?”

“I would have got done for laundering, in that case,” said I. “I mean – I very nearly did!”

“Laundering! What now?!” spluttered Finn.

“Shoo, don't you know ennything?” cut in the bloke from Liverpool whose name escapes me. I'll make a note and come back to fill it in here when I remember. Still, he explained, “It's where you steal money and then buy summing fancy, to get rid o' the evidence. Then flog it on elsewhere to get your dough back. Me uncle's still doin' time forrit!”

“Oh right... I see..”

“I don't..”

Alec crossed a leg, amused at the consternation and smoke-screen he'd created. I avoided his eye, because I knew I'd split smiling again. Honest, there's no restraint on him. No wonder he claims he drove his family despairing – I quite believe it!

“But so – how'd – did you do it?” Finn asked me.

“And abscond wi'the takings?” Excitement at the idea.

“No! And no again a'fore you go runnin' away with falsehoods!” Alec squeezed his eyes and rubbed a temple as he searched his imagination.

“Mark thee: old Maurice refused to sell himsel' down the river and handle this swinder's swag. Not a popular one. But he couldnae shop him to the coppers, now could he?”

“Why not?” said Patsy. Yes Alec, why not?

Alec tapped his lip and allowed the pause to impregnate. “Because, this fellow wi'the loot were in government.”

Silence. Well, no – actually, the piano still played merrily in the background, and the other groups still made enough noise to wake the seven sleepers. But our table, thoughtful.

“The gov'ment.” Kenny glanced at me and I kept passive. It was Alec’s yarn!

“That's right.” He crossed his arms.

“Someone importan'?”

“Tha' knows it. Right high up.” Alec pointed at the ceiling.

“Wot, the Prime Minister?” said Patsy.

“No! Idiot! Who'd fuckin' swallow that, for God's sake?!”

“Fine,” laughed Luke, and to me: “So what then? They stitch you up? Threaten thee? Comply or take the looong walk off the short -”
“You read too many adventure stories,” interrupted Alec, with, if you knew him, some irony. “He scarpered, didn't he? Like any sensible fellow would do under the circs. Cobbled his bits together, kissed his mother on the cheek and off like the clappers on the next train out of town.”

Perhaps I ought to have kissed Mother. But dash-it, how was I to know I'd be leaving forever? And anyway, morally-speaking, it's very far from kissing mothers, this mouth, now...

“... to be Birmingham, the train at oh, just after ten, I reckon. Where he met me. Right Maurice?”


“We happened by each other in the restaurant carriage.. I'd spend the last of my brass on the ticket because I wanted to drink, as much as travel. Maybe more! Still the old Midland don't half scalp thee for the basics, don't it? But there I was, drownin' the sorrows, what were money anymore?”

“How come?” said Finn eagerly; everyone inclined expectant.

“Well – Christ, buy me a drink first, will yer? I been gabbing here like a preacher at Easter!”

Clamours, and rustlings in pockets, and climbing over knees and laps and calls to the barmaid; in the midst of the confusion he actually winked at me, to which I returned a small, all-encompassing smile as we accepted our drinks.

“And so, what did land you here, Alec? What were the ruination of you?”

Alec folded his arms, lifted his chin.

“I,” said he, “loved a wild, unsuitable farmer's daughter.”

“...And..?”

“That's – that's it! Ent it apparent? She – unsuitable! Me – here wi'you lot – clearly it didn't work out! Made a fool o' me the length and breadth of the country, she did – and you say 'And'!!”
He sighed and took a draught, prepared the face for the coming tragedy.

“Followed her to London, sod that I am – I were that bothered by she. Took up wi'some City plank she were – I tracked her down only for he himsel' to open the bloody door, and gave me a right dusting, so away I stumbled miserable for a bit – couldn't face the folks back home, the shame I put on the family carryin' on with her in the first place – so I come to t'station and hopped on the next train – and -” He waved his hand in my vague direction, pure nonchalance.

“What would some City gent want wi'some old rough young'wan from the country?” Kenny was sceptical.

“She were famous,” said Alec.


“Not that kind of famous.” Alec squeezed his eyes shut and stuck out his tongue suggestively, to much ribbing and laughing.

“What were her name?” said Patsy.

“... Hortense. And I ain't sayin' her surname – I'm not that kind of a boor. Give the poor love some chance...”

“What were your fella's name – the one what nearly snared thee into trouble?” Finn poked my arm, jostling my drink.

“Lordy!” shouted Alec. “You'se have more questions than the Confession Box! I'll come away from here pure as snow, I tell thee – every sin and secret laid out.”

He pointed at me, but glared at Finn. “And he wonnot tell thee, because then you'd all know the down details – cat right outta the bag. Then what would ye do with that information? Although of course, only a complete scumbag would stoop to blackmail..”
“True that,” said Luke; beside him, I paled rather and willed Alec to look at me – or not, no, maybe just a glance -

“Go on,” said Patsy, nudging Alec’s elbow gently – probably afraid of another tirade. “How’d ye end up here?”

“Well, as I say,” Alec relaxed back against the booth. “Us were on the same train, there weren’t many about – awake – and we got to chattin’.” He smiled at me, and I wondered: How how how can you all not see it?

“... swappin’ woes. So I says: I know! Let’s solve each other’s problems! Why don’t I do-for your – dodgy banker bloke, and you can do-for the bastard what whipped my missus!” (I interject here to add that the repeated verb in this exclamation was accompanied by a stabbing motion. As you may have surmised, had you read too many adventure books yourself!)

To the wide, doubtful eyes, Alec boasted: “The perfect crime!”

“Did... yer do it?” said Patsy.

“Ah musha! Not a bit of it,” said Kenny. He pointed at Alec and said: “That one'd try and stab hisself and miss.”

“Big talk!” cried Alec, spilling beer on his leg.

“Well?!” said Patsy, sending an agitated look my way. I kept mum; after all I knew no more than he!

“Oh, you know,” said Alec. “Seems like a great plan wi’drink taken, and the strangeness o’ the night – but come the morrow and the sore head, the whole endeavour starts lookin’ fair mouldy, and far too much work to be bothered with.”


“So as we was both us at a pair of loose ends, I said that I knew a bloke, a sorter – prolly not unknown to some of ye – Pete Hazelwood.”

A chorus of “Pete?”s and “Oh yeh”s and “Salt o' the earth!”s and suchlike.
Alec lit a cigarette. “Landed in Birmingham we did – dawn – set right out to find Pete, who sorted us' places and – well, here we are.” Extending his arms to encompass all, he blew out his smoke to shouts and clappings.

“Great story!”

“Right well said!”

“Who's next?” Alec smiled around him. “How did the rest of you lot fall so very low so as to end up here?”

A stampede to the bar. Who could have imagined imaginary Alec and I to be the most respectable of our party?! 

“Wait'll we see,” said Alec. “Few more snoots'll loosen their tongues. Race to the bottom round here!”

Hours later and the sounds that surrounded us were the bell clanging (for a second time), voices calling loudly for further last orders and being good-naturedly refused, stool-legs scraped on the ground and knees slapped as legs rose to leave, and rain pelting down on the amber crown-glass windows.

Accordingly, the departing drinkers wound scarves tight and buttoned up coats careful; Patsy was all of a flutter because he'd lost his hat and it really was simply bucketing down outside.

His anxiety was only further compounded when the barmaid rummaged behind the bar and recovered a forgotten lady's hat of dark blue, and cream, and sporting various decorations, rather like a fox-glove in shape, I don't know the name, having no experience in the fairer fashions. Nor, it seemed did a horrified, tearful Patsy.
Thus, as we all ran over the puddles and piled onto the uncovered wagon, Alec kept his nose high and haughty as we rocked and wobbled over the uneven terrain and the rainwater ran down the ribbons and felt flowers onto his shoulders.

“Suits you -!” attempted Finn; Alec cut him dead with a look, deadly under the stylishly sloping brim.

In spite of the rain, which in any case had a refreshingly sobering effect, it was a jolly journey, we all packed and tucked together on the back of the cart, like a troop of soldiers on their weary way home from battle.

Alec and I had the first cottage along the West estate way, so we hopped off before all the others and began making our way through the trees towards home.

Alternately sneezing and swearing, Alec led the way at a half-run and I had to jog to keep up.

“Nearly there! That's if we're goin' the right way... Frigging rain..”

“Alec..” In the cold, I tugged on his sleeve; in the rain I stopped us. He turned, sniffling askance.

“It's – what you said before – I don't think, that blackmail is necessarily the particular forte of the scumbag.”

Surprise, and confusion, and a third: a slight blush. All crossed over his face.

“Oh.. yeh. Well. You're kind to say that but – I cannae deny it -”

“Alec.”

“I'll be 'shamed of that till my dying day. I did come the right bastard, trying to intimidate you. You!”

“But you didn't mean it. I mean – dash-it – I threatened the law on you.”
“You didn't mean it,” he said quickly. “I don't believe for a second you ever. I come at you from all directions, roun' and roun' the estate at Penge, and in yer bloody bedroom window, wires down at thy home i'London.. No wonder you was thrown for a loop. No wonder I had to – sort of – convince you to like me.”

Restlessly he shifted his feet and flapped his long sleeves which hung over his hands; streams of drops flew from the dark soaked cuffs. Oh tut, now that coat would have to be wrung out before being draped on the fire-guard.

“Why wouldn't I like you?” I said, adjusting his lapel to cover his scarf more. “People tend to.”

“Alright! Alright, more. You had to love me!”

I pulled his other lapel, brought his face to mine, said with smiling, heart-thumping urgency: “You got your wish.”

It was difficult to squish back to the cottage; the mud pulled the feet and he clung so, balance be damned. Really it mattered not, there was no especial hurry; we had already reached and surpassed saturation point.
Turkeys were the next order of the day. Well, you can guess why, although you may wonder as to the use of the plural, as I did.

“Turkeys?”

“Aye.”

“Well, what about them?” I flapped the Times, my chair leaned back and my crossed ankles up on the table. (I'm sure you could see that coming, too!)

Alec was sprawled out on his prone in front of the fire with the Illustrated, paying particular attention, in fact, to the illustrations.

“We oughter git some,” said he, “Near grown-up, pen 'em, fatten 'em, and has 'em all ready, fresh in time for Christmas.”

I chuckled at his guileless enthusiasm and expectant mien; I turned a page.

“Well? What does tha' think? I'm lookin' on your professional opinion, here. Consider me a client. At – Halls and Balls.”

“Hill and Hall,” I laughed, swinging my legs down and giving him more of my attention. As I haven't half an ear turned to him at all times anyway, no matter what I'm doing.

“So? Do you think it'd be a good investment? Will I git a good return?” He rolled over onto his side and propped his head on a hand, on an elbow. With his other hand he reached over and squeezed my
Certainly this wasn't akin to my usual business meetings. Still! Did that mean that my approach to the job should be any less professional?

I stroked his curls with my socked foot. “Hmm. Well that all depends on your business plan. Where's the lolly?”

“I just said the plan. Fattenin’!”

“So you'd have to spend money on food too.”

Exasperation. “O' course! Meal and butter – makes 'em good an' tender.”

“And then what? Once they're – fat?”

“Slaughter 'em. Don't worry – I'll do that bit. It's no trouble to me but it ain't pleasant. You can do the next part.”

“Oh? Further to giving financial advice?”

“Advice my foot. I'm doin' all the plannin', here! Once they're all done and bled and emptied and plucked and hung for a while, tha' can truss 'em. Me ma always does it back home, so now mark: my expectations are high.”

“Could've fooled me. Very well then – what does this entail – how does one – truss?”

“It's gettin' the turkeys all neat and tidy and done up presentable for flogging down t'market. You'll need boxes or baskets, straw, holly, cloves mebbes..”

“More expenses,” I said, but smiling, and I rummaged in the side for a pencil, tearing a corner of the Times. “How many baskets? Come to that, how many turkeys?”

Alec's face fell, as, confronted with the brass tacks of his ambition, his confidence faltered. He's not unique, as an investor, in that regard; happens all the time.

“At least labour will be free,” I went on smoothly, over-riding for the moment my own qualms. “I'll do your trussing, no bother. How exactly – shall I..?”
“Like this.” He motioned for my pencil, and I eased off the kitchen chair to join him on the carpet and watch him draw a detailed sketch of – perhaps too detailed, the turkey seemed to have several extra legs – or perhaps they were holly sprigs?

“Ah!” said I, taking the scrap and examining it. “I see. That looks perfectly do-able. Turkeys.” I folded the paper and put it carefully in a pocket. His warm glowing face was pleased, and pleasing.

Waking blearily to the soft, comforting sounds of someone gingerly moving pots and padding about the room in his slippers, I cracked an eye to half-observe the flickering lamp travelling slowly round the cottage as he tended to his chores.

Due to his unhurried gait, the extreme darkness and that particular poignant dead silence of the deepest night, I guessed that it was very especially early in the morning, well before six. Therefore I had plenty of time and no guilt in rolling over, curling the blankets all the more deliciously round me, they pressing me into the mattress; the fireplace I faced had no glow but the residual heat remained in the flagstone.

As I burrowed my face into the pillow once more, I heard dozily the soft clink of the ash-bucket being laid down a few inches from my head. For it was in front of the hearth I lay. At some point, during an icy spell, where frost formed not only on garden grass but on toothbrushes in cups, we had hauled and heaved the mattress on its side, and slid it into the sitting room (come kitchen) to lay directly in front of the fireplace.

There was no sense in having a fire lit, Alec observed, and spending the night shivering away in another room, and land if we could afford two fires a day. So now we went to sleep, most uncouthly and comfortably, on the mattress on the floor with firelight glowing on the bedsheets. Where I was
now, tucked in and eyes closed, and I wanted to stay, even just for a few minutes more.

But was that...? A low knock on the front door, and footsteps over, and creaking of hinges, and voices...? Or was I back dreaming? I rummaged around under the thick blankets to almost-expose an ear.

“...all but done. So it'll be over in the Upper Fen, you know?” said a voice, deep-ish.

“But that's later in the afternoon?” said more musical, familiar tones, Alec. “Still t'usual place this morn?”

“Tis, but don't bother wi'the horses, just go straight to the lodge.”

“Grand so.”

I quivered back under the covers.

“See you in a bit.”

I waited – the door shut gently -

“ALEC!” I swept the blankets aside dramatically and sat up. Alec raised his eyebrows at me and sat at the kitchen table, counting out spoons of porridge from the brown paper bag into a mixing bowl.

“What on earth do you mean, by letting people in at this hour of the morning, practically still night, and them seeing – our – us -” I struggled, my protests.

“T'weren’t but Luke,” said Alec. “He's alright. And you was all covered up, anyroad; he didn't get the pleasure of seeing you in your jammies.” Grinning.

I seized the blankets and wrapped them back around myself. “Yes but... He'll have seen the mattress pulled in front of the fire.. Both of our thermals bunched up on the clothes-horse. It'll seem odd.”
“Yes, that's exactly what he done. He come in, looked around, judged us, and left.”

Chastened, I blew some fringe out of my eyes and accepted, to some degree.

Alec poured hot water onto the porridge, stirred it a few steamy times with a wooden spoon. Then he came over to me, on the mattress, pushed aside the blankets, and slid his hands up under my loose shirt in a way that meant business.

“Mmm..” I closed my eyes as he pulled at the material, his hands travelling up to my head and combing my hair, massaging my scalp, circling sensuously. “Oh Alec... that's so... but we have to leave for work in fifteen minutes, what are you doing...”

“Checking you for ticks.”

“AAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!” I leapt to screaming standing, sending Alec sailing into the breakfast things. The cats – the culprits?! - who had been dozing on the dresser shot underneath it.

Alec shook himself, righted the jug, the cups. “It's alright – only, a lad or two's come back from t'forest covered in 'em, even though the time of year... Don't worry, if there's any I'll find 'em, do fuck for 'em.”

Blankets pulled back around me – for what, protection?! - I slid, whimpering, back onto the mattress, and tried not to think about life.

Which was something one tried similarly to do at the quarry, too. It was easier to consider oneself a robot, the easier to fool the body into thinking it didn't feel pain, or tired-ness, or the embarrassment of being the first or most frequent man to pause and mop the brow.

“Ironic,” I muttered to Alec, one particularly gruelling day when we were obliged to break some several seeming tonnes of huge boulders down to more humane-like football-sized stones. “We came here to be together and free and safe in secret, and yet here are we still suffering the same punishment as we would if we were proud and open and captured and caught!”
I jammed the chisel into a crack in the rock and hauled the sledgehammer into a shattering arc.

“It's as if we are fated to do penance for what we are, even if we manage to avoid prison,” I continued bitterly. It was raining, I need hardly add.

“Oh quit your bitching,” Alec hissed at me, his face red and wet and heated. “Must be you be ever so bloody contrary? Our friends in gaol – do they get to wear they own gear? Do they get to see the sun and trees and fresh well-water ever' day? Can they come and go as they please, nights, Sundays? Do they git strawberry jam on they toast ever' other Saturday?”

He leaned closer, voice lower, faster, and hot in my ear: “Do they git to kiss, and feel, and *fuck* and fumble with they mate, ever' night and not a soul to know or vex 'em?”

His lips were red and spitting on his f's and wet and full and shiny – I coloured myself, my cheeks, with shame, and - “I know, Alec, I know, I do. I'm just venting. I'm most awfully grateful.”

“I know you are – really.” He paused, scraped huge loafs of wet muck off his shovel. “You worrier. But I'm grateful you're careful. I want it to go on forever – you and me I mean, not this...” And he looked helplessly round at all the other lads toiling away, digging, scraping, cracking, carrying, aching. Words failed him, unusual, but his meaning rang clear!

Agitation and vexation seemed to be the general disposition. Though it were we labourers who were slowly wearing away our bodies, pouring sweat, throbbing muscles, hobbling joints, skin rubbed rough; still the most who seemed to be suffering just then was Harold Montmorency, who now had a permanent worried pallor, and who had taken to patrolling the worksite, examining especially the slowly smallening stone-piles. He carried rulers, papers, telescope, measuring tape, maps, all with the air of madness.

It's dashed difficult to ignore someone outright when they call you right clearly, and in front of other people. I mean it's most awfully rude and Harold was, apparently, not a very sensitive man, and
couldn't read hints – or maybe he was too sensitive, and over-compensated with displays of exaggerated optimism and enthusiasm. But, I'm no psycho-analyst, and I don't have time for it these days.

At any rate, those days when he would come over to me to talk, I was more receptive. I mean to say, he was a disaster, hard to stay stony at him.

“I had hoped we'd be a little further along,” he said to me, eyeing the pit nervously. “Oh, not that I'm blaming you fellows, I ought to have started earlier, or employed some dozens more men, I didn't realize. Do you think we'll be half-way finished by Christmas?”

“Rather!” said I. That was a disingenuous rather. A rather of deceit.

Another time, he stood in a clearing, anxiously poring over a large sheet of – why it almost looked like parchment. Curiosity called, so when he beckoned me over I came agreeably.

“If something is so very old,” said he, “Does it become 'more' or 'less' strong and binding? Less so, I should think? Because, circumstances change, relevancy waives, it must do."

Instead of offering an immediate answer to this confluster, I looked over his arm at the document he held open with two hands. I'd thought it was a map, but it was clearly some kind of official paper, cramful with terms and conditions – in the top left-hand corner, in that deliberately artful decorative text, it said *This Indenture* with many fancy flourishes of calligraphy and – oh my! - some kind of family crest.

I read on.

“This Indenture made on the twenty-eighth day of January, One Thousand Eight Hundred and Forty-Three in the presence of an Act of the ninth and tenth year of Her Majesty Queen Victoria to facilitate and encourage the granting of leases in this United Kingdom, BETWEEN The Right Honourable Wilks Osborne-Grimsby-Brooke Esq. and his wife Meredith Osborne-Grimsby-Brooke, both of Philipstown, Dashwood, Norfolk – witnesseth that the said deemers do demise unto the SAID Kenneth Montmorency, his Executers, Administrators, and Assigns, the lands of the Yarbury Estate, Shropshire, numbering some fifteen hundred acres…”

I paused, and frowned. Though I didn't want to seem negative so I relaxed my brows and said sympathetically, “You don't own the estate?”
“Oh! Well, I – I,” he spluttered. “I do – practically. I mean, it's been in the works since my grandfather – Kenneth here – the repayments are still being made religiously – a-almost. I mean it's a done thing. Really. All but ours!” An attempt at the airy.

I just waited.

“My family, my father, his father – ah – we've managed the grounds for generations. And we've been slowly buying it, yes, it's – Montmorency land by right! We've gone to our graves for this place – well not I, but I will do and my son too!”

He was growing redder and sweatier and more excited with each expression, in a not-unfamiliar way.

“Is it our fault that the titleholders went bankrupt? Would it not be better – more progressive, worthwhile, forward-thinking to actually use the land gainful? Hectares going to rack and ruin for God knows how long!”

“You're doing the right thing,” I said. Well I wasn't about to argue, the fellow was clearly quite dippy.

“Mm.. Well, it's just that: these Osborne-Grimsby-Brookes, they generally leave us to it, even when they lived here, you know, it was all, 'Carry on!' Old fellow was no bother. Except, you see, I do believe that the old codger's croaked it, as it were, and the little trickles onto the next troublesome generation – well – ours in fact..

“And then I go and find this! Jammed inside the grandfather clock at my parents' place in Nottingham..”

Evidently this will, or what have you, was the cause of his concern – indeed of our current conversation.

“I mean.. I'm sure it's nothing, my wife says that it can't possibly hold water after all this time and not to worry, but I only read out the gist of it to her down the phone, she didn't get to see the signatures – the seal – see?”

I took the sheet and read some more.
“... Heirs and Assigns do retain all Royalties and Franchises and the rights to all Game, Wild Fowl, and Fish, and all privileges of Hunting, Hawking, Fishing, Coursing, Shooting, and Fowling on Said Premises with free Liberty of Ingress and Regress to the Deed Holders and Affiliates."

I paused; I couldn't say for certain that Alec hadn't indulged in each and every one of those privileges in the past twenty-four hours alone, and he was certainly no Osborne, Grimsby nor Brooke. Oh... but this:

“.. And thus, the over-signed doth bequeath to the leaser the lands of Yarbury Estate, excepting all Timber, Trees, Saplings, and underwoods, and also retaining all Mines, Minerals and Quarries, now found or hereafter to be found on the Premises, remains the remit of the Titlers, and additionally they retain authority over any production, materials used, and the right to work, dig pits, manage, dispose of, or carry off, save, or produce thereof subsequent manufacture."

“Ah,” I said. Risked a look into Harold's face, his frozen, ridiculous smile.

“So, you bent the rules a little. Who wouldn't? Better that than let the place rot!” I said.

“Yes – exactly. Just what Cassie was saying!”

“I mean to say – what's the harm? As long as there are no surprise audits!” And we both laughed, possibly deliberately forgetting or disregarding the 'full power of Ingress and Regress' that could apparently be exercised at any time. But after sixty odd years – surely it had lost its influence?

“But still,” as Harold said. “One just can't trust the eccentric landed gentry.”

“No indeed,” I said disloyally. Though did I owe any allegiance to a memory?
“No, of course you don't,” said Alec firmly, later, as we sat around on heaps of clay for a smoking break. A fire had been lit in our midst, for though it was only mid-afternoon, it was dark with overcast skies and cold with the promise of rain.

We most probably all resembled heaps of clay ourselves, all wrapped up in mud-splattered layers of grey, brown, black clothes. A far from Tea at the Ritz I'll confide! Though I've only ever had early lunch there, non-peer I be.

This I preferred however. Softly rustling trees, gaining fire, a tin of toffee being passed around the circle from fellow to fellow, Alec and I being obliged to squash up on the same dirt pile due to numbers... It was another whole twenty minutes until we had to arm ourselves with our shovels again. Thus fine.

“In fact,” Alec added, “I don't approve of you helpin' your pal Monty at all! He's a proper nob-end!”

“I'm not helping him – nor palling! As I've told you maybe fifty times already. Simply talking, he was showing me – oh, but if you don't want to know..”

“Oh no! Tell me. Everything! He's in some sort of bother, you were saying..?!” Alec was peering eager, and one or two of the other fellows nearly tittered.

“No! Well – he only thinks the worst. That the owners of Yarbury – the Osborne, Gro – oh, just the Brookes will do – that they'll come calling round and causing chaos.”

“Don't he own the place?” said Mardy in surprise.

“Evidently not,” I said. “His family has been slowly purchasing the place for generations.”

A thoughtful silence.

“Poor prick!” said Luke.

“Poor nothin'!” said Alec scathingly. “Still struttin' round like cock o' the walk, innee? With his book-learnin' and fancy pants and silly moustache, givin' orders wi'the smile o' the devil – oh I've
seen his type, time and again!”

I very deliberately didn't think of this type. Though he used to be all I thought of.

Now I thought of Alec, his eyes flashing and fingers blue with cold and his words impassioned.

“'I s'pose us're paid to take orders,” said Patsy, which was jolly brave, to invite Alec's glare.

“You're paid to work,” said Finn, “Same as us all.”

“I don't mind,” said Patsy keenly. He wasn't often the focus. “It's more a week than I ever had -” and when he said, exclaimed with enthusiasm, the amount he was so delighted to earn, his winning wage, prideful pay – there was a shifty silence.

Well. You know. It just doesn't do to talk about money. One's own, that of others, an excessive supply, a lack. It just isn't seemly, it's not good English to discuss it. You may note yourself how I dance around the topic of hard figures in these memoirs, and I am – once was – a professional!

However...

“Pats...” said Mardy awkwardly. “That's abou'... half what we're makin' in the week. Right lads?”

Uncomfortably, everyone nodded.

“How come..?”

“Oh,” said Patsy. “Ah – I don't mind. Mr. Lee said it were on account o' my age, seventeen only since July, that's all, and I were lucky he took me on at all!”

“But – you do just as much liftin' and shiftin' as the rest of we!” protested Alec.

Patsy shrugged helplessly, smiling. Maybe he was regretting his disclosure; he was regressing behind his scarf.
Beside me, I could feel Alec’s stance – his shoulders or muscles or somesuch – that is to say, he made no verbalage but I just knew that he was about to speak, and I quickly knocked his knee with mine, saying “Maybe not quite now” because I doubted Patsy would survive the true torrent of Alec’s righteous ire, when it happened to bubble to the surface. I could barely!

He shot me a small, frustrated squeeze of his mouth and held his peace, pulling his legs up Indian-style so one knee poked over my lap. Crossing his arms too he smoked grumpily and – I know – stewed.

Some days later the simmering continued. O hindsight! This is easy – recounting all sorts of events and interactions – good or bad – from the cozy security of the Present, the worn red armchair, scuffed and rattley writing desk, green drapes, wretchedly sticky type-writer.. Reassuring smell of his cup of cocoa wafting behind me and his cap and used cartridges and work receipts cluttering my workspace.

But let's jump back to the past. I'll fix all this later. I don't want to spoil!

It was morning. Sunday, so extra good! We were feeling a little leery from the night before; there had been cheap wine, only the one bottle that we shared, but all the same it ran loose on us, and somehow many several cups and glasses had gotten involved, along with a roasting tin that had possibly been used in an attempt to make Charlotte. Left her over the log, though, poor old egg.

Alec was doing the pots in a tin basin on the side, muttering about how much easier it would be with soap and hot water – we'd slept in and let the fire go out.

“I'll fetch more at the well, shall I?” I called in the back door. “Water, I mean, not fire..” No reply but none necessary, practically-wise. Now in terms of relations..

“Only eight today,” I came in the door, cradling the eggs I had just collected from the make-shift hutch in the cobbled-together back yard. “I'd hoped there'd be ten, but two of the hens must be on strike.. Ha, ha.. As it is, these are promised to Clarke's in the village, you know for that tonic we got last week. Twenty four eggs we agreed and this'll be the lot – Oh, dear..”
Alec turned to see me standing at the old dresser where we kept cutlery, cleaning things, various bits of drapery; as the eggs were for the shop I had to clean them, and the drawer where we kept cloths fell apart in my hand.

“Dear me. This old place! Falling apart!” I laughed.

Alec threw the scrubbing-brush forcefully into the cold murky dishwater: “Is it now. And I suppose you'd find things much better off at your old place in London?”

“No,” I said, startled.

So much for Arcadia. This was more – oh, say – Trojan, a surprise attack, for I never saw it coming! If Alec was cloudy I assumed it was due to the weather, or the work – the twin certainties of desolation.

“No,” I said again, for emphasis. “Such a notion! You -”

“Or up at Penge?” Alec began noisily lining clean cups along the shelf above the side. “There's a place where you wouldnae know no hardship! Ever'thing catered for!”

“Now you know that's not true,” I said, heart thumping. What on earth had just happened? How had the world turned on its axis? Where was my sweet loving boy and who was this irascible imposter?

But of course it was Alec – full, free, perfectly rounded and human, with the entire spectrum of emotions and the lack of inhibitions to conceal them. It was for me to form around them, around him.

“What's the matter?” I said.

He turned from the counter to look at me, roving his eyes over my mud- and frost-covered boots, the broken drawer-front in one hand and chicken-shit covered eggs in the other. I gave a sniffle; it was cold season. A particularly long season, that year.

Alec passed a hand over his face and fingers up through his curls, grabbing a few; he snatched up his coat from the peg. ‘I'm goin' out.”
“What?” I said, panicked. I looked around for a place to put the eggs as he yanked on his coat and planted his feet into his boots.

“Where are you going? What -” I approached him, scarcely knowing whether I ought.

“Just – out – for a bit -” Agitatedly he seized his gun from amongst the brooms and mops and hiking-sticks in the corner.

“Well, of course if you want to, of course you must,” I said, hating the catch that could almost be heard in my throat; I managed to talk through it.

I bit a nail as Alec buttoned his coat and swept his ridiculous hat onto his head. It was new – well, different: after Alec returned the bonnet to the pub, he let Patsy keep his own cap and, apropos of nothing, the Joxter gave his own hat to Alec, a rather wide-brimmed baroque affair with rich green material, and a long point that was crushed to the side.

Alec had taken an awful (very awful) shine to it, even though he was well aware of how ludicrous he looked because several people had told him. At any rate, upon gifting, the Joxter had disappeared into the ether and so there was no chance of him hailing it back.

“Will you be back?” I asked the question before I considered the possibility that I wouldn't like the answer.

“Course I'll be back. For tea. I just -” And he sighed, turned and took the door-knob.

“Wait, Alec!”

He turned back and I hurried over to hand him his gloves: “It is beastly cold out.”

He looked into my eyes, his own bigger for some reason, and wordlessly he took the gloves, glancing down at my outstretched hand as he did so. A pained look crossed his face, but before I could say something – anything – to relieve the situation, to alter his mood – he departed and shut the door smartly. I was left standing, staring at it.

At least I wasn't huddled crying in a strange, unfamiliar hotel bed in London, crushed under the
weight of life and loneliness. No. That's ancient history now.

I didn’t really think he’d go off and leave altogether just like that. I had faith. Alright, alright – maybe a little rattle – oh, to be truthful I was scared stiff that he’d just gotten fed up and jumped ship – after all, he was young and dynamic and enterprising, and it was hardly any picnic carting stones around beside me all day!

If this was – as all likelihood suggested – just a snit, if he merely needed some time to brood, and, having done so, he would indeed be back for tea and all would be jolly once again – well, then the rub is – was – what’s brought this on? What had I done? Well I done lots of things. I gripe and moan and make mistakes, I bore, I embarrass, I bumble. But what particularly?

No answers from Alec, as he strode off into the woods. I was at a loss. But familiar territory to me, and one rallies.

I cleaned the eggs, and wedged the drawer back into the dresser. I dried the dishes Alec had abandoned, then went out the back garden to feed the – uuuugh.

Turkeys. Yes, that plan had gone ahead, some weeks before – in fact they were, so I was told, ripe for the culling any day now. They had all ten of them been spoken for; it only took a bit of mentioning round the village.

Malevolent, large, hideous and dangerous, as if they recognized us as captors and were deliberately un-co-operative – knocking over water dishes, pecking viciously, rushing me as I approached the trough – and the gobbling.

Best thing I can say about those beasts is that they strengthened my appreciation for the chickens. With chickens, one knows where one stands: a good five and a half above them! And sometimes when you picked them up they fell asleep.

No fear of that with the turkeys!

By which I mean plenty of fear. But Alec wasn't around, so I stood at the fence – the bastards raced over to me anyway – and I flung the butter, bread and oats haphazardly towards their trough.

With the birds as the only company – even the cats had gone out – there wasn't a lot of point in
hanging around the cold and quiet cottage, so I pulled on another jumper, overcoat, scarf, socks, cap. As I was about to leave I remembered my gloves and I admit I panged. I banged the door firm, leaving the key in in the flowerpot.

Consciously I went in the opposite direction to Alec, as I thought it might not be prudent to run into him while he was having some thinking time. And I wondered just how great a shot he was. On top of everything else, I could have done without my head being blown clean off my shoulders.

East bound, I passed through a small patch of forest to emerge into the right-hand main drive up to the Manor. Once upon a time it must have been awfully impressive, one could picture it of one were gifted with visual imagination – the sycamores and chestnuts and beeches and oaks which lined the roadway must have been hundreds of years old: they soared into the sky either side of the approacher and met each other yards high to form an intimate but still rather intimidating canopy.

As I walked onward, the trees to my left thinned out and I could see a wide expanse of meadow – grass, yes, but thistles, dock leaves, ragworth, palms – not the finest harvest.

In the middle was – of course – the cracked and moss-covered fountain. Must have been ten feet in diameter, and the water spout thrusting from the centre was – beneath the lichen – ornate and carefully carved to communicate most deliberately to the observer the message: here be riches.

Well Yarbury! Well Osbornes! Nevermore!

Ice cracked under my feet as I pressed on the upward slope; it really wasn't the weather for outdoors but I didn't fancy the cottage at this point, and walking and exploring was something to do, even if it isn't quite as sporting on one's own.

As it was, it was a wet-footed, panting figure that broke over the hill to the front gardens. Just how long was the drive, I wondered? Of course it would be the case that the labouring folk would be housed far away from the mansion, so as to not offend the Lords and Ladies with their existence. (There's some 'Alec' for you, just in case you were missing him!)

Dark, vast, and full of foreboding, Yarbury House loomed into view, like something out of Poe. Now, I'm not one for the heebies nor the jeebies, but even I slowed my walk down to a tentative tiptoe. Respect, maybe? There was a tomb-like atmosphere.

I heard voices. A small flag-stone footpath lined with hawthorns and furze led up towards the side of
the manor and I followed it, carefully not to slip on the shiny.

It led right up to the side-enterence of the house, what looked like a large conservatory – windows broken of course, and grey lace curtains fluttering out eerily.

Sat around the worn steps leading up to the French windows were a bunch of the lads, laughing and leaning in the same way they do everywhere: the doorway of the pub, shop, neighbours' houses, church, like secondary characters in a play.

“Well, would you look who it isn't,” said Luke as I came towards them, hands in pockets. “Where you been all morning, Philly Fogg?”

I took out my smokes and tapped one on the box. “Circumnavigating the globe, of course.” Popped it into my mouth.

Luke sniggered and one or two others may have too but the general reaction was perplexity.

“Where's your other half?” said Mardy, thinking he was being funny.

“Oh – Alec?” There was scant point in playing ignorant. “He's off shooting.” I passed around the cigs.

“Is he now. And didn't he take you wi'him?”

“We're not joined at the hip, you know.” I stuck my nose in the air – that felt good.

I gestured my cigarette at the porch-way: “What are we looking at?”

Finn heaved himself off a crumbling pillar flanking the steps. “We was thinkin' on goin' in, just have a look around.. It ent locked or nothin'..”

“So what's there to think about?” I spoke out my smoke.
“Well,” said Finn, looking into the dark interior of the crooked doors. “It is abandoned, innit? We've all just been presumin' that there's no-one here.”

“Of course there isn't,” I decided, though I had no idea that there wasn't some Havisham-like creature lurking within the shadowy depths of the dwelling. I strode up the first couple of steps, taking the others perhaps somewhat aback. “Jolly good!”

“Not so ruddy fast!!” Finn hared past me, the others in hot pursuit, scapping and scrambling now that the initial push had been performed. Like children. Like Lost Boys. I flicked some ash and trailed after them.

As one might have suspected – the Flight of the Earls had been very certain and thorough – but recent, and disorganized and leaving things behind. I could relate.

As such, the house was still groaning with heavy, ornately carved and covered furniture, abundant dampish drapes, floors parquet of course, and thick, intricately detailed wallpaper that flattened under the gentle fingertip.

We went into a library, still with an impressive collection – impressive in terms of quantity, if not quality – I recall a worn spine or two, loose threads, peeling labels. Also they had simply paragraphs of notes scribbled in the margins!

That'll further decrease their worth. I recall the advice of an auctioneer on the subject, whom I had been obliged to consult because of one dear deaf old client at the Firm who wanted to invest his savings in books, artefacts and various objects of art and so on, so that he would have more money to bequeath to his beloving children.

The belovings fled to me in strangled panic, saying this was no joke or experiment! The man was eighty-seven! I persuaded him to tea. Even though I can't take credit for what transpired to be an astute investment – it'll be gold dust soon enough, wait and see.

Art and items fanciful – I knew nothing about them really, aside from monetary value (and even my
insider knowledge there has slipped; I only catch the odd Financial Times.)

And yet I, and all the other fellows, none of us trained, expert, sensitive to the aesthetic – we were transfixed by the mere, pure, uneducated exposure to the Yarbury Collection.

Paintings innumerable – some huge, some miniature – and inkings, sketches, some covered in drapes that no-one was brave enough to sweep aside. Persian rugs, shelves of porcelain, crossed swords on the wall, some frankly alarming taxidermy.

“What's this?” said Patsy, pointing at a blue and white vase-bowl-pot-like hybrid sitting primly on a small carved display table.

“I don't know,” I said. “A dainty.”

“What's this?” said Mardy, holding something in front of me.

“An elephant tusk,” I said.

“And this?”

“Looks like its foot.”

“Yuck!!”

Finn grabbed my fore-arm and pointed at the sullen portrait over the marble fireplace: “Who's that?”

“I don't know! Look – I'm just as awe-struck as you all! I'm no bloody social historian.”

“But you're better at guessin' than we.”

In the drawing-room I leafed through photo-albums while the others tried on silk top-hats, a pith-
helmet, Saharan sun-hats and heavy military jackets from the front room hat-stand.

In the kitchen various tins and packets were pointed at, shaken and exclaimed over, and left back were they were.

In the front entrance-way we climbed the wide marble staircase, sticky and soft with dust, under the Damocles-like chandelier swinging softly and heavily from the ceiling.

What a view! Out the small dormer windows of the top-floor attic. We'd wandered in an and out of master, family and guest bedrooms; now we equally examined the servants' quarters.

I wanted my own little servant. Vast rolling hills and meadows and tree-tops and mysterious out-buildings and stone-walls met us as we rested elbows on sills. Where was he exactly?

Out there somewhere, wandering about. I couldn't help but smile, just at the warming thought of him.

Back downstairs, enthusiasm was re-invigorated by the discovery of the rec room, which was in a Godawful mess but that didn't matter; from the confusion on the carpet came tennis racquets, golf clubs, rifles (unloaded), shuttlecocks, cricket bats, even old clay pigeons in a wooden box.

“Looka this,” said Andy, holding up a wooden mallet. “We could play croquet! Are there any balls?”

“Croquet is for people with no balls,” said Finn. “Ponces.”


“You'd need the horses for that.” I was sitting on the billiard table, legs crossed and leaning back against the wall.

“How'se about some golfin' then,” said Mardy. “I always wanted to give it a go.”

“Grass is too long! Unless you want to mow it.” I considered. “For which you'd again need the
horses. And I doubt any of them would be willing to work pulling trailers or croppers on their day off.”

“D'you have to suck the sport out of ever'thing?” grumbled Finn, looking frustrated.

“Well, you could try over in the Dead Copse of course – nothing grows there only weeds between stones. Look I'm just trying to be helpful, if you want to pick out something you could actually utilize, like – like -” I rocked forward off the table and floor-planted; I'd spotted something amongst the scattered equipment and reached down to extract it.

“Ooo! 'Ey! Ent that right nice!” Luke came over and examined it carefully: it was an archery bow and in surprisingly good nick. I held it in the connect stance and practised twanging the string back to test the tension.

“Just like Robin Hood!” said Patsy. I dropped my arms and handed the bow to him.

Thus, laden with racquets, bats, lacrosse sticks, fencing swords, mallets, bows and any number of miscellany we went back outside to the light mist, for to put the recreation to the test.

What archery requires, naturally, is a target. No sense in sending an arrow through a window and then claiming that it was exactly that which you were aiming at all along! Not that I've done that!

Lately!

Patsy pivoted, looking for something to aim at. We were dotted around – this is depressing – on what must have been once an elegantly sloping lawn, surrounded by flowerbeds, with more stone steps in the middle leading down to a large, ivy-tangled wooden arch and the orchard beyond.

Now we kicked aside nettles and flung our equipment onto the scraggy Winter grass.

“What'll I aim for?” Patsy's confidence lagged behind his youthful enthusiasm. Perhaps someone was going to suggest some far-off knot in a distant tree.

But people are kinder than you take them for, in general, I've found. It's worth remembering.

“Look over yonder,” said Finn, pointing. “See the greenhouse? One pane of window left in t'roof –
see if you can get for it.”

Patsy protested: “It's miles away!”

“No it ent. A few yards, only.”

Patsy looked most sceptical, but still he raised the bow, slotted the arrow carefully, stood his ground, squinted an eye – the works.

Fingers trembled and twitched and got ready to release – when swooooooping down from a tree came a blue, chaotic, sweeping and screeching form, right in the firing line.

“Aiiiiiiii!” wailed Patsy, and swung away instinctively – everyone ducked – and he fired the arrow at a wild, obtuse angle, towards the hanging-garden where it hit a mossy, grey, frolicking, winged cherub, tip-toed on a plinth and sending it crashing to pieces on the flagstones below.

Horrified and wide-eyed, staring at the shards, Patsy panted, still holding the shaking bow aloft.

“Well, you hit something,” said Luke, patting his shoulder. Patsy was still frozen, so Luke slowly pushed the bow down. And eased away the arrows from beside Patsy's boots.

Attention turned to the interloper, walking and hopping and pecking and showing interest.

“The fuck is that thing,” said Finn.


“Shoot it, Pats!” said Mardy cheerfully. “Moving target – that'll test your mettle!”

“No – don't,” said Luke quickly, though Patsy's scandalized expression indicated that he hadn't the slightest intention of it.
Luke said, “Queer gentle-folk keep ’em as pets like. Reckon he got left behind – it ent right fair to do for him, any more’n a dog.”

“I’d rather a dog roun’ the place, much. Aarrghh!! It's comin' over! What's it want?!’” Andy danced behind Patsy.

“Food, proly.. I worked a place what kept ’em,” said Luke knowledgeably, though even he was edging around the curious approaching bird. “Made the place look right fancy at parties and they'd throw ’em the odd crumpet.”

“Well I’ve nowt wi’mee.”

“I’ve barley sugar.”

“That’d proly choke it.”

“Barley sugar? Hay, give me some!”

Squabbling continued like so, reminding me – my gaze fell on the peacock, and I remembered, and when I did I realized, I thought: Yes, I really ought.

As the lads continued their tomfooling, I went back up the steps into the house, through the dusty sitting-room and past the banquet-hall, the ornate staircase, the hidden wall-doors – now swinging brazenly open – to return to the games-room.

If I could find – yes. Some kicking around and rummaging had me unearthing a pair of cricketing shin-guards. Rather off-white and grass-stained by this stage in their career but what did that matter? Were they sturdy? Straps in working? Well then. Right. Off I go.

Off I went; with the pads tucked under my arm I re-traced my steps back to our cottage and went directly to the clothes-chest where I dug out and donned the oldest, worsnest, most rough and ready gear I could find.

Sat on the arm-rest of the sofa, I pulled on the shin-guards and strapped them securely; standing up I
could say they were good and long, came well up mid-thigh.

On reflection it occurred to me that I ought to have foraged further into the sports paraphernalia for a box, but well, it would take the brave opportunist to launch an attack in that intimate an area, surely, especially if I was armed?

Just in case I grabbed a broom from the corner for extra protection. I tested, swinging it round like a baton. Finally I went to the top of the rickety dresser and took down a big Bisto tin; ostensibly full of gravy powder but in actually it was where we hid the spare whiskey from the drinky neighbours. This was certainly an appropriate circumstance to break into the auxiliary alcohol, a one-off one, at least, I hoped.

I took a draught and before my nerves deserted me, I went out the back door and over to the turkeys' paddock.

With my elbows resting on the top wooden beam of the fence, I regarded them carefully. Beadily they returned my gaze, and warily too, perhaps suspecting.

Well! No sense engaging in a battle of wits with a clutch of turkeys! What if one was to lose? I took another swift one, replaced the cork in the naggin, and swung open the gate.

I gathered my tools, rope, cloth sacks, old bedsheets, tin buckets, the stump we used to chop wood and the axe we used too..

Here I shall draw the veil of discretion over proceedings. I don't want to write it, and you don't want to read it. Suffice to say that what transpired was a highly productive, energetic, life-altering two hours.
Mmm.. Very, very dark and soft and relaxed. And the row-boat rocking so gently. Faster now.. Hold on, not so gentle..

Oh! Sudden, bright brown eyes: I was – in the armchair, flat-out with feet resting in front of the fire, being shaken awake and peered at.

“Maurice?” He had finished shaking but remained crouching with his hands on my arm.

Still wearing his ridiculous hat and blue scarf, and his face was dirt-smudged and a little concerned. I smiled lazily, then pulled myself up into proper sitting with a groan.

“Alec, darling..” I yawned and rubbed my eyes with the hand-heels, leaving my elbows on my knees. Alec rocked backward a bit but kept a hand lightly on my bicep.

“God, I only sat down to take the weight off my feet, was I actually asleep?”

“Dead to the world,” said he, and watched as I shook my head and heaved myself very stiffly to my feet.

“Are you home long? Let me put the kettle on.”

“Just in,” he said and slowly he got up to watch me more, hands hanging. He was in a rather reserved sort of a mood, I could certainly see that, but my arms throbbed and my head pounded so that I decided I'd firstly make tea, and then tend.

Ah! That should be steaming in a matter of minutes. I turned to Alec, wiping my hands on a tea-towel. “How was shooting?”

“Oh.. not so good.”

“Aah. Nothing much hopping about to speak of? It's probably the cold, they're hibernating or frozen.”

Alec said, “I forgot to bring cartridges.”
“Oh what rotten luck!” I patted his back and added encouragingly, “Still! Call today a scouting mission. You can always go again.” For some reason he looked agonized, and followed me with his eyes as I bent down and began removing hot ashes from the grate with the little shovel, dumping them safely in the bucket of wet sand.

“What's here?” said Alec, coming over to the fireplace and nudging one of the leg-guards with his foot. I’d cleaned them – along with everything else – quite painstakingly and they were drying.

“Ah! Yes – hang on, are they almost dry? Yes, just found them up at the house this afternoon, they were with a lot of other sports stuff, quite abandoned – shame, really, what the Mission couldn't do with that lot!”

“The house? Yarbury?”

“Yes, yes,” I said, holding out my arms and motioning him to relax his shoulders so I could slip off his jacket. He did so, and I continued: “I was just up that way having a stroll and happened by some of the other fellows. They didn't exactly seem strangers to the place – the exterior anyway – happen it might be where they generally go off to on a Sunday!”

“And – what? You were playin' cricket?” He watched me position his coat on a chair so the damp hem was nearest the fire.

“Oh dear me, no! Well some of the others might've – though it's such a fiddly game really, all that blasted setting up and funny rules – wouldn't you be better off with a game of rounders? No, I borrowed these for protection when I – er -” And I looked towards the back door.

Alec knitted his brows; he's always doing something creative with them. He went outside, though he was by now coat-less and approached the now conspicuously empty and silent little paddock.

I came up behind him, bundling a cardigan; he was unresistant to my attentions whereas normally he’d fuss.

“Where are they?” His eyes darted about, as if you could possibly miss the great brutes, were they still present and unfragmented!
“In the shed,” I pointed - “On the counter top. Their earthly remains anyway; their souls I suppose have gone on to their heavenly reward.”

Slowly he turned to me. “You done ’em?”

“Yes.”

“All of ’em? Today?”

“Well – yes. Only took a couple of hours.” I shuffled a bit in the beastly frost. “It was no trouble really,” I lied.

“But – but – You needn't! I were gonna do it!”

“Oh, I know -”

“I were! I were comin' home – course I were!”

“Of course you were!” I took his shoulder and took in his disgruntled face. “I know that. It's merely – well, it needed doing, and I happened to be home while you were out, and I fancied I was equal to the task too.”

He stared.

“Honestly I – I'm not trying to show you up, or play the hero – it's simply – simply this: I thought, well now, here's a chore that needs doing, and if I do it, it saves Alec the bother. I'm all for making your life easier, my dear.”

Drowsiness, or dreaminess stole over his features and he reached for my hand – I yanked it out of my pocket to make it accessible.

Holding my hand, he led us back into the bright kitchen, the fire throwing its light and several lamps dotted around on shelves and mantles and windows and upright stacks of books.

So it might have been the heat on Alec’s cheeks that glowed when he said, “Sorry I chucked a wobbly this morning.”
“Oh – hardly.”

“No – really. I were a right cow to you and you did nowt to call for it.”

“It's alright.” Though inwardly I was relieved.

“No, it ent.” He sighed and circled round the couch, looking no less disquieted than he did in the morning, although he was much warmer now.

“This is me, and it's awful, I always used to do this, at home like. I'd get the 'ump over summat, bang out the door and go off by mysel' and sulk all day. I'd hope but – me Ma would hardly notice! On account of all the others clatterin' about, Fred, my sisters. I'd do it at work too, even.. Spent half me life at Penge just loafin' about...”

I could believe that. I remembered how we kept running into each other. How he was everywhere.

“But I forgot about you,” said Alec, meeting my eyes. “Or rather – I put you out of my mind, deliberate. Very self-thinkin’ o’ me – I can't do that anymore, I can't just get up and leave, do what ever I please, when I get bratty. I ought to do right by you foremost. I want to! I mean – I were never before part of a twosome. Proper, like.”

My dear.

“Alec, so you got a little kittenish. You needn't pretend with me, I don't mind: it's quite alright. Well, it's not alright that you're upset of course!” I swept an arm. “Why not tell me what's the matter? Perhaps I can help.”

It was exactly the right thing to say. All the tension melted out of his posture and his gladdened expression shone like a beacon. He came forward in long strides, arms outstretched until he wrapped them fast about my neck, and I circled mine around his torso. That infernal hat poked me in the face and I removed it from his head and tossed it on the side.

“You're summat to come home to, Maurice,” sighed Alec. I rocked him in our standing. I recognize a crisis in confidence when I see one.
“Why not have some tea. I dare-say you're famished, you forgot your tuck-box this morning.”

He drew back. “I shouldn't've been gone s'long. I almost got lost.”

“Oh, I hate to hear that!” I squeezed his shoulders. “What about your map?”

“Forgot that too. I managed grand though. Retraced my own steps.”

“Jolly clever.” I moved towards the kitchen to fetch out a spoon. “Have a seat?”

On the sofa Alec sat lightly, whereas usually he would have done so heavily. He tugged off his boots.

“Here you are.” I handed him the sickly sweet steaming bowl on a cloth so he wouldn't burn his hands. He reached eagerly.

“What's this?” he laughed, though he saw.

“Bread and butter pudding,” said I, sitting beside him, already fed. (Turkey husbandry certainly works up the appetite.)

“Pudding first?”

“Pudding only,” I said, running a tired hand through my hair. “It's either-or these days, for you and I, I'm afraid! And I guessed what you'd choose, given the choice.”

“Mmm,” said he in reply. “This custard is lovely.” He swallowed his next hot spoonful. “Tastes so familiar – hay – you used real eggs?”

“Real? I used the eggs, yes. Oh, they'll lay more tomorrow.”
“So you made it from scratch? You never!”

“I did, got the recipe from a magazine that was lining the inside of the dresser drawers... Remnant of the house-wife who must have lived here before, God love her.”

Alec looked down at his bowl, a smile playing. “There's Birds int' larder, you know.”

“Birds?”

“Custard dust.”

“Is there really. Fancy that. And here I am whipping eggs like a peasant.”

“Ha!”

I made the tea and fetched cups; Alec helped himself to seconds. I watched him, waited until he had a good heartening mouthful of eggy bread and currants.

“Alec, are you very unhappy?” I'd vowed, earlier, walking along in the woods, to afford to him cleanly and clearly the opportunity to leave if he wanted to, to call it quits, and shake hands and part ways, with great assurances that he was under no obligation to me, I'd be just fine on my own. When in truth, the first thing I'd do upon losing him would be to crawl off somewhere and die!

Was he of a similar mindset? For at my question, at the mention of the word 'unhappy', his eyes bulged, and his full cheeks, and he rocked forward, shaking his head,

“Oh – no. No! Not at all -” he garbled through the crumbs in his throat.

“I were afraid I'd caused some awful quarrel betwixt we,” he wailed. “It's why I stayed away so long..”

“If it's not me,” I said, greatly relieved though I played it off casually, “Then what is it? You've been rather distracted lately, for a while now, come to that.”
“Oh – nothing. Only that I been thinking.”

“What about?”

“My mother.”

“Ah.” Instinctively I reached for the security of the tea-cup. I took a swig, wishing it was whiskey.

“You miss her?” My voice a little higher than usual.

“Well, yes, well – no, I mean.. Yeh, a bit, but no more'n when-ever I been away workin' before. No more'n I would do had I gone on the Argentine.”

Blow the Argentine. I hated the sound of it, the thought of it, how it had nearly pulled him from my grasp. Alec's well-bitten thumbnail replaced the spoon in his mouth.

“S'more.. I feel a bit – guilty, is all. I mean, I weren't much good at home. Weren't up to much, compared to the others, but I could at least listen to Ma prattlin' on, change the sawdust for Da..”

Leaning right forward, elbows on knees and hands hanging, he stared into the fire for some moments.

“Nice an' all, bein' at home, but – I were right restless,” he said at last. “I wanted summat else. Summat different – emigratin' wouldn't do it, it'd be more of the same and after all it were all Fred's idea. No, I were brewin' to do summat crazy, I knowed it.” He peeked at me.

“Knowed it practically the second I first saw you. Oh God, I only knew then what it were like to really want something! Someone!”

“I fell in love with you instantly too!” I said, although hindsight was my friend in realizing this. It was certainly the beginning of us. That'd do.

“So I reckoned: right. I'm not gonna live normal – that's grand, I don't want to. S'long as it's us. Only.. I'm still a man, ain't I? And what ought a man do? Look after his kin. And I'm not managing
to.. Even as I try I'm failin'!”

I was all befuddlement.

Alec took my hand and turned it palm up in both of his.

“This ent right,” he said. “I'm lettin' you down.”

“What – this?” I said, wriggling my fingers as he trapped my hand to cover the scar. “That's nothing. And anyway, it was an accident, they happen all the time at work.”

“Exactly! That's what's so particular bad abou' it! I ought to be protectin' you from harm, not bring you to a place so – dangerous and exhausting.”

“Oh, you do exaggerate. It's fine – see? All healed.”

“It's not just that.” Alec looked pained. “It's like, when I first knew you, first saw you goin' round the place up at Penge, you were so right grand-lookin', so clean and nicely-put and healthy and thrivin'. And now look at the state of you!”

I looked down at myself.

“You'se are all over cuts and bruises and scratches and burns, come 'ome every evenin' wi' limbs achin' and feet rubbed raw and dust in your eyes.” He clutched my face in his hands urgently. “You're sufferin', and I done it! I'm supposed to be takin' care of you.”

“Oh darling – of course you are! How you could even – I've never felt more safe and cared-for – and the work isn't that bad – all that exercise and clean, fresh air! Really, I'm healthier now than ever I was – I used to get hay-fever – no trace of that now -”

“It's the middle of Winter,” said Alec.

I patted my face. “I used to get spots! They're gone!”
Alec relaxed into a little laugh.

“I hardly slept,” I pressed on. “I drank too much. Psychologically, emotionally – I was a wreck! You came along out of the mists of confusion like an angel of mercy and saved me.”

I leaned closer and said low: “I prayed for you. I'm not religious, but I did, I must've done; I begged for relief, and that was you.”

Alec's mouth was open slightly.

I gathered him into my arms and spoke into his hair. “Now, don't you think I'd rather have you than a tray of cucumber sandwiches?”

He shuffled around until his head rested on my shoulder and he could look up into my eyes. “I'll do right by thee, Maurice, I swear I will. I'll do better.”

It occurred to me that it would be frightfully condescending of me to bluster out a breezy, “Not at all, sweetest. You've been so good, and I couldn't be happier, don't worry, don't ruin it with your worry”; thereby dismissing his concerns and anxieties.

So I held him even closer and said, “Thank you.”

Harold's day of reckoning was imminent: his greatest fear was looming towards the horizon. He had received a wire – quite out of the clear blue, he said – from the Right Hon., heir apparent to Yarbury and Harold's greatest rival in the ownership of the estate.
All the same, I read the wire and it seemed cordial and civil; as if the William Osborne-Grimsby-Brooke merely wished to exercise the muscles of Ingress and Regress which were after all his candid right. Seemed to me in the best spirit of co-operation.


“On both sides,” I pointed out. “At any rate, you said yourself that the stronghold is all but yours.”

“All but.” He shook his head. “All but! It takes but the stroke of a pen by someone in authority and all becomes naught!”

“Well don't bloody let on about the details of the deed, then,” I said. Really, the man was impossible! What on earth took possession of a person, haunted them so when confronted with the prospect of owning land? Rough, weedy, ruinous, unproductive land?

Now: shares in the railways. *That* I could understand getting het up over. Ah, if only I'd the money now! But what-ever we earn these days is fairly spent before it's pocketed. Such is living.

“Oh don't worry,” said Harold. “I'm going to be well-prepared. Plan a strategic defence, what.”

Which translated – he was given to talking like an Army General – into all of the quarrymen setting aside (with not a little relief and celebration) our stone-based duties, and attending to bringing the estate back up to some semblance of scratch.

Ie. The worst of the meadows were mowed (and the grass sold for a song at nearby farms), the potholes were filled, the gates re-affixed, hedges trimmed, statues scratched of lichen, window-panes inexpertly (likely temporarily) replaced on the front façade of the manor.

“I just want Sir William to drop by, sweep one look over the place, find it relatively unchanged and agreeable, and deem Cassie and I to be nothing less than the ideal successors.”

“Perhaps we should have made the place look even *more* dishevelled and decrepit,” I said dustily, taking time between shovelling cement to answer him. “So that he doesn't take a liking to living here again.”
“Oh, no fear on that score. Place they're living now is five times as big as Yarbury! Of course, it's not actually theirs...” Harold wandered off.

“The plot thickens,” said Alec.

Another piece of subterfuge that Harold hoped to employ, in addition to taping over the cracks, was to vanish all the workers for the duration of the visit and hide the very evidence of their labours from view.

“How's he gonna hide the quarry?” grumbled Alec. “Toss a bedsheet over it?”

“Wot -” said Finn excitedly. “We get the day off?!?”

“Well – yes,” said Harold. He looked relentful. “Paid of course! This is my own accursed fancy!”

Whoops ensued as the lads returned to bricklaying and chopping and raking and painting with renewed vigour.

Could hardly blame them! The promise of a day off -

“Er – Maurice, could I possibly borrow you just for a mo?” Harold approached. “Just a quick word, favour actually, I was wondering if it might be quite impudent of me to ask – well, I know it is, but – if perhaps you wouldn't mind, er – coming along, or, being around tomorrow when the Duke and his coterie arrive. For – um, just to chummy it up, as it were.. Lee isn't really so – forthcoming..”

In short he was asking for moral support, though he wasn't going to ever come right out and ask; and come to that, I dearly hoped he wouldn't – I should die of embarrassment! It's nice to be needed but it does make one squirm!

“...If only to make the party jollier, help the whole event run smoother,” he babbled, “It would help awfully if you came along.. Oh, and you too, of course, er – Alex..”

“Alec,” said that man, who was smoking away beside me all through Harold's little plea. For instead of glaring malevolently every time Harold struck up a conversation in the quarry, Alec had taken to
coming right along with me, listening and puffing and giving his opinions.

By this stage it was more or less accepted that we were something of a matched set, the way: forgive me, but it is a comparison – Clive and I had been regarded at college. Seek one and you'll find the other. I was surprised how accepted our dear friendship was in the more rude and unsophisticated environment of the labour-site, but Alec was quite astute: we were seen as fine and normal, even attractive and approachable, as long as we kept – or appeared to keep – Platonic, or as the lads would no doubt have it, 'matey'.


I wondered if I'd catch it later, get an ear-bashing for agreeing and essentially sacrificing our day off, but I had forgotten about Alec's natural curiosity. He was keen to attend this visit. Most likely so he could see Harold sweating bullets before his own social superior! Or maybe he merely wanted to be helpful. He is a capricious chap.

Saturday dawned – lucky lads, a long weekend – unlucky Harold, he was most probably at that point gnawing his fingernails, gazing hopelessly out the window, surveying his domain and wondering, for how much longer was it to be his? Or would it be snatched, Austen-style, from his grip in the turn of a strolling afternoon?

Alec and I had no such worries. In fact, no worries at all – or so I thought. I had cleaned our boots the night before, and Alec ironed shirts. He claimed that as the youngest Scudder, left at home, it had fallen to him to do laundry, tidy the house, weed the garden, keep the kettle boiling, while his mother helped at the butcher's shop by tending customers.

“She did it, 'cos I weren't fit to be seen.”

He was now, rather. Shaven and combed and neat and pressed, we set off for the gate-lodge, Alec sporting blooming knee-breeches and embroidered stockings and a fine lambswool vest; and I had donned tennis slacks and navy cardigan. It was a crisp, bright, beautiful day.

“There's no rush, these titled types,” said Alec, appreciating the full extent of the generous pockets of his slacks. He was enjoying himself, and in spite of his own dress he saw no irony in musing: “They're right unpredictable. They marry they cousins, in order to keep the money in t'family, and end up all banjaxed and buggered resultant. I mean – take a clock at the royals.”
“Tsk,” I clucked, keeping a languid pace with he. “Wash your mouth out.”

“My mouth has done worse.”

“Ha! Well, I hope this isn’t too vexing on Harold,” I said. “Hope he can continue with the process of purchase.”

“No odds to us whether or not he do.”

“I think it would affect us, in fact, if all production on the site were to come to a halt.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” On this obscure finisher we reached the lodge and joined Harold's defence battalion. Which consisted of Harold, Mrs. Harold, Lee, an anxious-looking girl with papers who turned out to be a lawyer's representative, and ourselves!

Eschewing formal introductions, we all just exchanged nervous smiles, although Lee was typically grumpy and Alec was definitely hiding a pleased grin. A car was drawing near, the engine loud in the lazy, leafy glade. Harold twisted his hands in reaction; his curly-haired wife patted his chest affectionately. “Do calm down dear, and either put on those gloves or pocket them; it looks as if you're going to challenge the Duke to a duel!”

“Oh do!” said Alec, but only so I could hear. At any rate, he was rendered silent, robbed of speech, as the Royce rolled through the gates (now hanging correctly), and glided the few yards up the driveway to where we waited by the neat hedges around the gate-lodge.

In the sunlight the black roof gleamed, the massive mud-guards shone and hurt the eyes; the chassis was dark wine-red and the horn tooted merrily. We were all as agog as if earth were being revisited by the Angel Gabriel. The girl with the briefcase whimpered.

Knee-booted and gloved, capped and buttoned, emerged the driver, who opened the back door and out tumbled three rolling and squawking children, followed by their distinguished parents.

“Hullo! Wonderful, you're just in time! You found the place alright? Well of course you did, you used to live here! Haw, haw... haw..” Harold was falling at the first hurdle. Alec sniggered behind me. I gave him the first of an afternoon-long sequence of warning-glances.
“Great to see the old place again, simply great,” boomed the Duke, who was of only average height and build but was so impressively bearded, coiffed and sporting sporting gear of such high quality and pristine condition that his overall impression was one formidable and venerable.

Hands were gripped and shook, and gushing introductions made: “My wife.” The Duke swept an arm to the dusky, demure Duchess and the three sprogs capering around her skirts.

“My wife,” said Harold, drawing her forward eagerly.

“How do you do?” said Cassie perfectly, simpering to the Duke and sincere to the Duchess.

“Ent it grand to have a wife,” muttered Alec, “The old arm-decoration.” The lawyerly girl heard and tittered, then jumped when she heard herself acknowledged.

“...rest of our party – some of our maintenance fellows, and oh – Miss Posner, the – uh – estate-house lady!”

Everyone, including Harold himself and not least Miss Posner, wondered what an estate-house-lady is or does. But this was England. Far too polite to spoil things with clarity.

Evidently Harold sought to keep his legal defence holstered, as it were, until he found himself outright challenged. Also admirable and English!

“I thought we could take a tour so you could see, William, just how very little the place has changed, how it’s toddling along just marvellously in our – in our hands..” said Harold boldly.

Oho. Now there was an offensive tactic.

“Sounds spiffing! Lay on, then!”

And off we went, some racked with uncertainty, some benignly suspicions, some watching with no little amusement, and some pushing and shoving and tripping and squealing and quite disrupting the
hard-worked for ambiance of the driveway, the Lower Orchards, the first Folly, the Marble Arch (painstakingly rubbed raw), the fountain, the paddocks, the cricket greens, tennis courts, the outhouses, monuments -

“Oh how I remember spending endless summers very here!” cried the Right Hon., gazing about at the empty stables (the horses had the day off).

“Do you remember, Tabitha, that you would repair with Mamma to the parlour to work so frantic sewing ribbons and fixing flowers to your old hats? And I and Terence would ride some ten miles to the village to deliver them to St. Anne's Institute – how their little faces would light up!”

Alec closed his eyes in helpless disbelief. I willed someone to start smoking so I could follow suit.

“Oh one must do one's bit, mustn't one!” said Cassie, and the Duchess smiled lazily and made to reply, only for one child or other to emit the ear-piercing.

“Ah – Miss Posner, would you mind? There's a good girl.” Harold flapped a hand at the kids, walking his party onward, and Miss Posner (Ruth, to make her your familiar) was unimpressed with the order and less impressed with the starving children crowding round her.

“Hay!! Don't pull on me you little beasts!” With one hand she held her sheaf of papers aloft; with the other she grabbed the stick from the little boy and bowled the hoop at top speed off towards the herb gardens, with the children in its wake.

“Well done that woman,” said Lee, speaking for the first.

“Isn't there great growth this year,” said the Duke. “All the richness of the downs.” He mimed taking a shot into the air. “What's on this time of year?”

Harold looked around, panicked.

“Pheasant, partridge, grouse, duck, deer – Red, Roe, Fallow – female only. And you'd want to get crackin' if it's deer you're after, a'fore sundown,” said Alec promptly.
“Why thank you, Scudder,” said Harold in surprise.

“Sir.”

“Oh, fielding? Oh I don’t know,” said the Duchess, glancing at the children who looked maybe too interested in the idea. “How about some tennis, darlings? You want to see the courts? You could make doubles!” And she looked at the honorary child, Miss Posner, who smiled toothily but most likely would have preferred a gun to a racquet at that moment.

“Capital! A capital idea. Except I was hoping you could show me some of the progress you’ve been making on the estate,” said the Duke.

“Pro-progess?” stammered Harold.

“Yes! Progress, man, production! Your father was very much a proponent, I recall my own saying – you are engineering the place into something more useful than a bally play-ground for the elites? Present company-.” And he patted a child’s head, his wife laughed. “I'd assumed you were industrializing, Montmorency. I've been boasting down the Reform.”

Harold was dumbstruck. But it wasn’t hard to see that the goalposts had shifted.

“Oh then you mean the quarry,” I said, and Harold gave a strange-noise.

“Quarry! Yes, that sounds – you manage it, fellow?”

“I do, your – you Dukeness,” said Lee.

“Then lead the way, good man – unless it's too far..” He looked down at the children.

Alec, Ruth and I were lumbered with giving piggy-backs. For some reason, the rider always seems to think it’s just as much fun for the pig as he or she; it isn't at all.

“...hope to utilize the great land we have at our disposal not just for agriculture but production too...”
Harold was saying. I jogged closer to eavesdrop.

“Well said! Well said!” said the Duke, and swiftly: “Are you running local?”

“Oh, well..” Harold demurred. “I don't know if I could be aggressively popular enough..”

“Christ, this again,” grumbled Alec low. “The lord preserve me from clamouring, country squire Em-fucking-Pees!” Adding: “Pull my hair one more time and I'll pull off your head! Off with you!” And depositing the tykes ground-ward.

For we at last reached the quarry, which the Duke was exclaiming over, with no nostalgia for the hunting-lodge of his endless summers.

“The old Codswold Lodge,” said the Duchess. “Never had much use for it!”

“Nor I, even. Tell the truth: hopeless with a gun!” said the Duke.

“Oh – as am I! In fact I've been trying to improve, shamed I am, been practising after hours.” Harold shot a bashful look at Alec. “Good thing I didn't hit any deer, what?”

“That were you? I mean – was you – sir? We heared gunshots in the dusk alright when we were – er - drawin' water from the well..”

“Afraid so! I do apologize if I startled you! Perhaps we could put together a hunting party some day and you lads could give us tips!”

“Capital idea! Don't know when I was last on a horse! One gets so used to the motor..”

This prospect wasn't welcomed in the Alec camp. I could see that because I know him so well. But he managed, “If it's an order, sir, I'm obliged.”

“Well we might as well all get on, wouldn’t you say? Friends and colleagues! After all, it is my intention to foster real production and employment in the locality – we shouldn't outsource
everything to the tropics! I was thinking of getting into naval development – Cassandra, remember the docks we visited in the summer.

“Yes indeed. Have you seen the dreadnoughts? We visited Portsmouth and my, aren't they a sight!”

“Not just a sight,” said Harold in serious tones. Here we go. “It's no harm to be prepared, keep the Standing tip-top, after all, what's happening.. we have friends on the Continent, and you would raise a brow at what's happening! Germany building up its boys, getting quite too big for its boots and forcing us to jump into bed with the French! And Russia! Well they are two nations that don't have the slightest respect for authority and what do you get? The iron fist tightening, mad movements rising, unrest.”

“Ah, there's always scufflings,” said the Duke amiably. “Nothing major, things are quiet enough in Westminster.. Well only the odd whispering.”

“It's best to be prepared,” said Harold. “Put up a strong front, show off a reminder who is the World Power.”

Only his wife seemed to be taking him seriously and she had probably heard this sermon many times before.

“I did some service in the Reserves after college,” continued Harold, as the kids tumbled down the mud piles and got filthy. “The camp was rather a squalid affair, no size and the manoeuvres! Now, I quite fancy Yarbury as a base, if ever we were to expand our own.. If need be.”

“Conscription?!” said the Dutchess. “How vulgar and continental.”

Alec rocked on his heels and looked at the sky.

“Oh I know!” said Harold. “It won't ever come to that – Britain has far to much sway on the political stage to have to resort to human postulating. Still we have the finest army in the world.. not in terms of numbers, of course, but.. I suppose I am quite a child about it.”

He looked at me. “Remember that map, Maurice – er – Hall?”
“Map? Yes, of course – Sir.”

Dreamily, he went on: “I’ve made some changes to it, as we change the estate, but some of the oldest features of the demesne are just perfect in terms of defence.. outposts on the perimeter, ideal viewpoints from all four corners, I’ve tried them out and if they aren’t perfect!”

Were they! Had he now! I nudged Alec in the side – that was it! It must have been Harold out playing soldiers – first the gun, and now the lookout post on the Roman buttress.

Alec avoided my eye, continued to look arbitrarily up at the clouds and away from me, even as I nudged him decidedly.

“Pragmatic lad!” shouted the Duke. “Imaginative fellow! You must – I insist! - you must show me all of your strategic fortifications. Keen interest in the military myself! Lost three uncles at the Boer, mother had a book made about them, fine displays of bravery, I must get you a copy...

“But I must say this is all theoretical mind you – nostalgic! Any more wars and they'll be fought in the offices by the civil servants, I guarantee you. It's economics that's the driver. All of this might gathering in Europe – pure peacocking! Why, Britain is as thriving as ever she was.”

“Yes,” said Harold desperately, “Due in large part to our shaky alliances with -”

“Yes, yes. Now what say we wrap up this tour and drive to the village for a spot of lunch? There must be some confounded place with enough seats for us all! Younglings! Hold onto Mamma, here we go – Ah!”

Here he turned to Alec and I who had retreated momentarily to the wings.

“Good lads! Fine fit fellows! Thanks awfully for the help!”

“But we didn't really do anything,” I said.

Now it was Alec's turn to elbow and he mimed holding his hand out. Wordlessly I did so.
“A whole pound! Not bad for an afternoon’s work, aye?”

We were walking back home after our cordial dismissal; Harold and the others most probably off to the village to eat, drink, and no doubt, strategize.

“For an afternoon's walk, really,” I said. “Still I suppose it was work – in that were were charged to do it.”

“Now you're catchin' on!” And he wound his arm around my waist as we entered the woods, taking a breezy pace back to the residences.

“Harold is very gung-ho,” said I, as the rain started softly. “Who ever would have thought it was he traipsing round the woods, doing target practice and surveillance? It's rather endearing, really..”

“It's rather nutty,” said Alec. “Who does he think he is, Boadicea?” I laughed and he did too and
then he stopped abruptly, removing his arm from me and taking a step away. He paused and pointed upwards into the trees, where visible through the scraggly Winter foliage were feet – figures – dotted around the swaying branches.

“Calooooooo!” called Alec loudly, and there was swearing from above; one or two swung and swayed and fell at our feet, while others rocked but managed to scramble down the trunks.

Finn was one of the ones crumpled in a heap before us. “Calay...” he croaked.

“Well,” said Andy, as we were circled. He pulled at the knee of my silly trousers, on Alec’s leg. “Had fun spiffin’ about all mornin’?”

“Tha’rt just envious,” grinned Alec, holding his coat open by the pockets theatrically to show his outfit entire.

“Anyways,” he went on, “You’se ought to be grateful, we earned summat to put in the kitty for the Christmas booze. Who were collectin' again – Finn, aye?”

“Oh – yeh,” said Finn, and I handed him the pound.

“Ey! Great! Us'll get some right fine whiskey!”

“No – just grab lots of shitty whiskey!”

Alec interrupted: “What were you'se doing up in a tree? Typical, ye'd the day off and should have been off philandering. Climbin' trees... I ask you.”

“We was just havin' a nose,” said Finn. “Wanted to see how this Duke and Monty got on – 'ey, his wife were right nice, weren't she!”

“Whose wife?” said Alec.

“Both of 'em! And that other young lass – Cor! What were they like?” To me.
“Oh.. Perfectly agreeable and charming. And sharp! Well up to speed on the current political framework.” This kind of description was likely not what the chaps wanted to hear.

“Best hold onto your hats,” said Alec. “Harold's gonna herd us all into his own personal army.”

“Ent he done that already?” We were now mooching en masse in the direction of the cottages, taking one of the woodland trail short-cuts.

“Well he's off now to show the Duke his battlements,” said Alec. “Though I hope he don' get round to all of ‘em!” He rummaged in his voluminous (always voluminous) coat and produced a pair – the pair! - of field binoculars. “He'll not be able to do much lookin' at the lookout.”

“Alec!” I engaged my most shocked tones. “How did you – when did -”

“Found me way to the tower again a few weeks back. Used the map!” He was pleased.

“And you took the opportunity to nick the binoculars after all!”

“I didn't nick ’em! I only borrowed ’em – you borrowed them cricket guards – and got ’em all bloody to boot!”

“I cleaned them and returned them!”

“How d’you know I ain't returnin' these, this very minute? Trust you to think the worst!”

The others stood a little aside to better view our revue.

“Well, you jolly better had bring it back, lest we catch it for trespass and burglary. Come on..”

“Lord, you're contrary as the day is long. I always were gonna return it.” But he followed, matched me, and taking the lead, led.
Isn't snow delightful? In etchings. Or cards. In theatre productions, films, fake... In a globe. In reality, however, and in a building that was sometimes more crack and crevice than cottage, stone cold, water frozen, bottom of the tin of cocoa almost reached, snow is less felicitous and more an added chore to clean up after.

Now I've gotten my usual gripe and grievance out of the way, may I add that even I was not immune to the charms of the softly falling snowflakes in the dark, solemn dawn of Christmas morning.

We awoke slowly, naturally, blearily.

“Mmm.. Merry Christmas, darling,” I said before I could even focus my eyes properly. I knew he was there though, he slid his limbs around me like tendrils of a creeping climbing clematis round a tree.

“And you,” said he, and kissed me, very slowly and deliberately, drawing it out; whereas usually we would have perhaps six kisses in the space of a minute, adjusting angles, nipping at necks, wriggling round in readiness for what would come next; this morning however, heavy with silence and the faint glow of the fire, he held me and kissed me, on and on and on so softly and tenderly, that there was plenty of room to breathe, and smile and sigh and keep kissing, was it really one kiss or thousands.

So sleepy and mellow were we that we didn't talk again just then; it seemed too sacred, the calm of the quiet, just blankets rustling as we reached for each other, and the snow ghosting down outside, which didn't make any noise of course, but you could just feel it coming down out of the sky, and it added to the other-worldly, mild and wild and blissfully sweet and indulgent atmosphere.
As ever we were heavily garbed; wearing rather many more clothes than one traditionally would in bed, certainly when tending to a lover. In this circumstance though, the extra layers could hardly be seen as impediments; in fact they drew out the delicious ambition even more.

As Alec pushed up a jumper or two from my body, he was confronted with shirt buttons to undo; whilst I got my hand into the waistband of his pyjama bottoms, I was obliged to un-tuck several layers of under-shirt and vest before I could access his long-johns, which I then eased inside.

“Mmm..” said he, and that's all we did, for ages, kiss and caress and shuffle about and smile, and there was no rush, because there was no outside this room we were in, and he smelled of jam and toast and tasted of it too, that we'd had for supper the night before, and he was softly stroking my chest, languid circles, then down to my belly, over my sides, tickling, then down to my arse where finally he used a bit more strength, intensity, interest, lust..

He rolled onto his back and pulled me on top of him, pushing my pyjama pants down to mid-thigh, and doing the same to his own. Then he slowed the tempo right down again, rolling his hips while I very gently rocked on top of him, while we kissed and wrapped our arms around each other's shoulders and rubbed one another lazily in the intimate area, our underwear still on but somehow the cotton wasn't restrictive but warm, and different, and lovely...

I could feel through the material the hardness of his manhood, then another slow undulation brought the softness of his balls, his thighs. Sometimes we would take a rest, stop kissing and I would drop my head down on the pillow beside him, and he would prop his chin on my shoulder and slide his hands up and down my back under my garments, up and down... We were one, warm, indolently squirming entity under some seven or eight blankets. Eventually he panted. It was he who did first, though my heart thuddered as strongly as his.

“Could you get off this way?” He spoke the first out-loud words for quite three quarters of an hour; though it would be incorrect to say that we had not been communicating all that time... That famous connexion, that meeting, melding into one another. O! Understand, now finally.. 'When our two souls stand up erect and strong, Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher..'

What I actually said was: “Hnnnngth! Ye-hyeh!” What else could I say? For he slid one knee between my legs, drew me down upon him with this hands firm on my backside, and increased the pace. Again he took over, again he was in charge. I was helpless.

All I could do was burrow my face into his neck, nose aside his collar, just give myself over and feel it – it – coming nearer and nearer, from somewhere in the recesses of my body, God-only-knows, how it gets to this point, but it Starts with Alec and it Ends with him too, groaning, which of us, each
of us, squeezing arms madly, as – as – it reaches and ends, what wonderful ends.

Panting and sweating finally now, we disentangled – physically. I really don't think we could otherwise. Spiritually.

For a while – oh you know that period where you just bask and simply delight – we gazed at each other and smiled, teeth, dimples, stupidly, marvellously love-struck.

“That were great,” said he at last, combing back some hair from my face. “Tha'rt an absolute goer, Maurice.”

“Oh Alec.. Do switch on. It was you who did it all!”

“But I wouldnae git so excited if not for you.”

Some people just won't see reason. Sometimes the only reply is to rest one's head on their chest.

For breakfast we had Christmas oranges, leftover cake and beer. Maybe we were a little half-cut by the time we got to the church; but actually the alcohol helpfully made the service take on a rather hazy, ethereal aspect, with the choir and the candles, and the crib and the witless monotony of the Gospel and sermon and recitations; one might almost be convinced!

Church was on the agenda because we were to go to the Montmorency residence in the afternoon, all the working lads being charitably invited to dine and sup and what have you. They were regular church-goers and it seemed neighbourly of us dinner-guests to pretend – that is, attend.

Dozily I sat in the pew watching the parishioners queue up to receive, before turning, saved, to
squeeze down the preposterously small aisle to their seats.

“Sorry, did you want to..?” asked Alec.

“To what?” I asked ignorantly.

“To – y'know.” He nodded towards the people still filing up to the altar to the strains of church-organ 'Away in a Manger.' “I cain't. On account of I never – I managed to give the Reverend the slip."

“Oh that's right,” I said. “You were the refuser.”

“Haha, yeh.. But if you want to, I mean – don't let me drag you down no further if you still think there's summat in it. I'll just em, you can get by -”

Ah, so we hadn't discussed theology in much detail.

“Silly boy. But I won't, anyhow; as it happens I stopped ages ago.” I could have described how as a bright eyed young student I had dismissed the church in an act of non-conformity and independent thinking; when the truth of the matter was I had fallen in love with an independent thinker and had not lost but quite deliberately chucked my faith away!

Beside me, Alec shifted about and played with his cap and coughed. Yes, I had long parted ways with orthodox Christian faith. And yet.. some parts of it still seem so magical, so attractive in its outrageousness. It's hard to believe that there isn't something strange and wonderful pumping compassionate energy into the world, beyond what we see.

Look at Alec for example. He doesn't make the slightest bit of sense. He came from out of the blue, from some foreign celestial plane, as far as I'm concerned, and took a hold of me, and now we were both there together, yet somehow still on Earth.

Yes, my belief and sheepish following of the Church had long since ended. But I stood with everyone at the closing of the service and joined with the rousing 'Angels We Have Heard on High' even though the chorus has always proved tricky ever since my voice had broken some ten years previous.
Back at the cottage we loaded up ale, wine, chickens and bushels of holly to bring over to the Montmorency residence, on the far south-side of Yarbury; a very respectably-sized Mock-Tudor, with creeping ivy, trees flanking the snow-covered lawn (complete with snowman), and the Missus greeting us at the door brightly like Scrooge's hearty niece.

“Wellcome fellows!” bellowed Harold when we were vested of our offerings, coats, hats and boots, and urged towards mulled wine, regular wine, beer. What followed was something of a challenge, particularly to those of us who had been choosy with our victuals for a whole Winter!

To start soup, cheese on crackers, sardines on digestives, devilled eggs and mango chutney, followed by the mains perhaps an hour later with turkey, a huge honeyed ham, two chickens, gravy, stewed apple and cranberry, pigs-in-blankets, chestnuts, stuffing, and – imagine it, and it was there.

For pudding Harold impressively lit the Christmas, and this was divvied out among all present and the chipped tooth or two proved worth the delight at finding the few shillings.

Alec, my boy, was as winning as ever, larking and pulling crackers and shouting at Charades, although every so often he turned quiet and thoughtful.

“Aah,” said Patsy. “Missing her?”

“Huh?” said Alec, chin in hand.

“Hortense.”

“Who?!”

“Your – wasn't that her name?”

“Oh, oh right, that, oh yeh, that's – right. Looka, I see the piano's unoccupied! Does anyone have any requests? Maurice can bang 'em out for you!”

“What! No I can't, Alec! I haven't in the longest!”
Perhaps drunk himself on the spirit of generosity and charitable delivery, Harold foisted cigars upon each of the men as we said our Cheerios and made our stumbling way back through the forest; this short walk involved much jig-acting and merriment in the child-like, otherworldly climate of Christmas.

“I say,” I exhaled, “I'm not a little tight, just now..”

I was sitting beside Alec on the edge of the Pit; the heaps of earth and rock within were all covered with thick snow and offered the single-minded merry-maker the perfect terrain for a snowball fight.

Spirits were high although the lads were falling all over the place, the moon showing their silhouettes up clearly, and visible puffs of freezing air following shouts of joy.

“Weren't it just flowin'!” agreed Alec, sucking on his fag, a little distractedly.

I looked hazily out at the others racing around.

“Where's Luke?” I asked, realizing. “He wasn't at the Monto – Montmorno – at the house, just now, for dinner, was he?”

“Gone back to Leeds, to the missus,” said Alec. “He only gets to go home a few times a year, has to keep 'em fed. 'Spose Christmas is one of those times.. Same wi'Mardy, and Andy's hopin' to see his wee lassie in the New Year – not sure yet though, says he's too 'shamed to meet her and ast' to marry unless he has a bit more brass.”

“Oh,” I said, and dawning: “That's terrible.”

Here I had been taking Alec's companionship completely for granted, all these many weeks. I had
thought we were the aberrations, the outsiders, the unfortunates. But at least I had my lover to constant hand and Alec his; little had I considered that the other men were wanting, were just as lonely and heartsick as I had once been – but in their case, for women!

How had they managed to survive so long without lovemaking, physical affection, mutual delight? I had only myself very lately begun to partake in sex and now I couldn't imagine going without it, I need it, needed him, like air.

Quite forgetting myself – I was that half-cut – I rested my head on Alec's shoulder and closed my eyes. After a moment's grace, he gently pushed my head off of him with his hand and shuffled slightly away from me.

I knew exactly why – we couldn't – he was quite correct – not in public – but still. I sighed, and groaned, and rocked away, perfectly understandable, even if it felt against all nature, which was urging me into his warmth.

He studied at me as I attempted to co-ordinate my blinking, before flicking his butt into the pit where it hit the snow with a hiss.

“Come on, you,” he said, tugging me unwieldily to my feet. We slipped away, through the twilight forest, deer cracking twigs and owls hooting and the lads' larking fading a little with every crunching step we gained.

Back at the cottage the fire was resuscitated and we both sat on the armchair front of it to watch the kettle slowly boil for tea.

Alec perched on the arm of the chair, one hand in a pocket and one around my shoulders. “Enjoy your Christmas?”

“Oh, rather! It was the best I've ever.” And I took his hand and kissed it.

“It's not over yet,” said Alec. “And just as well too – had you forgotten? We've not exchanged gifts yet.” He was smiling.

“Indeed I hadn't,” I smiled too, and made to get up, to go to the bed -
“Just a tick,” said Alec. “Me first.” And he hopped off the armchair and went over to the mantelpiece where the books were haphazardly heaped. Bemused, I watched him open the *Swiss Family* and remove something which he handed to me. Seemed like a card, except it was wrapped in red and silver paper instead of an envelope.

Sinking onto the rug in front of the fire, he folded his arms and crossed his legs.

“Lovely! How nice! Thank you!” I said.

“You've not opened it yet,” said Alec patiently.

“Still, the gesture..”

Alec gave me the eye-pleading and I was myself curious so I folded back the wrapping to reveal – indeed, a Christmas card, depicting a cat in a woollen hat and scarf, in the snow, with a choir-sheet, bearing the message, 'A Merry Christmas Melody.'

I chuckled and Alec explained: “There weren't a lot of choice in the village shop!”

“It's lovely,” I said again, opening the card hopefully to see what he'd written, confessed; “Oh, hello,” I said as an envelope fell into my lap from within. This I opened without his prompting, only his watching, and I pulled out -

“Train tickets?” I said, studying one of four small light green cards. “Shrewsbury to Birmingham .” I shuffled through them: “Birmingham to London?” This journey times two, and timed just after the forthcoming New Year.

I looked up at Alec who still studied me keenly.

“An excursion?” I said. “How marvellous... Wonderful! Though it might be a little difficult squaring it with Harold, to say the least about Lee..”
“Not an excursion,” said Alec. “An evacuation.”

“A – what, sorry?”

“I thought abou' what you said that time,” said Alec. “Abou' how, workin' here, we're practically punishing oursel' for being together. And why?! It needn't be this way! Things could be easier! We don' have to hide away sufferin' on the fringes! This is our country as well as the next man's.”

My drunken head swam; his voice and excitement and ideas felt like several consecutive gulps of Champagne.

“Go – back? To London?” Typical of me to disregard the fact that it was only 'back' for me; it would be a whole new environment for him.

But he had evidently considered it. “Yeh! That's what I were thinkin'. Tha'rt a city fellow really, it were main unfair o' me to drag you here out into the wilderness in the first place. And then expect you to take up labourin' just like that. You done so well but I...

“And ey, comin' in September and spendin' the whole bloody miserable Winter here. What were I thinkin'! Who goes north for the Winter?! Ain't natural. For you, anyroad, and, there may be, more opportunities, like, for you down there..”

“Never mind me,” I said, which was a pointless thing to say to Alec. “What about you? Us? Oughtn't we agree on a course? Wouldn't you rather live in the countryside?”

“Well, yeh...” he admitted. “Eventually. Bu' not like this, exactly.. Not wi' all the work streachin' out ahead of us, and the woods're lovely, but I don't want to hide away in them forever..”

He coloured. “I know I been awful bossy an' all, decidin' that we come here, then droppin' it outta the blue just now that we should leave! It's just – I don't mind sayin' I were hasty – If you don' want to go, we'll stay – I can flog the tickets to a couple of the lads, or the dinner-girls even, for a knock-down; everyone around is pure desperate to get away and do summat different, summat more.. Just say the word..”

London. Again. With Alec! Other things to do, places to go, food to eat, experiences to have together. London, home again, only this time home properly: with my Friend.
London. Seven million people, but the whole teeming city rendered warm and comfortable and inviting and exciting by just one. I was looking at him now; he was looking away, into the fire.

“Lookit,” said he. “Don' take this the wrong way, bu- what I were on about before, erm - did yer – before like, did you yourself ever sort of reckon on marryin', havin', a wife, like?”

A knuckle found its way between my teeth to gnaw on. All the same I knew him so well that I was aware that this wasn't a sudden digression, but that he was struggling to express some point using only the limited paradigms he had been given, growing up – rather like me, until college. Until...

“Yes, of course,” I said cautiously. “Ages ago. I must have done. Not for a long time though, not since I was practically a boy and hadn't the sense I do now – well, sense is a strong word. Personal insight, then. You're told you'll marry. Everyone does. You assume likewise.”

“I did, too. I mean – I figured, that – eventually – I'd pull me socks up, manage to get some means, take a shine to some lassie or other and hopeful' she'd be keen on me and we'd, y'know – cottage, kids, whole nine yards.”

I understood that Alec was confiding in me most intimately about his fluctuating self-perception, but it was very hard not to take it hard.

“Well, I'm.. sorry to have scuppered your plans,” I tried to joke, feeble of smile and of feeling.

“Oh God.” He covered his face with his hands. “Here I played this talk out heaps of times to mysel', preparin', tryin' to fix it so that you wouldn't find room to shove in a 'Sorry'.”

“Sorry.. Shit! Sorry!! I mean – please – do go on..”

Alec rubbed his forehead. “What I'm drivin' at is, I were determined, when I did have a wife, that I'd look after her, provide and all, keep her safe and happy – right?”

But he didn't let me respond, hurried on: “Like Da done for my Mum, they get on pretty well and he brings home the bacon – or, well, sells it really. And Ma, she ain't no slouch neither, she minded us kids and the house and helped Da in the shop but: he wouldn't let her work too hard, if you follow me, like he'd rather die than have her cartin' carcasses about, or gettin’ all sore and bloody from choppin' or slaughterin’.”
I began to see dimly. I could feel a major compliment was in the offing and I leaned forward in my chair eagerly.

Alec noticed this response and shuffled over on the rug to fold his elbows on my knees and look up at me.

“Put it this way,” he said. “If you was – if I'd fallen for a girl, and romped in the boathouse, and took her hand and run away wi’her, there's no chance I'd've brung her here to this dreary dank dump and make her break her back luggin’ around rocks all day. Would I fuck! The very idea! Me dad seen it and he'd go through me words-wise like a sword!

“So why did I drag you here? Because you're a man? Well, you can still feel pain in thy muscles, cain't you? You bruise and bleed and get bothered and blue just as much as a woman, don't you?”

Breaking off for a breath, or to collect his thoughts, he burrowed his face in my lap. I stroked his hair. I felt a burgeoning excitement.

I had thought, once, that because the sexual union between man and woman was something I would never know or appreciate, that the romantic connexion – the spiritual bonding, the summer's honey breath – would prove equally elusive and undiscovered.

But would it? Was it people who mattered – not sexes? Had I been wrong? I thought now I was wrong. Alec, do go on.

“I didn't know.. I didn't have any kind of example to follow. Two fellows together, the way we are. When I thought on marryin’, and – love – and alla that, I s'pose I looked at Ma and Pa, or Freddie and t’wife.. When you come along, I were just made up 'cos it seemed so simple, we was just mates who – frolicked a bit behind doors – as well as kicking about, mates.

“But that ain't the case at all. We're not just mates. I don' see you like that – like the way I see Davey, or Luke, or the other fellows. It's more.. When you gets grieved or hurt or unhappy it's like a knife in my chest!”

Pushing my legs apart, he wrapped his arms around my waist, his own knees still on the carpet. “Let me take care on you,” he said. “I couldn't bear it if... You know what happened to Tony..”
I did, vividly, and it was something that we nor the other lads spoke of, for fear of – fear. Tony had been hauling rocks over at the far northern-pile where I and some others were billeted – he dislodged a large stone from the base, and quite piles more of them came crashing down towards his crouching form – an avalanche – he wasn't submerged but was struck on the head by one particular stone and killed. In an instant.

After it happened Alec set his jaw, his mouth a grim line, wasn't quite himself for a week, not talking much, brooding, alternating between staring at me and avoiding my eye.

Now I saw why. “Alec,” said I. “Poor Tony. But I was quite out of danger, you know. It happened simply yards away from me.”

“‘Simply yards!’ says he! You oughtn't be within clear and simple miles of that sort of hazardous. No. You in some dangerous, grubby, God-forsaken shithole where folk sometimes get they heads busted in? It's not on, Maurice, I'm not havin' it.”

“Then we'll go,” I said, drawing him by the arm up into my lap. “If you like – because I like. I admit it, I would rather enjoy a break from all of these rocks and mud and hefting and dragging. And maybe work that's a little less fatiguing so we could spend more time together. And finding a place nice and cozy just ours but near enough to shops and etcetera so we wouldn't run out of lemonade or milk or matches... Better weather. Public transport. Oh, get some good, new, soft heavy bedcovers..” I was warming.

“As long as – oh, as long as we come back to the country someday. When we're a little better prepared, more able to carve out our own space in the landscape. It's just that the pastoral does so become you..”

“Of course we will.” Alec combed my hair back. “This is just another jaunt. We'll come back, anything you want.. I love you so much.”

And he wrapped himself round me, my head pressed to his chest. The smell of whiskey was overpowering but still I believed him. The sort of man who will gamely admit his own mistakes, and change and adapt and scheme and plan how to make things better for his beloved. Me!

“I know you had yer heart set on this Greenwood,” he said.

I squeezed him. “You're the Greenwood. Oh but Alec – the tickets. All the way to London!
However did you afford them?” When he didn't reply I cast my mind around, and then my eyes around, taking in the sitting room and kitchen and wondering -

“Oh. Sweetheart, you – sold your gun?” For it was conspicuously absent from its usual proppage in the mop-corner.

Typical of Alec to try and pass it off casually.

“Hawked it to one of the farmers I met int’village. Weren't nothin'. I'll hardly need it in the City, will I? No deer to be had, I take it, or they prolly b'long to the King..”

“Yes, but.. Well, you liked it so. I always saw it as rather synonymous with you.”

“Not necessarily – whatever that means. It were much more important to git you a present.”

“Thank you so much! I've never had a better one – oh! I suppose I should give you yours now.”

He laughed. “I suppose you should!”

“Oh but..” I was a bit hesitant now, given what he had just given me.

But he hopped off me and stood on the hearth brightly and expectantly. With some reluctance I went to the bed and reached down under it, pulling out a large parcel, wrapped in layers of brown paper and knotted string.

“Oo!” said Alec, reaching.

“It – it's a little silly, I do feel rather foolish.”

“Look at the size of it! And – oof – it's as heavy! I'm the one who should feel 'shamed!”
In fact it was very unwieldy, and he was obliged to set it down in front of the fireplace and fetch a knife from the dresser, which he applied to the tightly binding string while I hovered awkwardly behind the armchair. Scrunched paper was torn away to reveal -

“A sledge!!” Alec cried, holding it aloft by the runners. I had not seen it myself yet, having ordered it on spec from a magazine. But it was in fact most beautiful, with dark, shiny knotted wood, elegantly curving runners and reins neatly tied up.

“I suppose I thought we were getting each other silly, sweet gifts,” I smiled helplessly. “I don’t suppose -”

“I just love it! Gotta try it! Land if I’d had this when I were a bairn, the other lads'd be just sick! Maybe they will be yet!” And holding it still high above his head by the runners with both arms, he tore out the front door.

“Hay!” I ran to the door and grabbed the frame, my voice puffing freezing air into the moonlight. “I thought you were drunk!”

Chapter End Notes

I want to say Gracias, Gracias most muchly for the reads, and kudoses, and comments. Very encouraging. This actually got written nice and quickly. Back to the typewriter for the next part!
Thus endeth Michaelmas. Thus began Hilary! Post-Christmas, early-January feeling of change, energy, adventure, the Road to take beckoning, the clean breast. Except we weren't going back to the same old routine, same slog, same slop, same faces. In leaving the countryside, hurtling along the tracks, we were tearing our way to pastures new!

It was a brand new term and having weathered the winter, together, unsplintered, we were the very two to face 1914 and all the delights it had to offer.

Well.

Dreary and all as England is in January – or January is in England – February even more so – and March! - at least the beginning of the year can fool the optimist. Or reassure the lover.

Leaving Yarbury was, as it happens, not such a very great wrench; owing, perhaps, to the fact that as we were bidding a fond, sighing farewell to the cottage, the main supporting beam running the length of the roof – a ridge board, I've just consulted a text book – gave a creaking groan amidst the sound of lashing rain. Alec bent and picked up the final suitcase: “C'mon, we've wrung all we could outta this place!”

“It's us that'll need wringing out,” I said, but rain isn't so very bad when you know you're leaving it, slowly, bunched up beside Alec on the cart as we plodded down the drive just us three – the horse being agreeable to this extracurricular duty.

We had done the rounds of the workmen's cottages, and the quarry, the sites, even the Manor but the lads were scattered to the winds: we offered some acquaintances Good-byes and got some Good-Lucks in return.

Nobody was particularly surprised we were leaving – it was accepted as the nature of casual work, as Pete Hazelwood had remarked before. I pondered over whether it was a good or bad thing, casual work.

On the one hand, I still believed that there was a shocking lack of financial assurance associated with
fleeting, non-guaranteed work. Luke had conspicuously not returned from his Christmas visit to Leeds; I hoped mightily that the reason was that he head found nearer, better work and not that some spat with his wife had decided for him that work was no longer worth it.

“You and your imagination,” said Alec, which was rich for him, as he was the one who had told no end of porkies when inventing our colourful backstories.

“You ought to be a writer,” I’d told him, some days before, in our relieving last days in the woods. He laughed in my face – well he had to, we were curled up so close together – and said some things about writers.

“Don't be so judgemental,” I said. “Alright, a storyteller then.”

“Sounds a bit more like it,” said he, leaning an arm over me to reach the smokes. As we were outside, soaking up (quite literally) the final air and ambiance of the forest, the cigarettes were kept under a home-made canopy of Alec's hat. Gosh, the northern counties entire – it was if Atlantis were slowly sinking and we were nonchalantly going down with it.

Alec added: “But I might have to be a bit more leery in London – eh? Keep me trap shut about personal things – like us – I mean, it's so crowded down there, people right on top of each other. Folk might see more, notice more.”

“Maybe, and maybe not.” I said. “City folk don't tend to see past their noses.” And I crossed my eyes and looked down mine. Alec laughed. “You headcase!”

Even Harold took our departure on the chin – one would think he'd be more dismayed, given that roughly half of his workforce hadn't re-assembled after Christmas! But again, it was par for the course for hard labouring.

Maybe the men had gone wearily home; maybe they had gotten better jobs; maybe they got similarly arduous but different ones... Oh let's attribute some anti-pessimism: perhaps they married (not each other!!), or came into good fortune.

Or emigrated – there must be some who would welcome the opportunity to start afresh many miles away, even if Alec considered the Normannia to be a snare he had managed to skip, to my own eternal relief.

On the other hand – yes, I go back to my notes and realize that I considered one hand but not yet the
other – the positive side of occasional, unstable, manual employment was that we could up and leave the estate with no preamble, no obstacles, no explanations – which was wonderfully refreshing.

I mean to say, I had left Hill and Hall with no explanation nor painful extraction – but that had, though I didn't emphasize it to Alec, come with no small measure of eventual guilt and discomfiture and wondering. It would be easy for me to say – er, to write – that is, type – to you, that when I renounced my Old Life to follow the sun with Alec, I never looked back.

But that would also be inaccurate – and I'm sure Alec had similar sentiments, given the odd mention of his mother, his home and his friends. No regrets, on both our parts – oh not we! We were fully confident that we were charting the correct course together, doing at last what we had been made to do – made by who-knows-what, but in the Grand Scheme, the path of least resistance was also the one of most contentment. You simply couldn't make it up!

All the same, there were pangs, and – not sleepless nights, but perhaps a midnight half-hour before closing the eyes and dropping off that the mind wandered to all the people I'd up and abandoned – people who weren't monstrous, or particularly galling or cruel, who were, in so many basic ways, kind: Mother, the girls, Dr Barry, Mr Hill, my colleagues, friends – perhaps they were too kind. Complacent. Limiting, stifling, suffocating.

And they were only good to me and accepting because I was normal to a painful fault, or so they believed; was one of them. Surely, I was indeed the very celebratory exemplar of the Model Gentleman, the dependable, unchangeable sort who only needed his Merchant Princess to complete the picture!

Suffice to say, if they knew what I really was, what I did, who I had wrapped up in my arms every night, well, fur would fly; my nearest and dearest would fairly deduce that I was not a basic requirement in their lives – in fact my absolute absence was.

Whereas, Alec... He made no secret of the fact that he couldn't be – wouldn't be doing without me, and that where-ever we'd go it would be the pair of us, walking, trotting, holding hands and running: “Where you go, pet, I go” - and where we go is London.

And not on so very much of a whim: Alec had duly done his prep. Now why should that surprise me!

“It should surprise you 'cos I never did a tap of work in school; guess I've found my vocation!”
And as to our plans:

“O’ course I wanted to be right grand and ceremonial,” said he, “Presentin’ you with those train
tickets on Christmas. But I thought abou’ it right careful – beyond your face lighin’ up.”

And so he had, putting no small amount of planning into our relocation – more effort, he remarked,
than he had put into moving to South America – because that had been all organized over his head,
by Fred, Fred’s employers, his parents, the favours – beyond and outside him.

Far more engaging are one’s own ambitions: intentions that come from within. And it’s much more
exciting and worthy to make plans for two.

Owing to his somewhat chequered past – I didn’t dare ask for many sordid details but they trickled
out by and by during general conversation – Alec had picked up a tidy amount of acquaintances,
friends, well-wishers, drinking buddies, other buddies – who knows! Peter Hazelwood was only one
and he was likely the most respectable.

On Boxing Day – having eschewed the Boxes, and the Hunt – we spent the day trying out the
toboggan and Alec outlined. He explained to me that he had once been matey with some acting
troupe who had come to the village for a couple of weeks ‘bout a year back and entertained and put
on shows, and, in a less professional capacity, caroused and drank and debauched around the town.

“Sounds more like a circus,” I observed.

“Sure was! Mad,” said Alec. “I joined right in, eyes on stalks! They really knewed how to paint the
town, even our little’un. To be honest I did fool around a lot. Right on me own doorstep. If I’d’ve
been any younger, Da would’ve taken the belt to me and rightly so. As it so ’appens, our neighbour’s
son Winst who were supposed to be my mate gave us a kickin’... Think he were actin’ on
instruction!”

I waited patiently for the point. First he’d say ‘anyroad’.

“Anyroad, like I say I were friendly enou’ wi’them, bunch of characters they, and one girl Katherine,
she took fond on me, said if I ever wanted to come along and join ’em, to feel free to do so – and I
were sore tempted: oh, you know, travellin’ about, seein’ new places, just larkin’ and singin’ for your
supper like! Weren’t I glad I stuck around though. Wouldn’t time tell me there were somethin’ comin’
my direction, some new excitement right there at home -” And he pinched me playfully.
“Still, a'fore she left, Kath she gav' me her address, when she were home, London – silly really, but I were that soppy on her at the time an' she done it to make me feel better once she were gone.”

I was sitting on the hard ground, propped back against a tree with my legs thrown out and my hands tucked behind my head; I pulled my cap down more so it covered my face entire.

“Hay!” I felt him shuffle near. “Don't be s'daft. Didn't mean nowt. Just.. Ships in the night. Hay?” He removed my hat to implore more.

I sighed. “I'm too lazy to move, so you might as well keep talking.”

“Hmph. This is your Christmas present we're talkin' on.”

“And yours!”

“So I got two! So anyway, few weeks back, I wrote to this address – still had it in me almanac – not thinkin' on much, but I had to throw out some lines of inquiry to haul us up out of here, so I said, casual-like, how were she and how were the – plays and sketches and what-have-you, and her friends and maybe I'd come visit? Not thinkin' too hopeful, cos it'd been months, and she were travellin' as I say, but on the off-chance she'd gone home for the Winter..

“Well, didn't she write back within two days full gushin', glad to have hear from me! And that I were still in England! And of course to come visit – more the merrier – immediate if not sooner! 'Course she always were a generous lass, real accommodating..”

“I don't seem to remember us getting any post.”

“I'd it marked reply care of the little hotel in town.”

“Ah. Very clever!”

“I wanted to keep it a secret from you just in case nowt come of it. Didn't have the scratch together for the train tickets yet, it were but the – the germ of an idea, yet.”
Well that germ had germinated, and found the pair of us, suitcases, bags, trunk, toboggan and coats about us, on a footpath in crisp Covent Garden, looking up at a high, narrow, dingy building with dark windows, grass in the bricks and a shop sign with peeling red and gold paint announcing 'MASTERPIECE'. Underneath this title some wag had written 'of shit!!'

Alec looked apprehensively sideways at me, as if I were about to kick off, but I said, observing the iron gate in the doorway: “It doesn't appear to be open. Perhaps it's an odd time to arrive.” Though it was late evening.

“There'll be a – tradesman's entrance. Roun' the back. Come on.” And we hauled back up our baggage. We were obliged to walk past several store-fronts before an impossibly narrow cobblestoned alleyway offered us leeway to the back street.

Relocating the theatre, we crossed the walled back-yard and Alec used a suit-case edge to knock-knock-knock on the back door.

No reply from the heavy wood, which wasn't surprising given the din from within, of jaunty piano music and shouting and clattering. Rehearsals no doubt. These show-folk were certainly conscientious in their work!

“Oh sod this,” said Alec, and dropping a bag or two on the step he tried the door-handle and it gave way easily. He beckoned me to go through, though I would rather have followed.

A short flight of steps brought us into a dark hallway crowded with drawers, boxes, hat-stands groaning under clothes, posters on the walls and a window-ledge facing a brick wall on which was perched a dark girl, swirled with cigarette-smoke, wearing a blue dress and who looked up with a start as we very conspicuously descended.

“Er – how do you do?” I said as politely as is possible with one's arms full of one's worldly.

Hastily she stubbed out her fag in a plant and hopped off her shelf. Her eyes roved over me and my gaberdine and cap; Alec in the green Norfolk and the trilby. We were admittedly a cobbled-together assortment.

“Hullo,” said the girl, bothering her hands.
“Wotcher,” said Alec, trying to find room for our luggage in the narrow corridor. “Old Katherine about? We're expected.”

The girl nodded and sped off down the hall – she didn't even have shoes on!

“I could go for a fag mysel','” said Alec.

“I have some, but they're packed away God-knows-where,” I said. “I think in this one, under the -”

“Don't trouble over it, I can wait -”

“Alec Scudder! As I live and breathe!!” Here was smoke, think and fragranced and heralding the arrival of a short, stout, and grinning woman in a long navy dress, her hair long, brown and curly and loose and her hands boldly on her hips. The fetching girl from the window-seat bobbed about behind.

“Well Miss Katherine,” said Alec, warmly with just a measure of caution, “How is findin' thee? Right nice set-up you got here – took us that long to find the place, kep' passin' it by – thought it were a morgue...”

“You young pup! Is that any gratitude!” But she was clearly delighted with this greeting. She passed her long black cigarette to the hovering girl and strode forward to fling her arms around Alec's neck. Well, it wasn't the time for reserve, now was it? And he gave me a shot of the rueful as he embraced her back.

“Awe.. No, I'm grave now. You look great, Kath, absolutely top!” Which is exactly what you say to a woman. Maybe it's what you say to a man too; for Katherine pulled back and tweaked Alec's ear and said: “Not half so good as you, my darlin', those red cheeks and look how you grin!”

She winked at me: “Shouldn't wonder why!”

“How do you do?” I said again and held out my hand. “Maurice Hall.”
Katherine tittered blatantly at this, only half-covering her smile with her hand. To the girl she directed: “Hear that? Well well.” She shook my hand very firmly. “Katherine Bow. Pleased to meet your acquaintance, Mr Hall.”

“Pleasure's all mine,” I remembered to say, and she nodded, and tipped her head to Alec, holding her hand behind her for the cigarette, saying: “This is a surprise.”

“Mm. But is it really?” said Alec.

“Nah. Not really,” laughed Katherine. “Always knew you were an odd duck!”

“Yeh well.. Takes one to know one,” returned Alec; not quite up to par but it had been a long day.

I took the opportunity to hand over some very fine wine we had brought as a gift. “Thank you for having us,” I said to Katherine's astonished face.

“Did you ever!” She turned the bottle round in her hands, no doubt noting the vintage. “You are very welcome – in fact very welcome to stay as long as you like, at this rate!

“Well – go on then,” she added. “Up to your room to fling down your things, the pair of you, then come directly back down to the kitchen for tea – right? So we can have a good look at you. Jens, show 'em.”

Jens, the girl in the socks, came over and led us up the stairs on her own – certainly not appropriate – she carried two or three of our bags – even less so – but two stories up and two doors left of the stairs – our new place of rest, and a very welcome sight.

“See you downstairs,” said Jens, who had found her tongue. “Follow the music.” And she swirled.

I may add here that the music throbbed, from my first having mentioned it earlier, all throughout the previous and current scene; though it was mercifully fainter up here, especially when we closed the door to the outside world.

Alright, so it's probably obvious by now that I look at everything, since Alec, with a fond – romantic
– inaccurate – lens. So I will catch myself here and say, delighted though I was for us to have a space, it wasn't quite a suite at The Connaught.

Small, shabby and with it cramped. Walls were covered in peeling brown paper, the lights were dim, there was a wardrobe and dresser overflowing with clothes, blankets, material – indeed the bed was in a similar state, hardly visible beneath coats, dresses, brightly coloured and garish drapes and throws and what-have-you. Clearly this was something of a store-room, or else the previous tenant had been a complete clothes-horse.

“Not too bad,” said Alec, climbing over our bags to get to the window, which wouldn't yield to his opening efforts. “I mean, we wasn't expecting much. And London! Lucky to get anywhere at all – er – right?” He gave up pulling the pane-frame.

“Right you are,” said I. “I don't mind if it's a squash.


“Well, I said before, didn't I? Norrin so many words. What do you want – details?”

“Oh good God, no!!”

“Good. ’Cause my memory's a little fuzzy..”

“Just.. clarifying!” I said. It was unlikely he was still carrying a torch for her, given the way they were carrying on downstairs. I just wanted to acknowledge the elephant.

“‘Just,’ jeered Alec. “Come on, let's go down and face the firing squad.”

“Whatever can you mean?” I followed him down the creaking stairs. I'd see.

The kitchen was noisy and busy, with people constantly passing through, pans clattering as Jens and another girl – wearing trousers! - prepared food; music seeped up from the lower floor - “Cellar, that's where we rehearse, so we don't annoy the rest of the house” - and Alec and I sat on benches at
a large, heavy, scrubbed wooden table.

Beside us sat Katherine, who was going through letters, and our other table-mates were two men seated across from us. One was smoking in a purple coat, with blonde hair falling into his eyes. His neighbour was feeding a bicycle tyre tube through a basin of water to find the hole; he had rolled up sleeves and a cap and sideburns, though not as impressive as Alec's.

For the purposes of narrative clarity, these men were named Philip and Frank, and the pantalooned girl who was now placing down buttered bread was called, so I was told, Chuck. Whether this be a sobriquet, or if her parents were of a humorous disposition I do not know.

“I've already had my dinner,” said Katherine, reaching for bread.

“So,” she turned to Alec and I and our bowls of chicken casserole. “Alec, your letter wasn't near long and juicy enough. Not half! What have you been up to since I saw you last, in that god-forsaken field you call a village in Wiltshire? Just what you gone and done that left you so desperate as to come here?”

“Desperate? Not hardly! I just – ah – wanted to come visit yer.”

“Oh pull the other one – knobs and all,” harrumphed Katherine; the girls seated themselves and laughed.

“How did the two of you get shacked up together? I mean..” Katherine pressed forward to peer at me keenly: “When I first seen you out in the hall, Mr Hall, you could've knocked me down with a feather! I knew Alec were bringing along a hanger-on, but – well!”

I blushed and felt awkward eating my next bit of carrot with everyone watching, but I did all the same. I was hungry.


The man in purple – Philip – looked away, although actually he was more likely training his ear to the table, the better to hear us, I'd hazard now. Frank continued patiently with his tube.
“Oh lordy,” said Alec. “A garden party.”

“Oh come off it.”

“A mutual friend,” I said, speaking for the first. Alec sent me a grateful glance.

“Oh give over!” said Chuck – a girl, if you remember.

“Never you mind how we fell in! You’d not believe us anyway,” said Alec, which was probably true. Our history did have a touch of the fantastical about it.

“So there is a story. A good one!” said Chuck.

“No there isn’t. It's awful. Dull as nails.”

“Now, now,” said Katherine. “You're guests, you are, and you have to provide us with entertainment, that's how it works in civil society!”

“Is that right?” said Alec. “Guests are we?” Pausing in his eating, he reached into a pocket. He tossed an envelope onto the pile of papers beside Katherine's ashtray: “Have some rent.”

What confidence. Then again, there was fortitude in the fact that the envelope landed with a soft pat and not a jingle. Certainly Katherine looked a little surprised, but tucked it quickly into her papers.

“I thought you were down-and-out. Workin' in some mine or other up north.”

“That we were,” said Alec. “It were that back-breakin' we were savin' the whole time to leave.”

“Hm,” said Katherine, taking a slow pull.

“Aah, look... She's cross now that she cain't boss us around.” Alec nudged me. “That us aren't being
holden to her. Think I'd hand you over that power, tha' sneaky wench?!”

Jens gulped her tea, wide-eyed, but the others laughed. Katherine pretended vainly to look angry.

“Awe, Kath! I'm only codding with you.. Oh come here..” Alec put his arm around her for a quick squeeze. To seal this mollification, he added: “You know tha'rt beautiful! That's why I can make fun of you.”

“I did wonder if you'd gained a bit of cop-on since I saw you last.” She shook her smiling head.

“Well you've gained nowt,” he said, goosing her. “So tell us, did you come back here all on your own? Where's the rest of 'em, still circlin'? The – er – Hole in the Hedge?"

“We're the Hedgeliners now,” said Chuck haughtily. “The new batch.”

“We got fiddle,” she continued, poking Philip.

“Piano -” Jens.

“Brass.” Frank nodded.

“Well well,” said Alec, though he was more interested in mopping up the last of his gravy with the heel of the bread.

“Yah, it's all change,” said Katherine. “Oh – except Edward Taylor come back too – you'll see him later on tonight.”

“Oh yeh? Always liked him. He stoppin' here too then?”

“Oh no – lives wiv' his missus over Crompton Road. He's gone into fittin' but still comes helpin at the shows – I mean you'll see him later when we go out.”
“Out? Ooh.. I dunno..”

“Oh – come on,” said Chuck.

“Yes – don’t be depressing,” spoke Philip in rather a taunting tone. The peers were pressuring.

“It’s been such a long day, though,” said Alec, making out like he was trying to put them off. “Might just turn in.”

“You’ll have plenty of time all night for alla that,” said Katherine. “Come on – be a sport!”

“Alright then,” said Alec. He winked at me and I nodded acceptance; was feeling much more agreeable now that I was full of stew and bread and beer. That is to add – I was already eating with my cheeks bulging and spoon in the right hand and elbows on the table – what more was going ‘out’? Whatever that might entail with these fey musicians.

Add to, I still remembered enough of the civilized decrees to know that it was rather incumbent upon us, as newcomers, if not guests, to partake in the social mores, however distasteful, or worse – dull – they may be. Still, reflecting, was it not a stroke of golden luck that I did go out on that sodden hunt with Archie London way back! As oblivious I was to Alec zeroing in!

“Cracking! Cracking!” Katherine clapped her hands. “Alright, everyone – spruce! Spruce!”

Abandoning the meal, everyone got up from the table, and disappeared in different directions, presumably to their toilette.

We were left to deal with the pots.

“Why do I get the impression that a headache is going to be a permanent fixture for our entire tenure here?!”
Footpaths, allyways, short-cuts through parks and behind yards; arches, cobblestones, railings, gutters, grey, grey – ah London – and after twenty minutes walking we were grouped around a narrow, exterior stair-way that led from the pavement down to a plain black door, in an unremarkable building.

I looked around the innocent street, peopled with late shoppers, workers, messengers, mothers, nannies – normal folk, or so I presumed. Knowing the area – probably not.

Philip the violinist went down the stone steps and knocked on the door, and spoke through it. Everyone else in our party took this as completely commonplace and not at all the kind of behaviours one would associate with mystery stories or true crime tracts.

I loomed a little closer to Alec's back and he reached behind to hold my hand. Our neighbours knew and maybe strangers saw – couldn't say but no-one stopped him.

Inwards the door creaked, and we all descended down, down – no coincidence – into the den.

"Underground," I hissed to Alec, as we passed some menacing-looking fellows in the hallway. "Like as if it's a secret."

"That's a nice way of lookin' at it," said Alec warmly to me.

"It?"

We emerged into a large, open room – a kind of a parlour – thick with smoke and with couches, armchairs, tables all cluttered with glasses and bottles, plants and flowers. On the walls hung large ornate mirrors and paintings and tapestries. Carriage clocks and pictures on the mantel, drawers and desks and cupboards wedged edge to edge round the walls.
Flicking my editor's eye back over this description, the scene appears conventional enough; indeed suggesting images of a typical party or ball or gala. But now I must start on the people – oh the people!

Specifically, the clothes – or the costumes – that adorned with abandon. Velvet and silk, crushed and shiny; all manner of gratuitous colour combinations, with feathers, sequins, furs, lace trims, high laced boots, delicate barely-there pumps. I shan't even bother attributing these trappings to any particular sex – suffice to say that there wasn't much distinction. Edges very consciously blurred.

Strange mannerisms, exotic faces, peculiar, garbling accents. To the inescapable ear – chattering. Rising above that – laughter. Loudest of all – music! The piano was stonking hotly and with its riotous output came drums, bass, brass, violin, and a doe-eyed Sybil Vane singing atop – not a stage, but an ornate, mirrored, dark wood chiffonier.

Bedlam, in other words. Fewer words.

But there – I've typed it now. Well, sets the scene, what!

In we went – our coats were manhandled away, drinks were thrust and more people pouring in from behind pushed us forward into the room.

“Pretty quiet,” said Katherine. “Still, it is a Thursday.”

Like earlier, at the breakfast-table, our party departed to all directions, seemingly all with their own agendas.

Or potential partners they'd spotted.

“Eugh,” said Alec, peering. “Eugh, what's this ming floating in my tea?”

“Cherry petals, darling,” said a passing woman with bright red lips and slightly mad, black-lined eyes. “Imported from the Orient only this morning.”

“Well they can head straight back to the Orient,” said Alec lowly to me. He set his teacup on a
bookshelf and I did likewise. “Come on, let's see if us can find some proper tea wi’milk and sugar. My head couldnae take any alcohol, not with alla this racket.”

Real tea appealed, and appeared, when we scrounged around a grotty kitchen – still thronged with Bacchanalians – and discovered some leaves and sugar, although no milk. But it sufficed.

We made our way back to the drawing-room, or the mockery of it, where Alec found a spot on a sofa to sit on. Before I could register, leave alone object, he drew me down onto his lap.

“Alec,” I chided, but not very forcefully, and not leaping upwards but shifting around in a resigned sort of way so I wouldn't dead-leg him with my weight.

“No one's lookin’, don't take trouble,” said he, which was incorrect, in fact; people were looking, though with interest rather than disgust. Put it this way: it was unlikely we would have the Police called on us but all the same it was prudent to stay on one's toes. Even when one's sank right back in a settee.

It was in short an entirely new, chaotic environment for me, and, I think, also for Alec; I was grateful for the tea. I was positioned sitting awkwardly – half on him, and half on the lady beside him, pressing into her hip. She didn't appear to mind at all.

“Might just stay for t'one cup.” Alec and I were of one mind. “Only come out to show willin', really, and Kath'll not even notice, if she digs up Edward... That's the trouble wi'folk, they drag you out with sweet words and praises and then drop you like a hot spud when summat else catches interest.”

I was not folk. “I'm with you Alec. All that travelling and meeting and greeting we did today. I feel as though I could sleep for a century.” I rubbed an eye, hard; the music somehow pumped louder.

“We'll head back in a bit so,” said Alec. “Test out our new bed.” A look. “For sleepin', I mean!”

“Well, well!”

We looked up.
Standing beside us with one hand on the back of the sofa, and a crystal glass of wine or somesuch on the other, and a wry expression, and oh, hmm, what else, I search the memory banks... Dark hair, rather too long, clever eyebrows – too arched, too neat a moustache, and a cream coloured shirt just that much too billowy. Just too-too, all round. A resolute renegade, put bluntly. All quite deliberate and eye-catching. A challenger to the natural wallflower!

This stranger lightly touched a long scab on Alec's exposed, hairy lower arm.

“That's a poor nasty. A little accident, did we?” He gazed at Alec, completely discounting me, even as I was using Alec as a seat. I felt a small vibration as Alec forced back a snicker: “Yeh. T'weren't nowt.”

And the fellow was even more pleased at the sound of Alec's unrefined accent. Oh I can read these social nuances like a bawdy book now!

“You must have been doing something very dangerous and rough.” The newcomer dropped down to his hunches and traced Alec's scar. The arm on the arm-rest twitched instinctively, but he couldn't draw it back as there was the cup of tea in his hand.

And anyway – harmless, meaningless banter, perhaps. We were after all at a party. To be expected in a place like this. To an extent. Best not to make a scene. Though if necessary...

Therefore, with me comfortably on his knee, Alec replied breezily: “Oh aye. Workin’.”

“Is that so. And you must. Does it pain you?” The man grasped Alec's arm suddenly and I felt his body stiffen in instant defence. “Or have you – adapted? Perhaps you enjoy it!”

“Look,” said Alec, finally moving his arm – I took his tea - “Look, sorry, but – Piss off, will you?”

Immediately the aesthetic face dropped to darken and he stood up.

“Well!” he said huffily.

“Canna thee move on? I'm not – not interested.”
“If you're going to be like that about it!” Luxurious locks were angrily tossed. “I only wanted to tell you how very.. curious.. I find you.”

“If you do,” said Alec, “That's your business.”

“That's right,” I said, chiming in at last, although my very presence and position was providing, I venture, ample protection thus far. “Alec has no obligation to you just because you like the look of him.” I felt a grateful, warm arm around my waist.

“Oh of course you'll jump to his defence!” The man acknowledged me for the first.

“Of course I will! We're – after all – we're -” I faltered stupidly.

“You can't even say it,” said the fancy man in disgust.

[Exeunt]

I looked down at Alec. “I don't even know what I was going to say. What are we?”

Lovers wasn't enough. Too reductive. Partners – too businesslike. Friends wouldn't really cut it either, not when we lived for one another and would die for the same.

“Spoken for,” said Alec. “That's what we are.”

I wondered if Alec might have come over a little shy then, insecure, the stuffing knocked about, as it were, by this encounter. I didn't wonder long.

“Well, there's nary any point in sittin' here and pretendin' we don't hear the music.” Alec put our mugs on the coffee table. He jogged me. “Come on, pet, hop up. I bet tha'rt a right little mover!”

Whereupon I was hustled onto the wooden floor among all the people swirling and sweating and leaping about. Alec grabbed me expectantly and it become immediately clear – within three or so seconds, only a beat or two of the tune – that he hadn't the foggiest and so I took his hand and waist, and he followed, quite feverish with delight.
So it happened, we did indeed stay for only one drink, but for many dances. To the extent that it was quite two fatiguing hours later – gone midnight – when we managed to fight our way past the crowd, people still cracking open packets of cigarettes and hacking at ice-blocks with picks. Back up the stairs we struggled, and were ejected out on to the shiny wet street like paint squeezed out of a tube.

It was a slightly cloudy night, but some stars were visible when one craned, and the moon joined the street-lamps in lighting our way back to the artists' boarding-house. Home – for now, for all intents.

Alec's face was tired and glistening and I'm sure mine was too; the cobbles were rough on our pained feet, but the promise of a bed brought briskness. Alec were I were a strange but winning combination: on the one hand, he was much more familiar with these wild, rollicking, untraditional types and their cultural milieu.

But on the other: I was much more accustomed to London in general and the navigation of streets, footpaths, road crossings and borough signs on buildings. Therefore it was a collaborative effort getting us home, and worked well.

As we walked along the main thoroughfare of the Garden, the town was still quite active and bustling. Dispersed around, all manner of people: lurking in doorways, hurrying in drizzle, jumping in and out of cabs, calling and laughing, standing and leaning at lampposts... alleyways... railings... hanging around the sides of buildings, alone, in twosomes or groups...

Many of them women, in cheap bonnets, and long, tattery-edged gowns, more often than not with an item or scrap of red or pink in the costume. Some older and tired-looking, some impossibly young and terrified, others confident and catcalling.

Wayward women – and men too. They must have been, for they were – lounging against walls, countenance casual with hands in pockets, or smoking, or ribbing each other and laughing, but still obviously – waiting, performing, attempting to attract the attentions of passing gentlemen with smiles, whistles, jeers, pushing up their caps to reveal their handsome – eager? desperate? - faces to approach a stopper.

A customer. A punter. In his City hat, expensive, thick winter coat and gloves, evident as he gestured while evidently battering out terms with the nodding young fellow – all of the male workers were young, I noticed, unlike the women – and I felt an icy shiver shoot through me. I recognized a sick affinity, a glimpse of another life for me – my fate had I not met Alec: relegated to the outer limits of society, much more so than I was now, and so much more unpleasantly.
Reduced to paying someone to physically love me! Paying him to pretend! All while truly knowing what love was like – for it's something of a paradox, given its chasteness, but I did love Clive once.

And to think I may have spent my life, ended my days – likely prematurely – vainly scrambling for a shadow, a taste of knowingly false affection – with money, dirty money.

And yet – why did I relate so immediately with the older gentleman, the patron? My eyes slid over to his companion-to-be – his sharp, sly, beautiful face – tanned and dark-eyed and aged well beyond his natural years by his blank, businesslike expression.

Light hair tendrilled from under his cap; he wore a green scarf and a short coat much too thin for January. His hands were propped on his hips as he muttered to the gent; looking at the ground instead of into the face of his future lover.

Well, in the grand scheme of things, could not he also have been me? And my life his? Forced by need and necessity into selling my cardinal being for a living. Had I been born lower. Had I not been me.

Who decides – up above – before we are born – who will be fortunate and who must suffer? For we are all capable of hurt and we all appreciate and crave love. I see that so clearly now.

Alec noticed me staring at the cornerboy.

“Busy spot, ent it?” said he. “All sorts. I'll warrant the coppers don't even bother comin' down this way – they'd have to arrest everyone! Be here all night! Aw, Hell's Bells...” It started to rain in earnest. He grabbed my hand: “Come on and we'll run.”
Like a Virgin

Chapter Summary

And book. Now I'm off on hols to visit a friend; going to hassle her to visit Grantchester while we're there because I want to see the Rupert Brooke memorial. She's hmm'ing and haw'ing but said we can go punting on the Cam ha ha!!

For better or worse, it was marvellous to have a roof over our heads. In the interest of keeping our heads thus, we had our hair cut (badly, but for free, by the girls in the house); we put on decent clothes (there were simply roomfuls of gear to choose from at the Masterpiece, if one's tastes ran over a little to the fey), and set out to find work.

“Where?” said Alec, who was only too happy to leave some decisions to me.

“Employment agency,” I said promptly.

“Alright,” said he. “But what about me?”

“You too of course,” I said, as Alec scoffed. “Don't dismiss the idea off-hand. We don't know anyone here, but that's also advantageous – we're completely unknown, and can start afresh. We'll simply lay out our supposed skills and... we're as good as employed, lickety-slap!”

Alec remained unconvinced. Perhaps I ought to have excluded my closing idiom; it did come over rather flippant.

But if Alec is up for anything, it's something new: routine complaining be damned. Some inquiry, shop-window reading and shopkeeper-asking – the Katherine crew were of no help, suggesting only any number of theatrical agents, and Alec and I weren't quite so desperate as to embark upon a double-act – led us to a street with some dozen recruitment offices, and we joined a likely-looking queue outside a narrow, grey-bricked building. Our fates we therefore placed in the hands of 'Canning and Carey.'

Men – we inclusive – sat and leaned and folded and unfolded and read and sighed and waited – eventually we made it up the stairs where a put-upon secretary on the landing had us fill out forms and give names and details and references and preferences and the like.
Alec gnawed a bit on his pencil; I helped him (in writing, not gnawing), and he did moan and complain about the long long wait – it was near lunchtime by now and we'd arrived at eight. I let him, even joined in: hanging between us was the unspoken point that we had nowhere else particular to be, and it was of pretty pressing importance that we come into some income, quickly.

When one has a lump of savings, it seems so solvent and satisfactory; incredible how rapidly it begins to diminish upon setting foot outside the door!

I was called first, and I knocked and entered through a door at the end of the landing, with 'Mr Carey' painted on the blurry window.

Inside, the small room was small to begin with and was crammed with files, books, boxes and papers – on shelves, leaking out of drawers, balanced precariously on stools and window sills – I'd not have had the like of it on my own office. But perhaps there had been too much free space in my office; any sane person would be bouncing off the walls.

The recruiter was a short – well, he was sitting, but his arms were modest enough – balding, distracted sort of man in his rolled-up shirtsleeves. I felt very well-groomed in comparison but then again it was me and not he in the dock, at his mercy and up for judgement.

“How do you do?” I said, extending a hand.

“Right, right, and you,” he said, grabbing my hand and giving it one quick shake. “Name?”

Oh. Hall. Maurice Hall.” I had no qualms about using my real name. I had no reputation, no fame to begin with, and it was unlikely that there'd be any organized connectivity between the recruitment agencies and the stockbroking sector. Perish!

One doesn't come here, to a professional job-hunter, to work in the City – but in the city – the outskirts, the menial, the unpolished. For the capital City you navigate the long way round, via Oxbridge, or no way at all. My parchment degree certificate, hanging dustily on the wall at Mother's, was unlikely to be of any use to me here and now.

It mattered not who I knew, now where I had been educated; there were now no silver spoons nor strings to pull. Witness the true test of my mettle!
Mr Carey was speed-reading my application and I tried to sit calmly in the kitchen chair, though it felt a bit like waiting for your tutor to mull and mumble and finally spit out your exam results or essay mark. Not happy memories.

“Alright,” said he – and moved his eyes directly from my sheet to a pile of blank forms beside him on the desk, the topmost of which he grabbed and dipping ink, he affirmed: “Office experience -”

“Yes – you could say -”

“Clerical.” He cut me off, taking only to himself: “Good writing and probably reading..”

“Certainly,” I said – also to myself.

“Number crunching,” he muttered, splattering black dots as he scribbled away.

“Numbers? Oh yes – most certainly -”

“Type?”

“I'm sorry?”

“Typing speed? Can you type?”

“Er – er, yes. Of course!” Well, I could read type.

“Shorthand?”

“Yes!” With a straight face. I mean to say, it couldn't be that dogged difficult, surely?
With impressive speed – he must get paid by the case – Mr Carey blotted his page, grabbed another and flicked tick-tick-ticks alongside a list of boxes, gave it a firm STAMP with wooden and rubber, folded both pages into an envelope, extended it to me, and said, without looking up, “Take this to the address written tomorrow morning. See Miss Laverly. And send in the next.”

Well! I wasn't his employee. But I said: “Thank you”, and, deciding it was futile to expect another handshake out of him, departed.

Alec gave a wobbly smile as he passed me to go in next, while I settled with the secretary for the both of us. She passed no mind.

It wasn't five minutes later that Alec emerged, bearing his own envelope. Even five minutes – four! - seemed rather a lot, given Carey's brusque manner!

We compared over coffee. I had been assigned to a semi-state office in Lissom Grove, which dealt with the external auditioning of tax and public expenditure. Bottom rung, of course, but I was pleased; Alec mystified.

He examined the sheet of paper that Mr Carey had stamped in red ink. “Certified recommendation,” he read aloud slowly. He waved it. “How come you got one of these? I didn't.” He looked in his own envelope again to make sure. “Carey don't know either one of us from Adam. How come you got a gold star – why's he think you're more brainier an' more respectable than me?”

I didn't like to answer. It was a bit embarrassing – ought I apologize, or tear the letter up? Try and arbitrarily enforce equality? But the document itself wasn't the issue, I knew that much. It was the why and wherefore.

Really I was all at sea, and still formulating a response, when Alec, annoyed, answered himself: “I s'pose it's cause o' your hoity-toity way of speakin’.”

“And nothing more. Perhaps we could get you elocution lessons.”

Murderously I was looked at from deep under-brow. “Wot, learnin' how to talk fancy, is it? I'd die of shame.”

“I'd die of heartbreak,” I said. “I love your voice.”
This proved pleasant to his ears. “Tell you what,” said he, leaning nearer. “That were that nerve-addlin’, that were. I don't like offices an' papers an' pens and things. Make me right shifty. I could serious do wi'a drink, but I've to be at work at -” He consulted his sheet and groaned - “A-sap. That's if I want the job at all.”

Alec had been directed down to Southwark, where there was construction work going on at the Underground, via the city.

“The council,” he said hopefully. “That sounds decent, dunnit?”

“Right decent,” I said, as we began walking. “A right distance too though – all the way across to the South Bank! We better start now so we can memorize for future reference the buses, or trams, or..”

“We? You'll come with me? All the way?”

“Of course,” I said, and was again almost mortified by his red cheeks and shining eyes.

With Alec deposited, with misgivings, and fidgets and a promise that we would re-convene at five forty-five, I was left to go home and work out routes, and budgets, and rising-times, and try and vainly dredge up any memories of the administrative skills of my one-time secretary. Perhaps I could have phoned her for advice. She really was very sweet!

However it would have taken a team of secretaries to bring me up to speed, and in fact it more or less did. Upon arrival at the Lissom Grove Auditors, I went through several staffing channels on my best behaviour before being shown to my desk – that is, a large heavy table with three other occupants.

My corner was set up with typewriter, pens, adding machine and on on the floor behind: heaps of papers presumably to be filled in and placed in the three trays in the middle of the table.

“You'll want to crack your knuckles,” said Ms Ellman, who was showing me around. I gave a laugh, shucking my coat and tugging at the fingers of my gloves. “Really,” she pressed. “Your hands will be in an awful way by the end of the day.”

“Oh - I see. I'll take that on board, thank you.”
She smiled, looking younger with it, her fair hair so scooped up. Pointing, she said: “There’s where you’ll hang your hat and coat.” Pointedly too, she didn’t offer to take them, and I was glad. I was my own man now.

Own man – and only man – almost. In the large room, which I cast the peepers over as I sat town and pulled forward, I could pick out – three other men, and perhaps forty women.

The typing pool! I was extremely glad Clive couldn't see me. Or mother. Or Alec – though he would be tickled more than anything. And he would be hearing all the details later anyway.

Tickled – my co-workers were – apart from the men who kept the head down and the papers flowing, as did most of the women, except, right at this moment, my three grinning table-mates and a ripple of others around my epicentre.

Giggles and smiles and whispers – well I favoured them to frowns and grunts and judgements, for now.

Confessionally, I'd never had a lot to do with women – except my own lot – the lady Halls – and I had had even less glimpses of the other sex in my months since Alec.

Even so I had to admit that the large, wood-pannelled, busily clacking and coffee smelling room had a soothingly domestic atmosphere, one that I would have scorned at a year ago, but recent events and emotions had kindled in me a sincere appreciation for the soft, the sweet, the achingly human.

Even if it was I who was the source of amusement, well, a laugh is a pleasant thing, taken impartially, isn't it? I chanced a small smile in return.

More grins, before paper shuffling and noisy typing increased in volume and intensity as a brown suited, maroon waist-coated manager strode by. I followed the ladies' example, grabbing papers; he paused by me and continued on his way, sucking on his pipe.

This work was ridiculously easy – the number crunching anyway. Half or more of the calculations one could do in the head and I'm far from a genius! The typing took me down a peg or two however, you may be glad to hear.
Certainly I half hated the great beast of a contraption by lunchtime – paper got stuck, paper got ripped, paper wouldn't go in, wouldn't come out. It would try me so.

One of the girls – on the table-corner opposite – noticed me in desperate blunder changing the ribbon, and came over kindly to help. She was Miss Rathbone, and without her advice, and the ink from Miss Ellison, and the assistance with the wobbly table leg from Miss Gardiner, I should have had a bad time and a short career at the Auditors.

As it was, the time flew quite rapidly, and one o' clock found me heading to the canteen flanked by my workmates, all vying and laughing and asking all manner and pointing things out. Why, you would think they hadn't laid eyes on a man since the fall of Babylon!

I looked a bit desperately round the modest food hall for one of the other male employees I was sure I had glimpsed earlier, but there was something of a crush going on and it was easier to queue and sit.

“We go out for lunch often,” said Ms Gardiner, her big eyes appealing.

“Well, Fridays,” said Ms Rathbone, whom out of all of them had her feet planted most firmly in the ground. Alas that she was correspondingly the quietest.

“So you can come too Mr Hall!”

“With us!”

“Other fellows come too! Look, here's Mr Braddon.”

A tired man, a little on the short side with thinning brown hair and inky fingers approached. He poised to sit beside me but Ms Ellison didn't budge, instead smiling prettily at him. No flies on these working women!

With a minor grumble, Mr Braddon was obliged to sit across from me and one down. All the same, he stuck a hand over, elbowing more than one nose on the way.
“Braddon, Felix... Welcome aboard!”

I hastened to wipe my fingers of crumbs and butter and seize. “Hall, Maurice... How do you do?”

He whistled. “Quality!”

“Oh stop,” said Ms Rathbone, giving him a square look over her spectacles.

“What brings you here?” Braddon was sympathetic – no, empathetic – some kind of pathetic!

“Through a recruiter,” I said. “I must say, I was considerably lucky; there was an awful crowd of people looking for work there! I mean – awful in number, not in – that is – erm -”

“I mean – what are you doing here? In this line? This bloody racket!” He mimed typing feverishly, even changing the paper for show. I took a sip of tea and let him continue a while.

“What's wrong with this line?” said Ms Gardiner, as Ms Ellison piped: “What's wrong with this racket?”

“How did you happen to come here, Mr Hall? Forgive us, but – oh come now, you are a little unlikely.” Ms Rathbone brought her calming influence, the one she also used out on the floor during disputes. You wouldn’t believe the squabbling I was yet to witness!

“You're a gentleman, she means,” said Ms Ellison.

“Jane! Don’t speak out of turn!”

As to me, I smiled indulgently but inwardly bemoaned. Why in God’s name were people forever prying? What was the hook? Back before, when I was normal – stockbroker, son, brother, face on the train – I drew very little attention, perhaps allowing my own inner demons fester for so long. Small wonder Dr Barry all but laughed in my face when I suggested that I was a little different.

Now the trick (and it's a trick, you learn these things more instinctively than the alphabet or times-tables) was not the stories themselves, but the selling of them. You want to sound ordinary enough to
pass muster, but off-putting to the extent that they mayn't inquire further.

Trouble is, the 'life-questions' are so general that any measure of evasiveness looks suspicious. And I wished to invite absolutely no more outside interest than was necessary, if Alec and I were to live, and live quiet.

“Well, I'm experienced in – office, I - I was in admin years,” I flustered. “In Argentina!” Well, I could hardly lay claim to having been employed as an under-gamekeeper for the past year.

“Oh yes?” said Ms Rathbone with interest.

Ah. More. “Er – yes. I was – you know. Government. In an – advisory capacity and – and there were skirmishes, in the area, you know, quite dangerous, political unrest. Special task-force brought in. Martial law.” Good lord. What was I twaddling on about? Let it never be henceforth said that I lack imagination. “I and some others thought it best to return to England still in one piece.”

“How exciting!” said Ms Ellison.

“Oh, not really,” I said weakly.

“I'd just love to go out Foreign! How did you fix it?” demanded Mr Braddon. “I suppose it's all about who you know – back scratching, under the table, sort of thing?”

“Not at all – I – well, I – you, naturally you first reach a certain level in the Service and – and then apply for the decentralization grant, and -”

Lunchtime was ten times more wearying than the actual work!

Five o’ clock rolled around and I was right there to punch out with the others, and the waves and goodbyes were nice and congenial and the rest; how would they all react should they ever discover just who I was going home to, however. And what I'd hopefully be doing with him.

I made my way via tram to the River and met Alec where we intersected; I was was glad to find that he had not had trouble wending his way northward. From there it was walking distance to Covet Garden; on the way way I amused Alec greatly with my fresh history, in part borrowed from his brother.
“He’d grouse, but really he’d be right flattered – would Fred. No, it were well wily of thee, Maurice,” he said, understanding even though he’d had it easy: when asked about his past at his own workplace, he’d merely caged, ‘oh, here and there’ and it was readily accepted.

Acceptance! Such a simple thing to want and near impossible to imagine. Alec prattled as we picked up food and wound down side streets and around parks and through overgrown back-yards.

“You was doin' sums all day? Sounds easy! Rather you than me though of course – even if you did get to stay inside in the warm.”

“Are you bitter because of this? Shall I join you on your juncture? I can do, easily -”

“No! No, no, I'm only delighted to have you good an' cozy all day. Looka – your cuts'll be healed up in jig time and I can let my hair grow back a bit too.. You and all, mebbes..”

By now we had reached the relative sanctity of the under-theatre and I allowed Alec to pull the back of my hair playfully as he spoke.

There weren't many people about – there were the usual bangs and clatters from above, and screeching instruments below – this was home but an odd one, people coming in and out all hours, familiars and strangers intermingling.

We heated our dinner and brewed our tea and sat facing each other at the kitchen table where it flanked the wall, so we could put our feet on the hot pipes running along the skirting.

“It won't come between us, then? My working in an office again and you – out of doors?” I was labouring the point, and affected brightness, but I needed reassurance. There really wasn't any point in anything if Alec was unhappy.

“Not half! I'm as happy, Maurice, that you're doing summat what suits you better, and is nice and safe inside. And I'm not exactly out of doors – I do be Underground! Well out of the rain! And I got to use a jackhammer today!” He provided an imitation: the sort of mealtime behaviour that was all too common and encouraged at the Masterpiece – actors.
I looked at the carriage clock on top of the coat-press. “Better go upstairs and get some sleep before that racket starts.” I was referring to the music downstairs, which would only get louder when the show started proper at ten PM. Odd hours – but then again, odd people, the lot of us.

“Wonderful! I'll come with you.” Alec tossed down his napkin.

“How's that going to work?” I said as he put his arm around me and led us to the stairs. “When it's sleeping we ought to be doing?”

“Oh don't worry, we'll do it quiet.” Which made all kinds of no sense.

And so it was for a spell; this day proved typical. It was still mid-winter and sporadically snowing; frost formed on the windows just as frequently and ferociously as it had done in the freezing forest.

In the wee hours of dawn, as practically everyone else in the building slept it off, Alec and I roused and bathed and snuck down the creaky stairs to breakfast. In the civic interest we lit the fires and loaded them with enough coal to last until Katherine or Jens or some other yawned their way downstairs.

Meanwhile, I dispatched Alec on a tram to get him as far as Waterloo Bridge – I insisted on the expenditure, though he protested – and I caught the number 78 bus to Lissom Grove. Off on our separate endeavours.

A wrench, you might say, to be separated all the daylight hours; all the same it made us all the more appreciative and fond of one another when, tired and beaten and stooping we would catch sight of each other at our usual meeting-place: by the bridge, underneath the same lamp-post, by the same plant-pot, every evening without fail.
It did a great deal for the old self-confidence too: to each be out earning a modest but honest crust like any man and having the freedom – the front! - to come home to each other. It almost felt like cheating, like as if we were getting away with something!

But we weren't; we were scot-free because there was nothing we didn't deserve and no reason to feel guilty. We had simply decided this, by mutual agreement.

In the shiny wet street, we matched pace and passed bars, restaurants, hotels, lounges, schools, colleges, department stores, gardens, clubs, churches, theatres, libraries, museums, and in not a single one amongst them could there have been a person happier than we.

For we had the combined happiness of two – doubled – and more. Alec's delight made me delighted – and mine he – and forever will that circle. I mean I've written it now. In ink! So it's a done thing.

Back at the theatre we disassembled, ate our tea, checked the papers for rooms but not too avidly. In the kitchen it wasn't unheard-of to find one or any number of strangers draped around in various stages of costume for the evening.

Depending on the mood, or state of exhaustion, Alec and I would sit and listen to the players rehearse around the kitchen, even being persuaded into running lines with them when they discovered we could read – a rarity among actors who focus more on ceremony than the cerebral.

As to us: we were, all in all, so satisfied with our lot, our life and each other, imbued with a spirit of generosity that led us to help without grumble but with enthusiasm: we repaired utilities around the house, swept the walks, dug leaves out of gutters, took apart and carried and re-affixed the stage-sets, scrubbed graffiti off the shop-front. All even after a day's working.

All with unfailing good cheer and enjoyment with the old place and its loose and lively inhabitants; at least until it all became rather too rumbustious.

“Oh drat that,” said Alec. “We endure, we do, but opera singing is where I draw the line. Come on.” And on I'd come, and we'd go out, of an evening, to go to the cinema, or wander around the late-night shops looking at high-end clothes, occasional furniture, imported wine, books, records, tobacco.

We leaned on the railings of the cricket-green and played audience; or got chestnuts and watched the
boats on the river, the moonlight sparkling; or go to a pub or more often a night-cafe, sat at a table in
the window, boldly huddled closely in the crowded room, drinking coffee after coffee among the
 candles, and then trying all the different teas; I concentrating on my Trollop and Alec perusing his
Boy’s Own, idling over biscuits and toast, occasionally greeted as we became more regular: by very
odd people, who peopled the Garden but then again as I must keep reminding myself we were
perhaps oddest of all, wrapped up in our own rose-tinged world of two.

Generally when we arrived back, the theatrics were still in full swing – on the stage this time, rather
than the kitchen – and so we thought we may as well go watch the end of it. In this way we got the
gratis pleasure of singers, dancers, variety acts involving hoops and hankies and pigeons, comedy
routines, dare-devil performances, comic poetry readings, farcical sketches and lampoons.

Often as we sat at the very back with our feet up on the empty seats in front of us we would converse
over what groceries we needed, or chores needed seeing to, or that very annoying work colleague. It
was a wonder we got any sleep at all. For myriad reasons.

Occasionally, I spotted a speck of wistfulness in Alec’s eyes, when lighting upon a tree, or a bird, or
a cartful of straw being trundled down the street. Clearly he was still a country boy at heart.

But upon confronting him about it, he kept up his constant assurance that he was perfectly happy and
not a bother, he was getting used to city life – acclimatizing – except, the bugbear of lying in bed in
the middle of the night – the constant, continuing noise outside, of traffic, and shouts, and carryings-
on.

Quite different to the quiet and solitude of the rural night-time, and I was well used to it, but as Alec
said, it would take a thunderstorm to keep us awake, so ran off our feet all day were we.

Specific setting had faded into irrelevancy. One might think that, city-born as I am, I would now take
the lead in our partnership, helping and coaching my doting protégée, his admiration glowing as I
guided him around London, around the streets, smog, sophistication of the city; just as he had been
obliged to all but carry me around the countryside.

Alas this was not to immediately be; Alec was still leading me around by the nose. The way all else
became invisible whenever he entered the room and a dullness descended when he quitted it; the
way, dozing, I would awaken, elated, at the sound of his distant voice; and how I succumbed,
helpless, nightly to his loving attentions underneath the hodge-podge of sheets and blankets and
 garments and costumes that we used for bedding.

Warm and sure his hand would wander and I would crumble like fresh fingered cake: “Oh Alec..
Make love to me!!”
Surely he did. Surely he enjoyed our trysts as much as I; however it was a growing ambition of mine to orchestrate, so that he enjoy them just as I, just the way I did. I pictured him, pliant, accommodating, wide-eyed waiting, leaned right back comfortably; the beloved now watching the approaching movements of his lover.

I was determined to turn the tables; to seduce and reduce my darling, chattering, bold and brash boy to nothing more than a warm, soft, rocking and revelling body, a soul unthinking but living, for just the interim, solely for pleasure.

This might take some wrangling.

Alec wasn't particularly given over towards personal hedonism; I hoped sincerely that it was his generous nature, and not some residual social more, that motivated his continual prioritizing of my needs – sexual and otherwise – over his own and indeed anyone's.

Of course I hardly objected. But I began to crave his – neediness, to imagine his – willing supplication, for him to place himself in my hands completely and trust in me, let me take him, take care.

Not such an easy feat in a relationship composed of two men. I should think that in the traditional marital bed, roles are as fixed and unwavering as they are in polite society: man lead and woman follow. Or else I read those etchings in the sand completely wrong.

At any rate, Alec and I were free-wheeling, making it all up as we sent along, and though this was daunting, it was also exhilaratingly liberating. If we could be, (and were, like or no), avant-garde in out lifestyles and living arrangements and company – why not be so similarly capricious in the bedroom department?

I tapped my finger on my mouth, I lingered over tea, I thought and dreamed and eyed him over the dinner-plate, I coloured with anticipation; my bravery ebbed and flowed, and still Alec suspected noth -

“What're you up to?”

“Wh-what?” I took my head off my propping hand and looked up into bright brown eyes.
“Tha’rt miles away,” said Alec. “Are you runnin’ lines in your head now? Don’ let these bloody players exploit your kind heart! Let ’em learn readin’ themselves instead of spending the whole time mincin’ about on stage!”

He grinned at me even as there were shrill protests from various armchairs dotted around the parlour. We were sharing one, Alec hopping on the arm before I could stop him. I nudged him.

“How? What is it?” He bent his head down to me.

“Come upstairs,” I whispered, grateful that some joke or nonsense from the other side of the crowded room took general attention and all but drowned out my voice, except to one.

“Oho,” said he, eyes lighting up. “Like that, is it?” He laughed as I took his empty cocoa-mug, put it on the sideboard and got up.

But it’s nigh on impossible to get ahead of Alec; in all my years – grand education inclusive – I never saw a sharper lad nor a quicker one. Out in the hall he took my hand as usual and began to climb the stairs.

“Oh but -” I said – already I was being ridden roughshod, even when the romantic invitation had clearly been mine. Alec turned askance, and I smiled and waved at him to continue. Once he was upstairs and maybe the ambience would...

“What’s all this..?” Alec stood in our room and looked about him in surprise. The drapes were drawn tightly against the snow; the rugs were beaten and the higgledy-piggledy odds and ends were neatly tidied away into the wardrobes and drawers.

From the hearth, which I’d emptied of ballet slippers, building blocks and old magazines, a healthy fire now crackled. More soft flames danced shadows on the ceiling from candles on the mantel and shelves.

Flowers, I thought, would have been a bridge too far; I couldn't risk Alec taking it all as a joke. Still I searched around for the most attractive-looking bottle of wine I could find. Vintage-wise, and rather more fundamentally, taste-wise – I couldn’t yet comment.
Alec, too, was lost for words, for once. I didn't bother to answer his question verbally, as he was finding out by himself. His gaze roved over the soft surroundings; his nose must have smelled the fresh sheets. I had been planning for ages and now, the execution.

“Sit on the bed,” I said, pointing. Alec looked at the bed – it warranted it, never had it looked so neat – looked back at me, shrugged and plopped down bouncily on the blankets. With one hand he began unbuttoning his waistcoat; the other he held out to me: “C’mere.”

“No,” I said. “I mean, I -” Oh I felt an absolute tool – already I could imagine his strong confident hands upon me, firm and pressing – but no! I balled my own confident hands, came over and bent down to lift his feet onto the bed. Again he facially questioned but shuffled back gamely to allow me to sit on the edge of the bed, facing him.

He reached out both hands to grasp my shoulders and start pushing aside my cardigan. I took them in my own and laid them in his lap. Straight-away he began to slide them along my thighs.

“Will you – you're like a puppy!” I laughed, exasperated, pushing them back, again.

“What?” he said. “What's up? Aren't we..”

“Look,” I pressed him gently on the chest with my palm. “Just – lie down, and let me..”

Let me – I wasn't exactly sure what yet to be starting with but inspiration would strike.

“Oh,” said Alec, finally twigging, and he lay back on the pillows and – tellingly – spread his legs. He lifted his hips a little and set to un-doing his corduroys. “You want to -”

“Oh – that?” I said, realizing what sex-act he was referring to. The sex act.

“Yeh – that. Ha!”

“No,” I said – no. So tempting, but no: the mood that I hoped to cultivate was entirely inconducive to the animalistic (heavenly!) humping of that particular carnal undertaking. In fact such was the fair physicality of the Whole Thing that we hadn't done it that way much at all, since last we were in
London, an Ice Age ago.

It was just so exhausting, on Alec much more so than me, even though I was supposedly the active party – still, each time had left Alec – well, fagged – and all the more weary at work the next day.

So we had shelved it in Shropshire. Maybe we'd dust it down again. But not tonight.

Tonight was about Alec, lovely Alec, and making him feel warm and wanted and safe and loved – all the good things.

“I thought I'd – I want to make you feel good,” I said, stroking his face and he smiled slowly.

“What were you thinkin’ on?”

“I'll – undress you. And kiss you all over. And you let me. You'll be – quite mad with desire,” I added boldly.

He laughed, though it might have been nerves. “Alright,” said he, looking almost painfully excited and anticipatory.

“Alright.” I said too and firstly petted only his hair a few times; I was aware that my little speech and the re-arrangement of roles had ignited the interest but also sent the tension through the ceiling. We both knew what I was going to do, but not how we would feel about it.

Alec for his part was clearly finding it nervously novel to relinquish control – especially to one as bumbling and inexperienced as I!

But I did as I had bid, and undid him of his waistcoat, and shirt, and vest, and trousers, and one sock, and the other, him watching all the time, propped up on the pillow, and breathing sharply through his nose when he felt the touches here and there.

Once or twice I laughed, with the jitters; really it was so silly, the whole thing, when you stop and consider: two grown adults, one slowly undressing the other's prone form, and the prone merely lifting an arm or wriggling about to accommodate the other to slide off his underwear... I did this as sensually as possible and left them on the chair with the rest of his garments.
Sporadic cracks and snaps issued from the fire and the flames – I need hardly tell you but nevertheless, I shall, to commemorate it forever further in my mind – how the flickering firelight perfectly complimented Alec's beautiful body, naked, nubile, here white for the winter and there red with flushing emotion. Waiting.

He'd gone quiet. His body he kept determinedly still. But I observed the muscles clenching in his arms and chest and neck, the sheer demanding in his eyes. So he hadn't yet given himself over to reception.

I loosed my collar, undoing a button or two, but nothing more, remaining myself clothed. With my elbow on the pillow beside his head, I leaned right over him, without actually touching him.

Agog he gazed at my face as I hovered over him; he turned his head to the side eagerly as I lowered, predicting my lips were going to: “Would you like some wine?”

He re-opened his eyes. “Wh – wine?”

“Yes,” I said, and it was an ideal diversion, obliging me to leave the bed and repair to the chest-of-drawers, and rummage out two cups.

Alec propped himself up on his elbows to watch me. “Tha'rt just teasin' me,” he complained.

“It's only a tease if it doesn't lead somewhere eventually.” I poured out two generous measures and handed him one. “Are you in a dreadful hurry?”

“Not at all!” And he happily took a deep gulp, only to splutter half of it back out. “Jesus – that's rank. I mean – er – strong. That'll you make you – I'll -” And coughing.

“It's supposed to be sipped,” I said, the analogous symbolism not lost on me.

Recovering his breath, redder than ever, he nodded and took a more cautious amount. I sat back down tugging habitually on the trouser material at my knees to loosen.
“Don't seem fair,” said Alec. “You got all your gear still on and I'm here bare as a jay-bird.”

“It's not supposed to be fair,” I said. “The workload is meant to be on my shoulders.” And I patted one of my own. He laughed; he was still taking me jaunty.

I took a little more bracing wine and set down the mug; Alec did the same with his empty one. He wriggled back onto the pillows and waited more.

Oh dear. All of the anticipation I had myself created with my would-be debonair air was affecting me now! I wiped my brow with a sleeve and crept over to cover his body entirely with mine, sliding my hands under him to caress his back, and immediately I felt his arms wrap around my shoulders and his legs around my waist. I kissed his neck, just those soft ones – butterflies.

My right thigh pressed gently right between his legs; a small groan followed by a sniffle, followed by lowly: “Don’ let go yet,” for I had prepared to loosen.

“I'm just going to kiss you,” I said. “Remember?”

“Alright.”

“So... I'll start here.” On his cheek.

“Alright I said!” He tried to thrash about childishly but I held his arms firm.

“Relax,” I said.

He panted. “With ever' inch o' you pressed against me?!”

“Try.”

“Ugh – fine.” His arms went – it took some effort – limp.

“You you'll stay still – will you?” I soothed, stroking his chest.
“Yes..”

I kissed all over his cheeks, hair, ears, down his jaw, neck – before I left his face.

“Good boy,” I said. “How well you are behaving. Doing what you're told.”

Audibly he intook. “Well.. You only told me to wait like this..”

“And so you shall.”

And so I did. I carefully, slowly – tortuously, he’d say later – dropped kisses – dotted them, sprinkled them, scattered them, peppered them – whatever cooking term you wish to apply – all over every inch of bare skin I had available to me – and I had it all.

Covering his chest entirely with a lingering over the nipples. That drove him crazy.

I kissed his arms, down to fingertip, then laid them gently aside to bend my head to the soft sensitive flesh on his flanks. He all but squirmed.

Even his intimate area received the same temperate attentions as the rest of his body – to his obvious chagrin.

“Don't worry,” I said, bestowing only a stroke or two there – you know where – despite his whining. “I promise you'll be taken care of, just I don't believe I've ever kissed your legs – and I so admire them.” He kicked them to fully advertise their allure and I caught one foot and kissed it.

“HAY!! Ha-ha-ha-no!!”

“No?”

“I mean – yes! Only – I'm so ticklish. You know. Go gentle on my legs like you been doin' – I love it – but not on me feet, it'll just send us ructuous.”
“Alright,” I agreed. “Although that sounds like an order.”

“It’s a suggestion.” It wasn't his last. When I squeezed his hip to make him roll over onto his front, I settled down to focus on his strong shoulders, his back that twitched under my hands and lips.

“Maurice.” Even with his face half-buried in pillow, and his breathing laboured, I heard: the only sound apart from my loving administering was faint rollicking music from two relieving stories down.

“Hn?”

“Give us a mark – will you?”

“A -”

“You know. Wi your teeth.” Alec made a bold request, but was eyes averted and pillowed.

“Please..” I just about made out.

“Of course,” said I, and mouthed over his shoulder-blades, stopping at a sensitive spot curving up towards his neck. “Here?”

“Yeh..”

And I started, with kisses, and licks, and soft biting, all in the same freckled square inch, spurred on by the darkening bruise and his moving on the blankets, his arms going up under the pillow and clutching it.

“Oooo...”

“If it were summer,” I said between nips, “You might get into bother if you had to strip off in the sun with the heat. Your workmates might see.”

“It ent summer,” groaned Alec. “Anyroad I’d tell ’em truthful someone very – ooo – gorgeous and wonderful and sinful done it on me.”

“You want to get off,” I breathed.
“YES!!”

“But I'm not finished yet. So much more skin to go.” And I easily ran my hand from his shoulders down to his heels. Really he's only little!

Alec whimpered in protest.

“Calm down, my angel,” I said. “I mean to jolly well see the thing through.” He froze and then melted into the bedsheets again, whereupon I – even slower than before – resumed my meandering trail of kisses all over his back, and bottom, which he liked particularly – I was very thorough! - down to his feet, and it got trickier all along as his legs trembled and toes curled at the build up, the burgeoning -

I was getting impatient myself, desperate for release – but I grabbed my fervent desire, wrestled it, locked it in an arm, brought it to its knees. I wanted tenderness, man's romance, the male fairytale. I wanted *time* to cease, but to go on and on unfettered.

And so I scrambled back up the bed, scooped him in my arms to roll towards me, catching only a glimpse of his scarlet face and dark, clouded eyes before I lowered and kissed him, not deeply, not plunging and ravenous, but long and lingering, one arm round his body binding him to me, the other on his own palm on the pillow...

...Until I trailed it down his panting, undulating form to reach for his erection, which was at full capacity, if you will, and I ran my hand firmly over it once or twice; Alec wrenched lips from mine and reached for me, trying to fight, one-handed, with my trousers - “Argh! Damnit!!”

“Darling – *darling* – don't.” I removed his hand and pressed it back into the pillow as he pleaded with his eyes. “Don't concern yourself with me – no, I mean it. Just lie back, and simply concentrate on yourself, your own feelings.. Can you even do that, do you think?” I wondered aloud.

“S'pose,” he whispered.

“Good.. Very good. Now, don't you worry about a thing, old thing. Just give over.. that's it... think about my hand – going – like this, oh you're so very near, are you not, it's coming rushing and you can't help it, nor ought you and – oh -”
Alec clamped his eyes and bit his lip and dug his stubby nails into my shoulder with the wracks of passion, and let out bare whines even though I hadn't bid him be silent, and he had stayed as still as he could though huffing and puffing as he went in my hand, that I slowed now but kept familiar..

“There we are now.. My beautiful boy.. There's my bonny lad..” Surreptitiously I wiped my hand on a hankie, and soothed his soaking hair back from his forehead.

To my mild surprise he clung to me then, and there was a sniffle, and words in the warm room: “You really love me.”

He buried his snotty nose into my shoulder. In the cold light of day this was all going to seem mawkish, and sweet – but embarrassing – but was it? Was this as much 'us' as – as – 'day-us'? I know I was never more truthful as when I replied.

“I do.. Ever so.”

Those arms circled me tighter for just a second, before he drew back, bringing my pullover with him, tugging it over my head.

“Oh, there's no need to tend to me, Alec, love.. Yes, I'm excited but that will gradually diminish – oh...” For he was not not attempting to divest me of my outfit with erotic ambitions as I had thought; he pulled my cardigan on himself, poked his head through and snuggled up against me.

“I were a bit cold, and you're no'allowed to leave the bed,” he said.

I kissed his head. “I'm happy you're happy.”

“That's not enough,” he said low into my chest. “What you just said. It don't describe.”

I shuffled his hair. “Silly,” I said, attempting to guide the climate of the room back to playful and breezy.

But it was too late. I had made the marital bed. Already something had altered. But more than that. Grown. Strengthened. And yet softened.
What happens in the bedroom does not necessarily stay there; human beings are the world's great variant. For quite some time after this particular night, Alec took on; he sat gazing dreamily into space, and sighing, and moping about after me, and giving me the doe-eyes, and clutching my hand sudden and blushing, dropping it, and mooning about going 'Cor' and 'Wow' and 'Geez' and that was about as much sense as one could get out of him, for a time.

Really, he was so wretchedly obvious (and oblivious), that the other inhabitants of the house certainly noticed; it was dead embarrassing and yet awfully endearing – Alec in a nutshell, in other words.

It was a side-effect I had not anticipated: I suppose when you make love you actually do create something beyond the physical. All of that pleasure and good doting feeling had not evaporated come the dawn, but settled residually in Alec's heart. And in mine of course, though I was less of a tool about it.

Read between the above lines of course and you'll see unequivocally that in truth I adored it, adored him.

One dark Thursday morning I awoke, stretched, rolled over and saw that the space next to me was just that – a space. My slippers were missing too: he'd already gone down.

Blearily I folded myself into my worksuit and wrapped the dressing-gown over it, descending the creaky stairs and entering the kitchen, yawning.

Low, early-morning conversation was simmering around the table. Alec looked up as I pushed the door and he broke into a grin.

"Mornin'! Good, you're up: I were abou' to come up and rouse you, I know you like to be plenty early but you looked so right peaceful – that and you were out for the count. Come! Sit! Here you – shove over -" And he nudged at Frank, who was darning, and now shifting over on the bench to make room for me.

"Tea? Or coffee?" said Jens, getting up from the opposite side of the table. Alec and I had started throwing a little extra money Katherine's way for 'board' as well as 'room' and so the kitchen was always good for breakfasts and dinners and teas should we ever want them.
The fare came courtesy of Jens and Chuck, whom besides piano-ing and trumpeting were both apparently in Katherine's hospitable employ. It was convenient if we arrived home from work too exhausted to prepare food ourselves or didn't happen to be eating out that night.

“Coffee please, if it's there.”

“Only a potful!”

Jens brought a hot plateful of eggs and bacon and toast and jam and I tucked in. I gave a chewing, offering expression to Alec, who was very immediate to my working elbows.

“Oh – no,” he said. “I've already had mine.”

I swallowed. “Have some toast, at least. God knows you'll burn it off down that wretched tunnel.”

“Alright,” said he, taking a slice and the butter-knife.

Across from us, from behind high boots on the table, tan jodhpured knees and finally a newspaper came a sardonic blowing of air through lips: “Pffft.”

“What ails you, Philip?” said Chuck, in a way that suggested the question was not born out of interest but followed a matter of course.

“Oh – just this stomach-churning display.” Philip abandoned all nonchalant detachment and swung his legs down with a stamp on the floorboards, discarding the paper to prop hand on hip. Standing, he gestured towards the two of us, both chewing.

“I do think that the pair of you are really selfish and unfair,” he said. “Not spreading it around.”

“It?” I said, through bacon.

“You're just not – playing the game,” said Philip.
“Game?” said Alec.

“Oh for fuck's sake.” Philip abandoned all subtlety and metaphor. “Two men in love! I never heard of such a thing.”

“Me neither. Canna believe my luck!” Alec flung a friendly arm around my shoulders.

Philip sneered a lip and snorted, and departed, the back door banging. The remnants round the table chuckled.

I wasn't sure whether either of these reactions were particularly favourable to the other, or especially flattering to the Maurice-Alec-Alliance.

“Don't mind him,” said Chuck, who was wearing a large, puffy men's shirt today. “He's just pissy 'cause you'se are right here under his roof constant and he's lusty.”

“Pity about him,” said Alec, sipping my coffee.

“You are a curiosity,” said Frank, without looking up from his sewing.


“It's bizarre, is what it is,” said Chuck; she folded her arms and leaned back against the sideboard.

“Alright, Maurice, I can see why Alec went after you, but why in the honour of God are you slummin' it here with him?!”

“Hay!” said Alec.

I told the truth. “It isn't slumming. And anyway, I'd follow Alec anywhere, just to be with him.”
“Still,” said Chuck. “I'd say, the looks of you, that once you had a pretty cozy number going? Swank place, good means, position?”

I shrugged.

“So why'd you go and chuck it?” she said. “Why not what do what half them respectable folk do anyway, and get married, and have kiddies, and get a rise in their jobs, and the whole time keep their little bit on the side?”

“Hay!!” said Alec.

Again I opted for honesty. “Because that sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“Too right,” said Alec. “We been through hell an' high water to be together and I ain't sharin’.”

“Ain't it summit,” said Frank. Apparently Alec's statement proved inarguable, and with plates clattered away and crumbs brushed into cupped hands, the others left to go back to bed until rehearsals, or practising scales, or whatever raucous endeavours they got up to in the afternoons.

It was just us then. I sighed.

“We don't seem to fit in anywhere; getting it from all sides. Acceptable Society shuns us – our families, or even the other fellows up North. And yet even here where attitudes are more liberal we still have to defend our Love left and right!”

“This is it,” said Alec. “Cain't please no-one. So we may as well please ourselves.” He rested interlocked fingers on my shoulder and leaned close. “Let's go upstairs and please ourselves right now.”

“We've to work.”

“I know.. I know.. Stone to grind..”
I stood. “I'll get more newspapers today and keep looking diligently for our own place.”

He stood. “And I'll read the lettings you circle and give my opinions on them.”

Be Prepared – well, it's a nice idea, and an admirable motto, but a big ask too, is it not? To expect keen and rapid adaptation and reaction from a full-grown adult, leave alone a dull teen-ager in a sash cap and patches.

Of course, there was strange, fuzzy unreality to the Masterpiece, owing perhaps to the highly unconventional characters it housed: going about great chunks of the time in costume, singing songs all day and saying lines written by others, by foreigners, by long-ago livers, so that interaction, conversation and overhearing became confusing and intoxicating and ungrounding. Hard to know what was real and what not.

Callings, and shoutings, and scenery always changing and strangers rushing and lounging, coming and going, obliging one to press against walls or offer chairs; it was rather like living within a play, inside a work of fantastical fiction in itself, sometimes.

Or maybe the otherworldliness stemmed from the fact that Alec and I were happy: free, cramped, comfortable, staunchly together.

One afternoon, I was on my way home early from the office – hours taken – and as I approached the Theatre, a figure darted out of a side-alley and grabbed my wrist.

“What the devil! Oh – it's you..” I wasn't very panicked because the assailant was very small – it was Jens, looking wild-eyed and furtively about her.

“That's what I said,” said she, tugging me towards the creaky wrought-iron gate that led down to the back of the building. “When I saw you coming down the footpath looking all grand and dickied up like you do, well it near gave me an ’eart attack it did!”
“You know me by now, surely,” I said. We stood in the messy, walled back yard.

“But I couldn't see your face yet – and I'm on look-out. Still am, in fact, so let's get you good and gone and I can go back to peering out the front window..”

“Gone?” I asked, startled. Footsteps pounded up and down the stairs inside, bangs, utterances, shouts, consternation. “What's going on? Are we being evicted?”

“Yes and for your own good,” said Jens, as she perched on a crate to peer over the wall into the back road. “There's going to be a raid.”


“That's right – Old Bill are going to come down 'ere like a shower of bricks and shake the place down lookin' for amoral, un-English shenanigans. Happens every so often, usually when some customer or other gets knocked back and 'is nose stuck out of joint.”

“Does it really..” I felt ill. Un-English! What's more un-English than French! Or Greek!

“We got a tip-off though,” said Jens, who was now poking her head into the back door and beckoning me to follow into the kitchen. “Bobby o’ Katherine's down the station local. Sweet on 'er. And of course he don't want 'is wife to know that. Here's all your things..”

And indeed all of our cases were stacked clumsily under the larder; I was rather glad Alec no longer had a gun, it boded a bit unfriendly. Although perhaps in circs like these!

“I cleaned out your room – sorry it's a bit of a mess,” said Jens apologetically. “Where was your sheaf?”

“My – what?”

“Sheaf! You know – you and Mr Scudder. Your letters. Your correspondence. Your keepsakes. Short, the most incriminating thing you se could leave lying around your room!” She spoke quickly, impatiently, scolding but concerned. She was half my size.
How could she possibly know or suspect that we had any treasured written communication? Unless it was a common, a given thing, particularly in desperate, covert relationships. Unless she too.

“We don’t have one,” I said. “Oh – well, I suppose there are Christmas cards, and oh – yes, well, a letter I wrote, and – letters, actually, and that telegram -”

“Where are they!!” exploded Jens. “Did you hide ’em? I checked under your mattress, behind the skirtin’ boards – or are you that soft on him that you carry ’em about on your person? The coppers will turn this place upside down you know! Any excuse!”

“They’re in books,” I said. “All the important things are.. I’m sure of it. In books and in the biscuit tin.”

“That'll do.” She relaxed. “Cause alla your books are there. Now, you ought to call out for a cab and get gone. Here, I'll dial.”

“That serious!” I said greenly, after she'd spoken briefly.

Jens looked at me pityingly. “In a word: not half. You got someplace to go?”

“Yes, well, I – I could indeed think of, find somewhere – Oh but I must wait for Alec! He's not due home for hours and I never know exactly where he is of a day – somewhere on the New Underground on the South Bank, could be anywhere along the line or dispatched elsewhere -”

Jens pointed a finger on my chest. “DON’T wait – I'm telling you kind and senseful. It’s far better for your to be over the hills than here duking it out with the constab, trying to explain what the Billy Shears you're doing in a place like this. I mean – you're quality. You're not even an actor! They'll twig instant what you are.”

I went crimson. Un-English.

“Alright. But you'll warn Alec too?”

“That's what Miss Katherine has me ordered to do.”
“And give him this when he comes?” I scrambled out a pen and scribbled out a note – another for the sheaf – on the back of a receipt.

“That better be an address.”

“Sort of. Hope so.”

As she put the slip of paper carefully in her skirt pocket, I felt all pangs of fear in my chest area and made a concentrated effort to breathe. “Thank you so.. But what about you Jens? I mean – will you be safe? Perhaps you ought to come with me. And Katherine, and who-ever else is making all that noise..”

Jens laughed, but her countenance softened. “No, no,” she said. “The plan always – the whole point is that we scatter, split up, stop and – deny all association – or friendship – we're mostly in danger in groups – that's to say, how could you and I, example, explain our acquaintance, what do we have in common?”

I was thinking increasingly: rather a lot, actually..

But: “Alright, I take your point.” I picked up a suitcase, and another, and Frank and Philip appeared and helped toss our belongings into the cab that had drawn up at the back of the theatre.

I tried to be mannerly and wring a few hands but everyone was in such a frightful hurry! I suppose I didn't understand or appreciate the gravity. The Police! It was unthinkable. And yet thank God there were people thinking of it – thinking of us.

I swung into the hansom and stuck my head out and my arm, awkwardly, to offer it to Jens; she took my hand in both of hers.

“You'll – please?” I felt terribly guilty, fleeing and leaving her in danger and yet still begging favours.

“Of course I'll give it to him,” she said. “Upon my word! I'll be like a dog after a bone!”
Dogs are more likely to hunt rabbits than bones. How and ever..

She smiled reassuringly, and made to curtsey, to leave, to repair to her post at the watch-window..

“Wait!” I fumbled about in the cramped cab at the luggage desperately, aimlessly, looking for – I didn't know – but something – not money, I wouldn't make that mistake again -

A carpet-bag ejected reams of material when I unclasped it; I snatched the topmost article and stuffed it out the window.

“Here – take it. A token. Oh, ridiculous! But -” I was feeling so wretched, actually, at so suddenly vacating the place: yes, I had been intending to leave all along, and I complained daily about the noise, the mould, the vulgarity, the leaky pipes, the mousetraps, the eccentrics. And yet we had all been something together, almost a group; now we were to be shook like leaves back into the wind, the world.

“Oh!” Trembling hands held up my hip-length green-and-brown fitted tweed jacket with the black velvet lapels and elbow-patches. “Oh it's lovely! Thank you! Chuck will look an absolute treat in it – we'll share it.”

“You'll most probably both fit into it at once,” I said boldly, but not, I was sure, erroneously.

“We can but try!” she cried gaily. “Good-bye, and good luck! To the pair of you!” She waved and raced off.

I told the driver to aim for the main promenade whilst I dug through the bags for *Lady Audley's Secret*, from which I unfolded several torn-off newspaper sections, with circles and question-marks and in my own handwriting: 'Poss' and 'Near Station' and 'Is it a Dive' and 'Alec'.

Not much had changed at the old place: same austere, ancient statues, artefacts, paintings, postcards. Was I any more or less prepared to bump into more old schoolmasters was another head scratcher! I had sinned much, much more in the conventional sense, in the last five months that I'd ever and ergo, one would imagine my self-esteem and ability to hold up a moral head would be at a low ebb.
Being a practical homosexual made me vulnerable. And yet loving Alec made me strong; as I strode about the echoing marble corridors, and came outside to smoke and wait, I was unflappable in my utmost confidence in Alec and in myself.

I leaned on a low wall with one foot tucked under me and arms crossed, hat low, cigarette dangling. Such were the disdainful looks I earned from this careless posture that it seemed unlikely that even my own mother would look twice, leave alone Ducie!

Clouds drifted overhead, gradually greying and I thought apprehensively about rain. He came, of course; of course he came. As he strode up the street I rose to my feet in welcome.

“Found the place alright then?” My hands I kept in my pockets lest I grasp his arms.

“I did ’afore, didn't I? Some meeting-spot. I've had enough of this place to last me till next Christmas! I tell thee…”

Close as he dared, he muttered near my shoulder: “Still I'm awful glad to see you. Just.. main glad, I were so.. Christ, it's the very last thing a fellow needs greeting him when he's come 'ome from a long day's work..” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

As yet I could only comfort him with words and sense.

“I'm so pleased to see you too. So relieved. You saw Jens?”

“Yeh.. They're alright but my God, the row..”

“Were the police there when you were?” My heart thuddered, even though we two were safe. Why could not everyone be thus? “Was the – raid underway?”

“Oh – no, but well – sort of..”

I took his arm. No – touched it, and let go again.
“You'll not have eaten?” I said. “It was chaos back at the Theatre, the kitchen was full of anything but food. Come on, let's get some supper and you can tell me what happened. And I'll fill you in on where we'll be bedding down tonight. And subsequent nights I hope.”

“Oh – you has all our things wi'you? Your letter weren’t very informative.” And he took it out of his pocket – dear Jens, good as her word!

It said: 'A. B.M again. - M.'

Suitably cryptic. Who else but we could have decoded? You practically have to invent and adapt a secondary secret language for this kind of off-Society lifestyle.

“Our things are safe,” I said.

“And we've someplace to stay?”

“All taken care of.”

He glowed.

Eschewing the grandeur of the grander, central bars and restaurants of the City, we huddled in a small café and tobacconists, at a table with rickety legs and melted candlewax on the top. The dirt on the windows afforded us the privacy we liked.

Over lamb chops, chips, peas and beer, Alec described how he had turned the corner of our street at around six PM., a little injured that I hadn't been waiting for him at the riverside street lamp as usual.

“Oh dear, I am sorry.”

“Well, I knowed then that summat were up. Folk up and down the street entire were racin' around wi'bags and bundles and kiddies and clutchin' they hats. I were that scared it were the Law and that you'd got caught up in it. So I went cautious to the house -”
“Alec! Endangering yourself like that..”

“So what? If you needed me. If I were ever to lay eyes on you again! But it were alright, anyroad, I were caught and strong-armed into the alleyway by t'girls – Jens, and you know, Chuck.. Hay, she were wearin' your coat.”

“I gave it to her.”

“Aren’t you good! But Jens and she, they tol’ me the skinny, that the coppers were gonna descend down upon the place like God on Gomorrah, and that it were in our best interest to scarper. Tried to argue, of course I did, askin’ after you, and t’others, but by that stage there were already a mighty ding-dong happenin’ within the theatre and I had your note. So I thought I'd better be gone.”

“A fight inside?”

“Katherine,” he said. “A-rowin' with her fella. Pair of them turnin' the air blue and he sounded right shook for his part but you could tell all the same that he were Old Bill. Though he’ll make no head-way again' Kathy..”

“Chuck asked where I were headed so I said, the Museum, and she bundled me on the right bus. An absolute star! And that Jens.”

“And here you are.”

“Here I am. And you. But where are we going?”

“Ah, our new digs. Shoreditch.”

“Sounds fancy.”

“Don't jump to judgements. Anyhow I looked at four other places and it was the best.” And last, and I was exhausted – as was the horse – by the time I got to this particular place, glanced around and hastily agreed.
“It’s not far,” I said. “The beauty of it. Let’s go.”

Not for the first time Alec was pleased and agreeable to be told what to do. It was the least I could do for the lad, he having taken the lead himself since we’d left Penge, more or less!

A late bus, and some short cuts, and I led the way confidently to our new home. The street – Rain Lane, it was called – was quiet, with only a few leaning stragglers, street-lights throwing reflections on the puddles. I brought him through a court-yard and to a narrow, brown-bricked, several-storied townhouse gone somewhat to seed.

I let us in the enormous front door with its scratched green paint; inside were envelopes on the mat on the grubby yellow lino, a brave but browning plant in a large pot, and innumerable coats, scarves, hats and garments piled on the bottom bannister of the stairs, and in fact creeping up the handrail for several draping feet. No doubt in lieu of a hatstand.

It was late, around eleven at night, and so I declined to turn on the light, instead rooting out an oil-lamp from the cupboard wedged under the stairs, and I whispered: “Fifth floor, I'm afraid.”

Long work-day all but forgotten, Alec shot deftly up the stairs ahead of me, moving too fast and light to be noisy. On the fifth landing there were five doors. I pointed to the corridor leading down to the front window and then to the door on the right: 5D.

Alec used the keys I handed him to rattle the door open and in we stepped to the small apartment – barely more than a room really but what a welcoming feeling. I had of course seen it earlier briefly when making the snap decision to live here; and to subsequently move in our luggage. I must state that that cab driver earned his big tip! Severely diminishing our biscuit-tin, but who could put a price on privacy?


When actually, taken all around, it was really rather small. Similar to the cottage up North, the main doorway of the flat led directly into the kitchen, which was more or less the sitting-room; they distinguished from each other only by a bookcase.

In fact there were no great architectural distinctions – no definite characteristics claiming corners of the space as one room or another. Case in point: a bed lay in the sitting-room opposite the front door.
“There's another through here..” I opened a door on the far right – beside that bookcase – and showed a pantry-sized 'bedroom', having barely the room for the bed.

“I said to the landlady that we would flip a coin to see who slept where! Not sure she believed me. In any case I gave her only one month's rent on top of the deposit, we can always leave if it doesn't suit, if it isn't..”

Once again I found myself watching Alec wander about a London flat inspecting it; once again I could hardly believe my eyes. Even after months of communion.

But his attitude differed greatly from that which he had had upon viewing Clive's apartment; this time he didn't wander around stiffly, hands in pockets and mouth set awkwardly, like a benighted museum visitor.

No, here in the Rain Lane flat he was smiling, curious, engaging, eager as a child. He touched everything – the wallpaper, chairs, curtains, counters, stiff old writing-desk. He looked from our bags to walls, corners, shelves, drawers, as if mentally unpacking and planning.

Soft spring-squeaks issued from the bed as he sat back on it, and shuffled backwards to lean against the wall.

“Shall we flip the coin then?” he said, grinning. My face broke relief and I removed my coat and looked about before tossing it over a suitcase.

Alec turned and crawled towards the window parallel to the foot of the bed; I joined him, kneeling alongside as he pushed up the windowpane and rested his elbows on the sill.

“Grand clear night,” was his way of voicing his approval. “Look! You can see the stars! Happen' the smog don't reach up this high – there's favourable of the fifth floor.”

I saw the stars twinkling too, but then I bent my gaze downwards, towards the grey, black buildings and glistening river, the yellow square lights of homes, and factories and offices and libraries and restaurants and workplaces; the tiny winding footpaths and massive imposing infrastructure – towards London, and I thought: I've conquered you.
Boys of Slender Means

Perhaps it would be disingenuous – despite how tempting it is to use the well-worn adage, I'm sure I've over-used so many so far – to say that it wasn't long before Shoreditch became pat and Alec and I were considerably 'settled in'. I could say so, and leave it at that, lord knows I'm no wordsmith. But I feel like being descriptive.

And I am for accuracy, if nothing else – the purpose of memoir to be not only to share but to jog the personal memory – so I'll always know just what it was like in those days and can revisit them always.

Generally people record their thoughts and adventures in letters, mutual informing and correspondence – but who on earth could I relate all of this to? Only Alec, just. And he already knows, having written it himself.

To sum: 'Settled' would imply that we had ceased courting chaos and had sat down sweetly into a nice quiet life, comfortable and kind, slowly slowing, like pulp floating lazily down a forgotten-about tumbler of lemonade, to gather yellowly at the base.

That's quite nice. It's almost the case: we did indeed unpack all our things and inflict them onto the walls, floors, and fixings of the flat; we certainly were still obliged to get up and trudge to work every morning; and every evening we smiled tiredly over the steeping tea-pot.

This was home, and homey, and we grew quickly accustomed. But settled? Quite hardly. Too many things happened – or maybe just enough things. Alright, I'll concede: there were no blessed Police raids, or clashing bashing hot music all night, or daily theatrical melodramas over lengthy bathroom-usage or last biscuit-eating – that all, mercifully, belongs to the earlier volume.

Always there's noise, however. Although, five stories up, we caught little of the traffic humming, the trade-off was that the cheap, fairly new walls – a recent addition, I should think, re-creating larger lodgings into smaller, more lucrative rooms – meant we could hear the constant up and down whine of other people's chatter, music and wireless programmes, plates and cutlery clattering, furniture moving (!) - just general Life.

Cups on shelves rattled when footsteps pounded up and down the stairs – we could hardly be peevish about that, as we were most probably the worst perpetrators, haring down to work, late of a morning, or taking the steps back up two at a time in the evenings to ravenously attack the larder, or quickly bathe and change for some such social reason or other, or tug the friend by the wrist, eagerly, excitedly to bed.
Aye then might the whole house reverberate!

If we gave ourselves free rein, of course. As it was, we were careful to be most consciously quiet in that department in our apartment, to the point of hands pressed to mouths and wild gestures: our neighbours weren’t bothersome but all the same we deemed it prudent not to gift them with gossip, horror or scandal – two male voices crying out the pinnacle of pleasure!

Silencing was for safety: no force on Earth could actually have kept my body from his, like two magnets, north and south, we drew near, drew near, until we pressed and kissed and enwrapped and rested. On the reg.

And maybe, maybe, we rushed upwards, flatwards, homewards because it was just that, finally: a home. I’d never had, really, a home of my own before. At mother’s I was really just a placeholder for my father. At school, all the sheer wood panelling and imitation-greats artwork and spotted dick made no lie of the feeling that it was still a mere restricting, moulding, deadening institution.

Cambridge was better of course, much – but the whole point of university really, which one is completely ignorant of at the time, is that it’s transitional – a place to take a long, deep, dizzying three-year breath before plunging, splashing into the cold briny depths of adulthood.

Which, I suppose, I attempted to dodge by investing so much emotional energy into poor Clive; looking to him, beyond our initial boyish liking, for solace and safety and devotion when he was weighted own with his own cross. Though I have idled over the notion, with no real regret or seriousness, but still, I wonder if it would have been so much easier, lighter, how we might have saved each other if only he’d given in.

Then again.. Maurice, attest. People are various. For Clive, giving into the basest indulgences of the flesh might not have had quite the liberating effect you hoped for. It may have given him just one more burden to shoulder. One more secret to shroud. After the night must come the next morning..

And if he had lain with me, back then, knowing him, he would have had some difficulty in looking into the bathroom mirror the following dawner. And wouldn’t that have meant curtains for the pair of us!

No. It was all I wanted once, but there’s little point, I see crystal now, in desiring someone unless they do so back. For he was not the cardboard cutout of the romantic Hero: he was just a man, warm and complicated and compact and autonomous and he choose Anne. Whether or not he truly wanted
her more is moot: for him it's her. And if it was a mistake, a disaster, a wretch, well, at least they face it together!

Bother it, I'm going to paint everything with an optimistic sheen if it kills me! Still one thing I will say for Clive, that strikes me still, is his air of mystery. What a tortured soul, and yet so lovely. I'll never work him out I think. I try. I ought to put these observations to him, to engage, see his philosophic mind light up his eyes; but I rather think at this stage, were he to see my writing on a breakfast envelope, he'd have a canary! While Alec might have something to say about it too! No: leave alone alone, now.

A steering end to the Clive digression.

I was ruminating, I think, about homes, and how I fancied I'd never have one, that I had created myself and felt truly mine, and fine, until Alec. Even up at the Yarbury estate; we'd had a cottage, yes, but on the back of working for our keep and sharing it occasionally with vermin – I feel fair and forthright in discounting it really.

And Katherine's theatre – of course, most grateful – was good for a doss, a stay, a spell – but now after some struggling months we had our very own digs: alright, no palace, or mansion, manor, house, nor cottage. But it was ours and we weren't long in marking it firmly thus.

First sight upon entering, and as such primary fixture of the flat, was the bed which was drawn up against the far wall, under a window that faced out towards the city, to innumerable other buildings and people behind windows, and if one, vertigo notwithstanding, peeked down the five floors, one could see the comings and goings of commuters, traders, horses, carts, cars of the cobbles below.

Alec wasn't completely bereft of greenery in fact, either, despite our position deep in the urban terrain. At the base of the building, beside the steps up to the front door, rooted in the cracking footpath was a large climbing plant of some genus with a thick trunk and bushes of swaying leaves quite wedded to the exterior wall, clinging to the brickwork and making its way up, up, meanderingly and determinedly to the very penthouse roof. It must have been dozens of years old and as hardy as steel! Stronger and much more obtrusive than creeping ivy, this plant, which was no doubt patiently crumbling and rocking the very bricks and mortar it fastened to, had nonetheless been, evidently, a deliberate addition: for there was underneath, if you brushed back a branch or two, a wooden trellis affixed to the wall, to encourage the climber in its skyward pursuit.

“Ent it lovely,” said Alec, and waited expectantly until I put down my razor and joined him on the window-sill looking down at the rustling leaves.
“Ye-es,” I said, not quite agreeing, not quite not. “Could do with a bit of pruning, though, would it
not?”

“You volunteerin’?”

“Heavens no! As if anything could actually be done against this monster! If anyone, anyway, it
ought to be Mme Raverat.”

This was a lady who lived on the ground floor, just adjacent to the stairs, and so she was witness to
all the household comings and goings. It was to she that we tenants were supposed to refer with
issues, problems, or suggestions for improvement. Thus far we had not. And I knew none of our
neighbours did either; she didn't invite it.

“Ask her to do summat! Rather you than me!” said Alec now. “Besides – no. I want it to keep
growin’ – I like it. Just abou’ to bust out bloomin’ – see the buds?” He showed me the small purple
growths.

“It is rather fetching. And fragrant. Lends a bit of a European aspect, what? I suppose we really
ought to maintain it ourselves..” But we didn't have time to sigh in those days.

In the first couple of weeks it was enough of a huff just getting to work and home in one piece, and
getting food at the market and butchers and bakers and yet still constantly running out; and
organizing the postman and milkmaid and the Times and fixing the pipes and scrubbing the kitchen
and beating the rugs and cleaning the chimney...

Other inhabitants of the building came to watch our endeavours at home-making (little realizing,
perhaps, just what kind of a home they were witness to), suggesting that we “Do ours next. Ha! Ha!”
Alec might just shake a spanner at them, not really begrudging the company. Mostly the great
observers were home-steaders, those women, children and the elderly. Maybe they wondered at the
pair of us.

All in all there were worse neighbours; they were dear really, always calling round to offer the use of
the wireless downstairs or the second read of a magazine; or to come and sit around and listen when I
managed to shift all of the boxes, blocks and dusty drawers off the piano and give it a run.

Its initial re-go was horrifying, the keys sticky and stodgy and the wires wobbly and echo-ey and
abominably out of tune. Alec remarked that it made him long for the theatre, “Or heck, the blastin’ in
the mines sounds better than this.”

“Oh do shut up. It's not me – it's the piano. It needs tuning.”

“It needs a whole team of tuners. Or a wood-chipper,” said Alec from behind the *Swiss Family*. He can read in the midst of such hullabaloo and uproar; I wonder just how much he is actually absorbing. Well, I shan't be asking him to turn in an essay on the subject!

“We know a tuner,” said a Mrs Wright, who lived down the hall at 5A. “My cousin's friend's fella she she's seeing.”

“Sounds like quite the recommendation,” I said, noting that Mrs Wright, Mrs Bearsley, Mr Hawkins, his wife, brother and any amount of miscellaneous children were now cluttering up the place.

When the chatting exceeded the length of five minutes that was it: I was obliged to offer tea. Which also meant I was indentured to go out and get more milk and cake and bound to root out every cup and saucer we owned and borrow some too.

Alec thought this was all a great gas; I'd a bug but suffered through it.

“People around, makes the place more homely, like, don't you think?”

“We're plenty homely as we are! After all – don't we two form a multitude?”

“..Do we? Are you askin' me?”

“No, I mean... Never mind.”

Gradually we made the Rain Lane flat more personable; before long it was an extension of us, the space for our relationship: the sort of place that you could come home to after work or the shops or the pub and discover to be empty, and yet still be satisfied, and comfortable, and content to wait for the other amidst the mis-matched furniture, crammed bookshelves and counter-tops, cast iron pots over the fire, cheap candles dotted all around, pictures and clippings pinned up all over the walls, the piano holding impressive (and mercifully silent) court against the wall at the far stage-left.
In the kitchen was the larder with preserves, sugar, tea, bread, jam, tins of everything, porridge, baked meat, biscuits.

In the front hall, down in the entranceway, were the stairs-bannisters where we piled our evening coats, and a stand where I took the morning hat and umbrella. Here too was Alec's toboggan propped; we used it to tie and drag heavy loads upstairs such as laundry, coal, potatoes. Laughing mothers poked out to watch.

In an alcove behind the stairs, beside an old dresser, was a 'phone, and heaps of messages on pieces of notepaper pinned brazenly all over the wall beside. Alec and I, having renounced family, friends and any old clinging acquaintance along with the burdens of the past, still checked the papers every so often. As Alec said it might look queer if we never; likewise the locked post boxes in the hallway.

In the communal room behind the stairs were the laundring facilities; tap, bucket, washtub, mangle, and the soapy, sudsy water was merely turned out the back door, down the sloping yard and out of sight and conscience.

Back up five flights Alec would hang our washing on the line between our building and the next; this I abhorred on prissy principle and yet it wasn't long before a sunny day would get my mind to thinking not of lazy punting or cricketing or outdoor cream-teas, but hustling home to get the washing out! Can you credit it? The old I wouldn't. No doubt I would now find me quite unrecognisable, incredible.

In this tenement, the bathroom was in the cellar and one was obliged to descend the stairs past the prickly Mme Raverat's flat, which, we were warned, necessitated the practice of deliberate quiet and the skipping over of certain squeaky stairs. Downstairs was the W.C., pumps, hot tanks, bath and open fire if you were effortful enough to generate at least luke-warm water.

It was quite a journey down, especially at night when one was caught short.

“She don't sleep, that one,” grumbled Alec, after a night-time trip to the loo and, presumably, a bollocking. “A nightmare, I tell thee."

Not that we were the exemplary house-mates.

So inept were our cooking skills still that the simple preparation of a meal was apt to involve quite a
log of clanging and cursing and no small amount of steam and smoke pouring out the windows.

One time, overtired, I left a downstairs window open overnight, only to discover the morning-hall and parlour dotted all around with cats.

Another morning, drunk, Alec fell down two flights of stairs, meeting a house-mate who'd just come in from his shift on the way and taking him down with him.

So if it was rarely quiet we could hardly look around in accusation.

I was glad. Alec wouldn't settle in the quiet, of that I was sure: although he still waxed wishful about our cottage-by-the-sea, or cottage-nestled-in-hills, or cottage-in-the-woods.

“The last one,” I said. “If I could choose.”

“You are choosin'. We are. That's the entire point. Alright, woods it shall be, then.”

To set: we were tucked up in the flat of a cold Friday evening – no work the next day (I – office hours, Alec – the tunnel they were working on had leaked, flooded and frozen over) – roaring fire, blankets wrapped, chunks of cheese and apple slices, and a bottle of fine whisky that was cluttering up the kitchen and needed using.

“To the woods,” I toasted. Alec clanged and sipped – see, he'd learned to sip.

“And there'll be – we'll have – what were it? Weavin' loom? Water mill? Tha' had a whole list of things for our home on'train up to Birmin'am, I remember..”

“Oh dash that,” I said. “That was ages ago. I was silly then.”

“You're silly now,” he sniggered.

“Of a different kind.” I poured more of the essential into our glasses and shuffled round till I sat cross-legged opposite and facing him on the hearth.
“It is nice to have the breadth to plan for the future,” I said. “Although it's hard to imagine any state of being that's happier than here and now. Could anything mar it?”

“Sure couldn't,” said Alec; I knew those eyes.

“Except?” I said.

“Well,” he sighed. “Like I do go on abou'. The home-folks. Ma and Dad. Me kin ou' foreign, me mates, the neighbours, the dog, the chickens. Fred, even! It does give me a land, times, right in the chest, that I won't never see any of 'em again.

“Now mark,” he added warningly, and slid a reassuring palm from my ankle to knee and back again, “I'd not trade. For anythin'! Just.. up and leavin' like I done. It's dead hard o' me. If only they knowed why I left.. If they could only clap eyes on you for one second they'd see instant why I dropped it all, fought and sought you – anyone would -”

I closed my eyes and smiled at the free-flowing compliments; his teeth clinked the glass as he slurped more whisky.

“I mean, in all serious, I should explain.. It's right cruel jumpin' ship like that. Like, for all they know, the folks, I coulda been – kidnapped, or hit by a train, or – eloped, or summat..” He blushed in the fire-heat.

“Hm,” I said, swirling.

“I s'pose I could write to her, Ma. Try an' tell her... Nothin' stoppin' me.. Oh but I wouldn't know what to say! Where to start! Couldn't make 'em understand. I'm no good at that sort o' thing.”

“But of course you are! You wrote me – er – wonderful letters.”

“And what did you do wi'em? Flung 'em on the fire! And Ma'd only do the same..” He was getting riled up.

“I burned them – just so – because they were so human, so powerful. It was as if you were there
He tenderized. “Oh.. They were meant to. That were all feelin’ I poured into ’em, no thinkin’.. Dunno where to start with Ma, though.”

“I could write to them for you,” I said, leaning a drowsy chin in a propped arm on a knee.

“You?” laughed Alec.

“Yes. If you'd find it difficult to get your point across, I could say it simple.. Where's a pen?”

More chuckles but he scrambled around for notepaper while I fetched down a pen from the Toby Jug on the mantel.

“Leave it to me,” I said, poising my pen over the paper on the hard-back book on my crossed legs. I swigged some whisky. “‘Dear Mrs Scudder.’ Is that alright? Or first names? Too formal, what?”

“Mrs is fine.” Alec struggled to keep a straight face.

“‘Dear Mrs Scudder. Hoping this missive finds you well. Please do not be alarmed for I wish to communicate to you glad tidings of your dear son Alec.’”

A pause while I reached for the pipe and took a pull.

“I'm sure it was a great surprise to you when he failed to embark upon his emigratary journey. Most unlike him, I am sure, to be so headstrong, shiftless, and flighty.”

“Dead wrong there,” said Alec. “Ma'd know – them three, that's me to a T!”

“‘Rest assured, madam, that he is in fact the finest young man there ever could be: responsible, honourable, brave.’”
“She'll think you took up wi'the wrong Alec.”

“Do stop interrupting. 'Rest assured' – oh, er, said that already – well, 'Rest assured again, that though his absence must surely aggrieve, it will comfort you to know that he is – near, and safe, and agreeable, and – and happy..’” I looked up uncertainly – did I presume too much, was 'happy' a stretch, had I gotten carried away in to the realms of the fictional, as pen and paper will often lead one to be?

Not to worry. Alec shuffled around with his blanket until he sat beside me, arm around my shoulder and his cheek pressed to mine and his finger poking the paper: “Put 'deliriously happy' – I heared that somewhere. Deliriously.”

“Alright, well, I've already written – Alright.. '.happy. Deliriously so.' Do you think that that will convince her?”

“Nah. Which is a shame, 'cos it's only the truth.”

“That's good – I'll put that. 'This is only the truth, and I hope that this letter goes some small way in alleviating the pain of his flight, and to give you some peace of mind.' ...That about covers it.”

I signed off: “'To someone who loves Alec from someone who loves him.'”

Alec followed my ink, reading as I wrote. He got a little teary-eyed at my closer and pulled me closer.

“If only you could meet her!”

“Well, I did – sort of,” I said.

“I mean as my – as what you are to me.”

Ah, that old chestnut: the conundrum of putting a name to the state of us. Was it necessary to define
our relationship? Given that we would likely never be admitting it out loud to anyone anyway?

Rather it was, yes, or seemed so; words have the appeal of the everlasting.

“Where’s some blotting paper? Might as well do the thing properly.” I pulled myself up into standing with the aid of the armchair and stumbled around, head spinning. On my return to the hearthrug Alec had poured two more whiskeys which was very jolly of him.

“Time for me now,” said he, dipping. “Tit for tat. It's only fair. And what will it be? To your mother as well?”

I played along. “To Mother? Oh, mm.. Well now. I doubt she would read it. And if she did, she might just – shove it, disregard it. I can't think of any terms she would begin to understand..”

“How about summat like you just said? To Ma, abou' me? That you're – sorry for the upset, but happy, and that?”

It really was that simple and yet it would still be misunderstood.

“Anyhow,” I said, “I shouldn't think they'll all be very interested in my whereabouts to be honest. I was, well, rather a ghost in the house for a long while, ever since Clive, well, ever since Anne..”

Alec was uncharacteristically quiet.

“I became incidental to the home,” I continued, realizing as I spoke. “I didn't really matter. The girls didn't much notice when I was there so they'll hardly mark now I'm not!”

“How could they not notice you?!!”

“I – what? How do you mean?”

“You must have no self-knowin' at all.”

Did I? Didn't I? But in my life I had been obsessed with knowing myself. All of that analysing, endless worrying and naval-gazing.
Alec was watching. So now he knows me?! This little so-and-so whom I only met five minutes ago. It doesn't bear scrutiny.

He poised his pen and waited on me.

“Oh, I.. Alec, I don't know. It would only bamboozle her! First thing she would do, would be to show it to Kitty for some sort of explanation or translation."

“Well then. I'll write to Kitty. Cut out the middle madam.”

“It's all one really, isn't it,” I laughed at his careful earnestness in writing our address: LONDON, ENGLAND, deliberately vague.

“Dear Kitty'. Oh, is that too forward? Will I start over? 'To Ms Hall'? Or is she Mrs?”

“She isn't Mrs,” I said. “Kitty is fine. Don't think too much.”

“You're right,” he nodded and took a swig of drink.

“Dear Kitty. You'll be right knocked bandy to git this letter I'll warrant. You don't know me, but we have got a mutual interest in Maurice.”

I tingled, I admit it. It was all so very strange, to consider a link between Alec and Kitty – even a false one, based on an imaginary, hypothetical postal communication. Even his saying of her name, acknowledging that she was a real person – who might care about me! - was peculiar.

Not entirely in a bad way, either. Like as not, they two were connected by close association to me: brother and lover. I played the part of both and it was suddenly interesting to face the idea that the roles could possibly harmonize, not clash.

“'I'll hazard ye are worried sick on him and fair anxious to hear about his howabouts, hopin' that he's doin' alright although thee miss him summat chronic.'”
I snorted. “She won't be told that.”

“Kitty, now Maurice he misses you too even though he's far too pig-headed to admit it.”

“That'll go down better – she'll like to hear that.”

“Didn't I tell thee?” He tapped his forehead and pointed at me. “I know just how to charm the boss class.”

“Boss? You mean my family? Tosh Alec! We don't go around employing gamekeepers!”

We *do* have maids, though, one of whom – *hypothetically* – would bring the letter to Kitty on the toast-tray at breakfast, between the salt shaker and the vase of flowers. I declined to mention this needless detail.

“Now I'll lay out. I'm not at all sorry to have Maurice come away wi' me. But I *am* sorry that in doing, I has stolen him off of you, and his loss to the house must be great, on account o' he's so lovely, and handsome, and clever, and witty and wonderful..”

“Reel it in, Alec,” I, but laughing.

“So I'm sure tha' can appreciate how impossible it were for me to pass him by. But don't worry. I'll keep him safe, God's honour, tell your mother and assure your friends, that old Maurice hasn't fallen wayside, but just gone a different route.”

I sat pondering. Alec dipped clumsily to close.

“Best to all and all the best. From your out-law, common-law, brother-in-law, Alec Scudder.”

I clapped. “Alec, you are a man of letters.”

“Enough wi'letters,” said he, and launched upon me, knocking me back on the rug and grabbing and rolling and mock-wrestling. But not mock-loving. The real stuff.
It's all a bit of a blur, following. Well, you can imagine. Next morning with the head still fuzzy I made my way down to the shops for the paper and scones and chicken for lunch, and liquorish for Alec, because when I'd left he'd been tidying, scraping candle-wax off the mantel-piece and hearth-rug.

When I returned, he was perched on the ledge smoking out the window.

“Fine mornin’,” he observed, breathing in the fresh air between puffs. In the distance could be heard calling voices, tram-bells, car engines, seagulls.

“Fine morning for going back to bed,” I yawned, although I didn't. One has to make the most of Sunday: not because sloth is a sin, but to waste a work-free day certainly would be.

Alec started putting away the scones before I had even brewed the tea.

“What a night,” I said, as we sat at the breakfast table, chewing slowly. I held the whiskey bottle upside-down – not a drop left.

“Wasn't it jolly though,” said Alec.

“Yes, quite.. We'll have to save up for another bottle tough! Got a bit carried away..”

“Ah, don't worry. I'll finish cleaning up all this mess after. Crikey, alla these nutshells.. apple cores...”

I crouched and gathered playing cards, open magazines, loose leaves of paper.

“I can hardly remember much of yesterday evening! Did we play backgammon, or pairs? Did you do the crossword puzzle backwards again? And – oh! Those letters we wrote. What fun. Do you think we ought to keep them – for the laugh?”
“Cain't hardly see how we can do,” said he. “I posted 'em.”

“You – you po – you posted – you did what?!”

“What fun!” he reminded me.

“Alec! For the love of God, the Angels, and Christ Almighty!! What in the blazes are you thinking!!”

“Don't throw a paddy – my land!”

“You sent it to Kitty.. Oh my God.. And the one I did! To your mother! Oh Alec say it's a joke – say you never!” In the absence of a handkerchief to mop, I just laid my face down directly on the tabletop and sagged.

“When you've quite finished bleatin' and carryin'-on – if ever you will – I'll tell you. I found 'em early this morn when you were still laid bare in bed and slumberin' – and I thought they were so right beautiful, actually, and so much truth in 'em, that we might do some good for once by sendin' them out into the world, for at least the chance of comfortin' some wonderin' women.”

I raised my face slowly, buttery bread-crumbed. Alec now stood by the bookcase, arms crossed and expression defiant; but he breathed a little heavily and his cheeks were just that bit pink under his stubble.

“Does it relieve you,” I said, “To extend the olive branch to your family?”

“To..?”

“To offer them the hand of friendship, even if they don't understand your actions, even if they don't reply?”

“Yes. It does.” He unfolded his arms, and left one hand softly on the bookcase, fingers gently touching the topmost book.

“Well then,” I looked around and slapped my knees. “Well then. In that case. If sending those letters has made at least one person happy -” - he twisted a lip - “Alright – two – and though they may totally upend two hitherto stable households into the throes of chaos -”
“At first – mebbes,” put in Alec, coming over and tapping the table. “There may be fits – they're women, after all. But at least they'll know we're alive. They love us.”

I looked up to him. “You're awfully confident.”

“I'm not a bit. But you have to try things,” he said.

We split the last scone and I tried to decide whether I felt glad or wistful that there were no proper, useable return addresses on our correspondence; Alec had flung our assurances out into the void, and now all we could do was live as happily as we had said we were in the letters. This came naturally as rain.

“Then, Granmaria waved her fan, and the Queen came in most splendidly dressed...”

*creak * *BANG *

“..and the seventeen young Princes and Princesses, no longer grown out of their clothes..”

*thump thump thump *

“with tucks in everything -”

*creak creak creak creak *

“to admit -”

*KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK *
“of its being let out.”

I frowned harder at my book in forced (and feigned) ignorance, my feet up on the arm of the couch and my finger on my temple.

“After that, the Fairy tapped the Princess Alivia with her fan, and the -”

*KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!*

“Can't concentrate on a word,” I complained aloud. Why not? Everything happened aloud around here! It was like residing in a steelworks. I went to get the door, pulling straight my cardigan, munching half a biscuit.

Cracking, I saw no-one at eye-level. A glance downward, however, confronted me with two small children – of – I've no idea about ages but most certainly not of school-leaving age yet. Although going by their grubby clothes, they perhaps came from a societal milieu which promoted neither school-leaving nor school-going imprimis.

Four enormous blue eyes gazed impassively up at me, two from a girl with long knotty hair, a navy dress and big brown overcoat; her companion had on his little miniature working-men's garb, waistcoat and corduroys and handkerchief and cap.

I hold my hands up – I'm dreadful with children, never saw hide nor hair of them (and at this stage don't predict to). But even I knew enough that the usual, 'What-ho, how may I help you' brush-off business may not fall useful here.

“Well,” I said after some beats. “What's all the hubub, chaps? What brings you all the way up here? Do you belong to someone in the building? Hard to keep track..”

“No! We don't live 'ere!” squealed the little girl.

Fortunate. “I see. Perhaps you're lost? The stairs you came up are right over there, can't miss them..”

“Mr Hall?” said the little boy, interrupting, but I had been rambling. So it's excusable. One would
almost admire his gumption.

“Yes..?” I tried and failed to sound authoritative. I just have no idea about children: what was his angle?

“Message, sir,” said he, and produced a crumpled envelope from a pocket. He stepped back with his hands folded behind him once I'd taken it; his friend took note of this and copied him.

“Oh right. Well, thank you..” A little unorthodox, but..

I looked at the terrible – and terribly familiar – scrawl on the envelope: an 'M' and a frantic series of scribbles, presumably the rest of my name. It was eight in the evening. He was due home. What was this?

Instinctively I ripped it open then and there in the doorway.

'Maurice – Bloody tunnels collapse. No one dead but its a pain. We has to sluice it all out w. buckets cos floodwater. It'll be late, its a pain, Your love Alec.'

What a missive. Reassuring, yes, but – the word - “dead” -

Concern straightened my shoulders, and I was about to turn round, and close the door with my elbow, when I caught sight of the kids still hovering on the landing.

“Oh – er – right,” I said with a start. I folded the letter and recomposed. “Thank you for that. Ah – just one moment please, if you will..”

Off to the biscuit-tin on top of the bookshelf, and I handed the small fellow a half-crown; he tipped his hat and pocketed it without looking at it. “Fankee, sir.”

The girl however followed its progress into his trousers, she wide-eyed, so for some reason I: “Wait! Just a moment -” Startled, the pair froze in their turning and I fetched and gave the little girl her own half-crown, just in case the boy hadn’t yet learned about sharing at school.
“Wot you say, Hazel, cam awn!” He nudged her.

“Fankee..” She stared at it, and perhaps having no pocket, closed her fingers slowly round it.

“Not at all,” I said briskly, feeling unusually kindly. Of course, were I true Samaritan, I'd've exclaimed over their ratty clothes, dirty faces and clear poverty, and emptied the larder into them, and rolled them in jackets and cardigans and scarves and gloves, and decried their condition to the streets, and brought them to a hospital, or a – a home, or – where-ever it is children go to be looked after. A church?

But no, the lines were clearly drawn: they'd run their errand, got on handsomely, and would now resume the cold street, and really I ought to help, but such an undertaking! I care, but can't act, and – and – dash-it-all, you can't for everyone - 'its a pain' - one is plenty to be getting on with -

“Excuse, sir?” The plucky lad was still local.

“Er – yes?” I released my hold on my own hair and turned.

“E alright? Your mate?”

I looked askance.

“Wot gav' us that there message. 'E wor right shook.”

“Wor he – was he? Oh.. He's fine. He's just – sent for me, that's all.” Hadn't realized that at first, but of course that's what the note was – not mere information but imploration, though the crux danced about as usual.

“Yes, I better gather – ah, off with you then!”

“G'bye, sir!”
Well, I sighed. They were a few shillings for the better.

So much for the quiet life! But if Alec was in any kind of bother then I was the very one who wanted to know about it. I put in the bookmark (playing card), and hastened to change into some of Alec’s hardy working-gear – pulled on my boots from our time at the quarry – wrapped woollies and hat, loaded up some food and made my uneven way down the stairs.

I’d rushed but the children were already gone all the same, that's youth – and in the dark, icy-breath night I caught the bus, the train and engaged the hoofs to make my way south of the river to him.

So this was where he worked. I confess, I hadn't given it a great deal of thought, the Tunnel, and had not imagined it beyond Alec's vivid evening descriptions and complaints. Occasionally I had accompanied him to work of a morning, and sometimes met him after, when he would emerge, bowed down and filthy, and wet, among his similarly exhausted flat-capped comrades, dragging barrows and buckets and shouldering picks, spades, hauling tool-boxes. Clearly the appeal of the pneumatic drill had dulled!

“Are you alright?” I’d ask him, aching a little at the sight of him; my voice secret for him among the shouts and traffic and whistles and machinery.

“Yeh,” he’d say. “Got to wash-up. Roll us a fag ready, will you?” But usually the latest he escaped was six.

Now it was nine in the evening, and instead of standing outside the site, and waiting for the figures to tramp upward out of the black, bleak entrance, I walked right down into the Tunnel, my boots immediately soaked in puddles you couldn't see.

Men were dotted around singly or in groups, muttering and barking, echoing in the dim, and mindlessly, relentlessly sloshing water in buckets out of the hollow where the rails were and into vats and iron carts.

I squinted to see; the Davy lamps were plentiful but the light was nowhere near enough for human eyes; the smell was awful and the cold reached the bones. I knew better than to make inquiries and instead kept my eyes peeled. It was a little claustrophobic and I forced myself to breathe normally and focus upon finding.
High above in the ceiling were heavy wooden beams; presumably there to re-enforce the scooped earth and stop the City falling down upon our heads. Girders lined the passage vertically too, holding them up; they were daubed with silver paint to catch the light but still I kept crashing into them. No-one here took any notice, they toiled on.

What on earth (or under it) were they doing? What was their motivation? I couldn't help but notice that the majority of the labourers down here were particularly well-developed physically – strong of arm, broad of shoulder, straining their cheap undershirts. Not that I make a habit of noticing that kind of thing.

And the ease with which they lugged buckets of muddy water – two of them – and swung them into the vats – an Olympic display!

I didn't think it would be difficult to pick out my more diminutive Alec from the bunch. Yes his arms are strong of course, but all the same I rather like the way he has to reach them both outwards and upwards in order to wrap them about my shoulders!

Water dripped from the roof, it seeped down the walls, and it splashed and crept steadily up the trouser leg. It was cold and yet the air was stagnant, not refreshing.

I tried to pick out the blue overcoat Alec wore every morning, plucking it off the fire-guard; or his grey or wine-coloured pullover, or his off white shirt, depending on how far he might have stripped with exertion. I tried to distinguish from among the labourers his cap, his pants or shoes; in the end it was his stance, his bodily ways, his posture so dear and familiar to me that led me to finally ferret him out.

Approaching, I recognized his sloping form, his hunched back; leaning heavily on his right leg, his arms folded tightly across his chest as he held a cigarette with a trembling hand and conversed urgently with the fellow beside him.

I said, “Hullo, Scudder – Ah – AAAAAAARRGGH!!” For upon hearing my voice, he swung round startled and all but blinded my eyes right out of my head with the light from his miner's helmet.

“Oh sor – sorry!! Oh my word! You alright? But you did come on me clean outta nowhere, you wally..”
Bent over, I rubbed my eyes for some moments, urging the pain out of them, before opening them and chancing his tentative face. Spots swam still. “That's alright. I'm alright. Just wasn't expecting -”


“Fair handy – we do be crashing into each other like bats down ’ere! Oh – this is – Hall..” he added in an offhand tone, not even looking at me. “He works north o' the river.” Well he wasn't wrong.

“Barry,” said the fellow, and offered the fag-packet in lieu of a handshake.

“Tha – Cheers,” I accepted one and a light. Alec stood carefully away from me, but he couldn't seem to chase the small smile off his face, though he looked at the ground, and this fag, and away up at the rafters. “You got the kids then?”

“Oh yes – the messengers. I did.”

“You didn't have to come alla way down here,” said Alec neutrally, in fact almost like he was mocking me.

I read his true meaning. “Oh – well, I thought if you were stuck at the site, I might as well come down and help, wasn't doing anything else.”

Alec looked away while Barry blew out some fug. “You're some mate!”

“Oh – um, well -” I faltered. I hadn't really thought this through. My motivations for racing towards the worksite and leaping straight into volunteering to sluice and carry and break my back – because?

Because *Alec*. Predictably. But I couldn't say that. He leaned casually against a wooden supporting post and wouldn't help me.

“Now take ‘eed,” said Barry, patting my shoulder in an advisory sort of way. “You'll not get paid for workin' down this way if you're stationed at the other Tunnel, northside. Well competitive it is, between the two.”
“Oh well – I'll shake something out of your manager,” I said easily, and Alec burst out laughing.

“Here,” I said, handing him the bag of biscuits.

“Oh wotcher!” cried Barry, lighting upon them. “They've not fed us lowly pumpers yet. They put on some nosh, but there was a mad scramble and the haulers made off – can I -?”

“Go ahead,” said Alec, and others appeared out of nowhere, performing their own mad scramble, reaching and crunching.

“Too bad tha' didn't bring loaves and fishes,” said Alec as we watched, hands in pockets.

“Haha, yes..” The whole encounter was an eye-opener. To get a first hand look at Alec's workplace, where he spent so many hours a day.. the cold, damp and dirt.. the labour.. the echoing noise of traffic overhead.. the suffocating feeling of being trapped in the earth, that caused breathless panic to come and go in spasms.. the other men, and the political structure that drew lines, assigned duties, forged affiliations, and, apparently, fed some and not others.

Alec snaffled a ginger snap and ate it messily, with much less finesse than the would have at our tea-table at home. Must be the environment. We were a right pair of chameleons by this stage!

“Us're pumpin','” he said, dusting off his hands and pulling his gloves back on. “It's over here – fairly just crankin' the lever constant, movin' the nozzle and tippin' the buckets. It's slow, slow..”

We walked small way apart from the others and he lowered his voice. “You didn't have to come,” he said again. “It's hard, this. It'll not suit you, even worse'n the quarry. I only sent you the message to let you know I'd be late.”

“Well, then my interpretation of it is my fault. Look at it this way, with my help, you'll be finished all the more faster and we'll both be able to go home,” I said brightly, knowing full well that my input wouldn't have any substantial impact upon the water level, which was lowering at a rate of about an inch an hour, with the best will in the world, and, for-all we knew, the best wheelbarrows, buckets, pumps, bailers.
“Well, it's up to you,” shrugged Alec, while knowing perfectly well that it wasn't remotely; I was powerless against the mighty force that drew us together like as if science dictated it. We just couldn't seem to keep away from one another. I had no choice. And even if I did, the result would be the same. It's all one.

He showed me the pump, up, down, up, down – jolly good and simple and easy – for about the first half hour. Then a turn – emptying. Then a turn – feeding the pump shaft. Then pumping again. And repeat.

Men groaned and complained and rubbed arms and popped shoulders and stretched backs. Alec and I stayed mostly quiet, sharing our unspoken secret, aware that later we would hurry upwards; ascending, emerging to our earthly reward.
The Returns of the Native

Chapter Notes

Hearty hearty thanks and appreciations to all who have commented, read, kudos'd or stumbled across the fic and said "120k words are you JOKING!!" This ain't no hayride!

Especial shout out to keyboardclicks for adding to the story, with great little ficlet :) Read it, love it, affirm your life.

Onward!

Unusually, it wasn't raining. Most unusually, the sun was actually managing to force some rays effort-fully through the cumulus like an arm seeking pathway through a wayward sleeve! Though it was nice that it was starting to brighten, evenings, the glass gleaming through the tram windows did make one cook in one's suit.

I pulled at my collar uncomfortably, and was relieved to loosen it, and slide off my tie, and draw down the brim of my hat, once I was back out footing on the street away from social constraints.

For all of that, by the time I had the last half-hour walked home – sometimes I waited for the buses, sometimes I couldn't bear to – it was dusking and nearly every window I passed bore a glowing lamp or candle. How lonely it would seem, were I not on my way back to my own glimmering homestead!

For I was weary, but my pace quickened on its own, the nearer I got and the more familiar the paths, buildings, people even, until I gained Rain Lane and crossed the road to the frontage, reached the high iron gate and swung through it, following the frightfully broken and uneven, barrel-lined alleyway to the courtyard.

So dim was it by this stage that it was incumbent upon someone to have lit the street-lamps in order to see the football he was kicking about. Although -

“You needn't have wickered. Light or no, it'll won't make any difference to your game, old fellow.”

“Shut yer pie hole.”
Though this was said good-naturedly, and as he came deliberately near to dribble round me, he flashed a smile that said, “I'd kiss you.” At least that's how I interpreted it.

He stole round my unchallenging form and bull-toed the ball at the wall, in between the goalposts: an old barrel on one side and a child sat on a crate on the other – one of a handful of children scattered around watching the practice.

In the windows around and above, in our building and those adjacent the yard, more people leaned idly out to smoke and watch the carryings-on.

He acted like he was completely unaware of an audience, or viewership; pretending to tackle me, now a dog, then a drainpipe. I put down my case and crossed my arms.

“I'll have you know,” he continued, solo-ing the ball with his hands in his pants pockets in that oh-so-casual, boyish, (irresistible!) way that scampish lads do, “That this ain't idle. I'm much improved in my game. In fact, as it 'appens, there's a few fellas what do git together and play – and practice – in the park over yonder when we cross to the mainway – saw 'em there, got to talkin' .”

He shrugged. But was no doubt fully aware that he'd by now reached twelve solos.

“Might join 'em sometime. If I fancy it of an evening.”

I stole the ball easily from him, circled his outrage twice with it just for fun, lobbed it over his head and *bang* clean between two doorways.

“You git!!” he cried, red-faced racing.

“So when will you go?” I asked, marking him but not too closely, poor mite. “Training, is it?”

“I might go, like I said. If I fancy it.” He seemed to contemplate a grandstanding bicycle shot, but instead opted to dribble the ball most skilfully, dodging and rolling it around the puddles – a feat much more impressive to the discerning soccer connoisseur.

A light kick to pass it to me and I stopped it neatly.
“Tell you what,” he said low, coming near, “I may be too exhausted for footie of an evening. You get me? Seeing as I might have enough exercise done already.”

And he stole the ball back and kicked it into his hand, and trotted to the scullery door, leaving it blatantly open for me to follow.

Later that evening, and I was down in the cellar, in the bathroom, in the bath: there was a kind of system of queueing and fairness and putting your name down to claim the hot water which people more or less adhered to. Occasionally some elbowing was necessary.

However this night, as I outlined, found me in the tub, which was about a third full, and I was scrubbing more than relaxing as it does go chilly quickly.

Alec sat nearby on a stool by the wall, a cup of tea on the locker beside him as he watched me groggily; the whole day of an early start, labouring, and footballing urging him towards sleep but he fought it valiantly, always wanting to stay up lest he 'miss the fun'.

It wasn't so risky, (or risqué), this. I'd bagsied the bathroom by coming down with my towel and toiletries and locking the door; Alec followed down about five minutes later and I let him in. Simple as that. Who was to know of it? It is possible to create a world within a world.

“It's shagged,” said Alec, reaching blearily beside him for his cup of tea, and in failing, giving up.

“Well, you ought to be,” I said. Then a thought. “Although now that you mention it, I have noticed
that lately we – since we – er – haven't actually. Dash it. Alec's eyelids fluttered but opened wide when I finally managed to expel: “- You know, done the whole thing lately.”

“The – whole thing?”

“Yes -,” I said, deliberately tending to my toes, although not as embarrassed as I ought to have been, rightly. “The whole – bang-shoot.”

“Bang-shoot,” said Alec, wonderingly. “What, you lackin'? We can do it again, if you want to, if you need to -”

“Oh – no – not -”

“Tonight, even, if you like, if we – well, happen I may have to -”

“Wouldn't dream of it tonight Alec, not when you're bodily weary, as you so often are these days.”

“Well I'm sorry!” He was red-faced himself by now. “I didn't realize you so needed – I thought you were happy wi'all we been doin' -”

“I am happy,” I spoke over his spluttering tones smoothly, conscious I had to regain control, calm because I had rehearsed. “So happy, in fact, that I rather thought maybe I could give a little something back to you.”

“To me?” Alec quizzed. “Like what, like?”

“Like I thought I could, for a change – take that role – that is to say – you could – me.” I pretended that the loofah and my foot were the most important things in the room.

A silence – a brief one. “I could – you?” It was a question, because of course he already knew the answer, the verb we wouldn't – verbalize. There we were, all alone, nothing barring us, and still speaking in codes. Hints were more than sufficient however.

“Yes – well, I thought in the interest of fairness,” I said. And base curiosity, I didn't say.

“Right,” said Alec. He was fidgeting a bit on his chair. “Bu – you know you don't have to.”
“I know. I want to.”
“You don' know that yet.”
“Well, I definitely know I want to try.”

“To try. Well, alright then.” Alec still had a very cautious expression on his face. He thought I was bluffing.

“I merely thought – It'd be fair, as I say – I'm not saying tonight or tomorrow or even soon! - But I might see what it's like – and you might enjoy it.”

“Oh I think I'm certain I'd enjoy it.” He broke into that wonderful smile of his at last.

“Super then. We can see to that. Maybe for your birthday,” I kidded, then felt a cold shock to my system. “I say – when is your birthday?” I was appalled that I didn't know. Still, one learns by inquiry.

“February twenty-sixth,” he said promptly.

It was February the ninth.

“Or – how about St. George's Day?” I suggested.

Alec grinned. “Or May Day.”

“Or the Midsummer's Day.”

“Or the Glorious Twelfth,” and he laughed, and I did too, elated that not only had this conversation taken place at all, but we had managed to discuss the matter both seriously and sweetly.

Alec crossed his legs on the stool and leaned back against the wall, with his tea. “Yer a riot, Maurice.”

“February twenty-sixth,” I mused, standing up in the tub to scrub. “That's not long now. And – again, how old will you be?”

“Twenty-four.”
“Ah, yes, of course... That's right. You know,” I said casually, as I balanced on my left foot to bend up and wash my right, “I was going to ask you to marry me on your birthday.”

Most deliberately, I concentrated my efforts upon scrubbing my foot vigorously, adding soap and splashing water.

Other than that: silence. I stole a glance.

Alec was fixed frozen; his cup of tea held on one knee and the other hand mid-scratch on his thigh.

“You.. Were going to..?” he stammered at length.

“Well, I am going to,” I said, standing properly to face him. “What do you say?” I could practically feel his heart beating, bashing against his chest from the five or six feet away. It was the gravity.

I ought to have been nervous and terrified and discomposed also, but strangely I wasn't; I was calm and composed and unclothed and Alec was folding under me, malleable as melted chocolate.

“Y-you mean I – well, I – well of course, I'll marry you,” he said at last; definite agreement although he looked so wrong-footed as to have no feet left. “I meandersay. If you want.”

“Jolly good. Then it's settled!” I squeezed the sponge and shook the brush, business-like. Alec hopped up and took the handle of the bucket of warm clean water by the wall and clanked over, clumsily hitting and splashing his legs.

He gave an idiotic grin, shook it off his face, but it forced itself back persistent, and he tried to fight it, before stopping in front of the bath biting his lip and shivering.

“You mean you – you mean we -” He appealed for help, while handing over the pail. I took it and the cloth for sluicing.

“Well – yes. Consider it. We've been stepping out – how long now? Six months? Fairly established. It's clear after that amount of time that we're courting. We better make it respectable between us or people will talk.” I squeezed the wet rag over my head to rinse my hair and Alec covered his gleeful face.
“Respectable, well.. In that case us better do it all proper-like, in a church.”

“Of course, a church. A big one. Fit everyone in.”

“Everyone?”

“Anyone you like. Your family?”

“Well, Ma would have kittens and never forgive if I went and got hitched ceremonial wi'out her there. And Dad would say he’d have to see it to believe it – me roped in!” He reached over and touched my hip for no particular reason. “And your folks?”

“Mine? Oh well: my mother would be of a similar mindset. Do it unbeknownst, deny her the new hat and the day out and there'd be holy war!”

“I'll have to get some new gear,” said Alec, fingering the lapel of his shabby cardigan. “Summat worthy.”

“Of course. And me. Special occasion, after all one only does it once!”

“And – can us hire a car? To go away in – afterwards?”

“Anything you like, darling.”

“And where'll we have the 'do? The afters?”

“Oh – we can hire out a venue too. A lounge – nothing extravagant, but certainly music, good food, fine wine..” I tapped my chin as I thought. “We could have the reception at the cottage of course, except I'd really rather have you all to myself there, when it's all over and done and quiet again.”

And so.. You see. At no point in this exchange did reality come and puncture, because, well, it felt as if it were already there. Somehow, in essence, this wasn't pretend. We were making plans, not dreaming.

We were imagining, yes, but something that would come to be. It seemed impossible that it not be possible. It wouldn't have occurred to either of us to say: “If only, eh?” or “Some day, maybe..” or
“It's a lovely thought.”

In fact quite the opposite. After a heavy beat during which he pocketed his hands and looked slowly around the room, mouth still smiling sidely, he slid his gaze back to me.

“Really?” he said. “You'll really? Throw your lot in wi’me? Stick wi’me forever? And let the world see you chose me, you love me?”

“Yes.”

“Me?!”

“Yes, you, silly boy!” I tugged gently on his fringe. “Why the scepticism?”

“Oh.. Well, it's just – it's one thing to pal up wi'someone, wi'a fellow, and shack up together and – everything – but – that you'd think that much o' me.” He blushed.

“Alec, marriage was made for us,” I said. “In its purest sense. There are no all-others to forsake. There's only you.”

He nodded slowly. “Right. That's – that's right.”

I was shivering myself now, with cold and other things, and as I climbed out of the bath he fetched the towel from the chair and hurried it warm around me. I let him dry me and he shook his head and chuckled to himself every so often as he did so.
Thus, the night of February twenty-fifth found us swinging open the door of the flat after work and making our way directly for the bed – not for reasons of recreational romance – we stumbled out of our day-clothes and straight into our pajamas and circled round each other down under the covers.

It was wise to bed down early and get some decent sleep for we had to be up at the crack of dawn the next day. Well not so much we had to. We got to. We wanted to! For previously:

“And what would you like for your birthday, darling? Anything at all. Just name it.”

“Cain't think of nowt.”

“Oh come. Really now.”

“Really and true! I don't want for nothin', Maurice, and that's plain and simple.”

“Alright, then, what would you like to do? Mark the occasion.”

“I don't mind – honest. Just as long as I git to be wi'you I'm satisfied. That's a birthday.”

“You know I want to make a fuss of you.”

“Oh I know you do! If you must.. Well, I wouldnnae exactly mind gettin' to see a bit of proper countryside; the parks and trees are nice, bu', can always hear the motors in the background and the air just ain't the same, its not as full and gulpin' as in the sticks. But I s'pose us're miles away from any right meaders and trees and coneys and that.”

“Not at all, old boy. That's the rub of London: everything's commutable. It's a jolly fine place, and part of the reason people revere it – at the back of the mind, it's known that one can at any point for a handful of shillings escape.”

“A handful! Now don't go to no needless expensin'.”
“We're doing alright there. And it won't be much. And you only have a birthday a year.”

“Alright then.” And burgeoning: “Yeh! Alright! Reet!”

So I met Alec after work on the Thursday and he came shooting out of the tunnel, himself like a train. As I say, we took to the bed, and it was a real effort not to start anything in the way of touching and feeling, such was our sense of high excitement and anticipation.

But Alec was out before I could even whisper a 'Goodnight' and it was no small feat to waken him the next morning when it was dark and cold and we didn't lay the fire as we'd be out all day.

“Out! Remember? We have a bus to catch, Alec!” I pulled his supine form again back up into sitting against the wall. “Remember? Happy birthday, darling!” At this his sleepy eyes opened more, and he groped for my hand in the semi-dark.

Encouraged, I passed him a plate of toast: “Come on pet! You can sleep on the bus.”

Which he most decidedly did, after we had finally gone out into the frosty morning air and raced our echoing footsteps along the paths and cobbles to jump on an omnibus, to take us to the station.

After electing the window-seat, Alec obstinately chose not to take advantage of it, instead rummaging around into a little ball and, with his head on a scrunched-up scarf on my shoulder, resuming his slumber. I let him. He needed it!

“Off on the day-out too?” said the kindly-looking woman sat adjacent to us, looking around another who was likely her sister, they both ringletted and fancy-bonnetted. Perhaps she made her surmisation from our own get-up.

In preparation for our day out leisureing (Alec had shaken his head, but proved a willing and
excitable companion in practice), we had donned our tweeds, cotton shirts, Fair Isle knit jumper vests, the golfing 'fours, soft leather boots and gaudy tan-coloured gaiters at his insistence.

Scrubbed up pretty well considering we were obliged, due to our plans, to consider sense and comfort as much as fashion; straw hats, tails and Oxfords I fear I have left far behind. One must dress to be prepared for any physical possibility, if one is to engage with the world.

Imagine, for example, being caught wearing patent pumps, when a situation arose where you had to suddenly run! Or walk over a field! Or hurry up some stairs.. Or carry something heavy somewhere dirty.. Fine, fancy, grand and gorgeous gear are so confoundedly confining, not only in their close cut but in their prison of helplessness.

No wonder women these days despair over wanting a change. They are rather fortressed in their role, right down to their darling, impractical costumes.

Across the way, the smiling woman had her piled up in her head, with the bonnet attached with either magic or pins; and every time the bus sailed over a bump or whirled around a sharp corner she nudged against the ceiling and it was knocked askew. I ask you!

I easily took off my golfing cap to her; I also removed Alec's and laid it in his lap. Only a lip twitched.

"Certainly we are,“ I smiled at the woman; I enjoy them much more now that I have been around them so much lately. At the boarding house, and at work. I used to sneer at feminine frivolity, but now I can see what it really is, I feel it myself, that sinking, giving in and running foolish when you love someone so...

They are emotional, as am I. They witter, I witter. Maybe we all witter!

"You went through Tommy's Tours too?” I asked, and wondered – thought I oughtn't, after all they were two grown, though young, women – where was their accompanyer. I couldn't see any older lady or dependable-looking brotherly type around.

"Oh yes!” said the girl with the even bigger blue bonnet, just over the aisle from me. "We booked it ourselves and snuck out; told our parents we were going with our aunt, and told our aunt we were being minded by our old school head! None of them like each other and so are unlikely to conspire. He! He!”
“I see,” I said. Imagine having to engage in such complicated planning and subterfuge just to leave the blasted house. They seemed particularly delighted with the clandestine nature however!

I took out a box and some matches. “Do you mind if I..?”

“Oh, not at all!” said the darker girl by the window. “In fact,” she added, extending a gloved hand, “Might I have one?”

“Remmy!” said her sister, taking that hand and drawing it to the safety of her chest.

“What? Release me, Romilda!”

“You cannot! It isn’t – becoming. It'll be our undoing!”

“I'm tired of 'ing'-ing. It's our day out! Who'll know?” She looked at me encouragingly. “The gentleman won't tell – will you?”

“I won't tell because there's nothing to tell! Prey don't make me party to your corruption, ladies, thank you!” I said loudly. Alec grunted.

I chanced a look behind at the general behavers before handing over the packet entire to the girls with the box of matches and dropped my voice: “At least do it behind the bike sheds like anyone sensible.”

“Oh thank you!” said Remmy, disappearing the contraband among her skirts.

“You are awful,” chided Romilda, but wryly. They smiled at me impishly. I felt like Alec.

In the further spirit of chivalry, I helped the women – in fact a line of them – traverse from the bus to the train which would take us from the Bethnal Green Street Station through Wembley, Watford and the Heath out to the swaying, graining wheat-fields of Aylesbury. Well – quite almost. Near enough.

Alec I all but carried onto the carriage, but he perked up pretty well at the gentle motion of the tracks, the view out the window and the tea-trolley – the train being still something of a novelty to him.
Hot tea restored the spark of life. “Why’d you lemme sleep so long?”

“Is that so! Alright, if you nod off again on me I shall pinch you. Like this.”

“Ow! Gerroff!!” There was no more time for sleeping – the sun came streaming gloriously, pushing aside the clouds, and the train slowed down into a twee little village station, where we excursionists – perhaps twenty in number – disembarked onto the worn dewy grass and into several horse-drawn carriages driven by bleary-eyed crew from Tommy's Travels.

“We're going to take you all on a wee tour of the village before we go over to Grandcastle for the 'unt. They're preparin' for the Mead Festival at present, and besides which there is much historic beauty to behold – aa-ahh-CHOO – excuse me, in our fair home town.”

The driver was calling back to us loudly as we journeyed, peering back through the carriage window; fortunately the horse had her eyes on the road.

“Laying the down-home on a bit thick, hey?” I said.

“Wot a silly accent he has,” said Alec unironically. “And history! Hope it 'ent too educational. It is me birthday.”

But whether or no he managed to deliberately resist actually learning was moot; the tour he found to be most enjoyable, and I most enjoyed that he did so. In the village square was an old-fashioned Maypole; just as you'd imagine it, resplendent with ribbons and bunting and what-have-you for this upcoming festival.

In a purportedly internationally-renowned bakery, Alec bought cakes and sweets; in some old ancient inn we tried the local beer and cider. It was barely eleven in the morning!

“Look!” said Alec, pointing out the old hooks hanging in front of many shops, to signify the village's fame as a centre of the meat trade. He went to investigate.

“Pigs,” he discovered, “Ham. Well, I'd rather the way we do it in Wiltshire, curin', but I'll surely try anythin'.” Wasn't that the truth.
So we had local sausages for breakfast, and local eggs and soda bread and foreign coffee, before we as a group were hustled through a supposedly haunted monastery, a fabled well that turned water into liquid gold (!), and the tomb of a celebrated returning Crusader who tripped on a tree-root at his own homecoming, and cracked his head open on his own chest of treasures, and was buried where he lay. “Whoa!” said Alec.

O England! Sometimes, on bright beautiful days like these, it feels as though you abhor adversity and yield nothing but gifts, comforts, delights to dim the greatest of any other nation. That's when you are not pressing down upon body and soul the weight of thousands of years of intolerance, prejudice and crushing conformity.

For example, what exactly made me laugh at a joke Alec made as we walked home from the shops and then immediately look round in base paranoia, worried and half convinced that strangers would mark and remark upon the very easy and intimate nature of our converse?

Were we obvious? Of course we bloody weren't! We didn't hold hands, or linger fingers, or even look at each other much in public; still we could set the place on fire with our bottled intensity. It is dreadfully unfair. The very best thing I'd ever do, ever be, my greatest achievement and it was a dirty little secret. Sometimes it wore.

“Perhaps we could move away, to another country,” I'd said wearily once. “Somewhere where the love between men isn't viewed with such distaste.”

“Like where?” Alec replied.

“Like – on the continent. More, oh, radical and unrestrained. Germany, or France.”

Alec curled a lip. “Wot, and live amongst the Frogs? No, I don't think so, Maurice. They're a funny lot out there, you know.”

“I do?”

“I mean like, in terms of..” He covered his mouth with his hand to whisper to me. “You know.”

“I tell you I don't!” Though an inkling, theme-wise.
“I means they do things different over the Channel. Not a speck of morals nor shame to share among 'em! Y'know,” he added conspiratorially, “Over there, mothers teach they sons how to -”

And he made a – oh, I hardly even want to describe it, even obscurely. A crude gesture with his hands, or rather his fingers.

“Alec, what absolute rot!! Mothers?! Think about what you're saying!”

“I tell you, it's just the way they do things! They take shagging very serious over there, France. It's main important you're good at it – they dasen't leave it to chance.”

I was sitting, at the time, for some reason, on a step. All I could do was put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. “And I suppose your source is credible?”

“True-blue, like? O' course – I had it from a fella I knowed who used to visit a workin' girl in – actually somewhere in London, come to that..”

“We'll most probably see her at the next party we go to.”

“Well, she told Kevie – that's he – she told him that she knowed a French fella or two, and that's why they're so good in the sack. They start early. And they mothers at it late..”

I covered my face with my hands. “I don't want to consider any mothers doing it with anyone.”

“How'd that work? How'd you think they became mothers in the first? The Word of God and Angel Gabriel? Ha! Ha!

“Mind you,” he added conversationally, though I clearly didn't invite continuation, “I wouldn't fancy it meself. Ma had six kids a'fore me, don't think I'd learn a lot!”
Let's go back to the lovely Medieval Mead Festival, shall we. I need hardly mention that by the time we (and not just Alec and I – all of the day-trippers) were bundled back into the carriages for the Hunt, as I say, by the time we were journeying on we were all a little pie-eyed. Even the girls!

Still, upon reaching the Park, the men among us were obliged to shake off the effects just enough to row the little flight of boats across the lake and towards the moderately-sized manor: the optimistically- and, I should think, latterly- named Grandcastle.

Much enthused, the ladies – who clearly were unaccustomed to such quaint activities – hence why they, like we, were paying for the brief experience – unfurled and unfolded dainty parasols, all of which were promptly whipped away merrily over the surface of the water by the wind. Only providing another source of dissolving giggles.

In the front of the manor, grooms brought out horses and we were given joined hands and shoulders to leg-up into the saddles. Alec raised his brows at me over the idea of being on this side of proceedings; although this was an entirely different affair to the Hunts at Penge or indeed any others I'd been at or Alec had worked at.

Essentially, what we were undertaking – and paying for – was the fancied experience of being among the Gentility – an imitation, a taste, a play-act. For a day – in fact, an afternoon – our group, which consisted of, I later discovered, tradesmen, housewives, middle class daughters (as you met), office workers like me, labourers like Alec, nannies, messengers, students, scrimping, saving skivvies – could see what it was like to be leisured, lazy and lolling.

And it came without the awkwardness of class disparities; the groomsmen and tour-guides and waiting-women were perfectly aware that we were workers too, just having a bit of sport; they lounged on the horses, not stood to servile attention, they flirted wantonly with the patrons, they laughed and joked and made dreadful onward progress and naturally this was the very element for Alec.

All hesitancy on his part was dashed when the rifles were produced.

“Oooooo!” He rocked in the saddle as he reached out eagerly and aimed. Even the women, whom had hitherto been petting the scampering beagles, seized upon the guns and exchanged excited calls and back-slaps. This was a carnival rendition of the Classic Hunt! And off we went!

Upon its release, the fox was given a generous head start before we were all charged to race like a battalion; maybe it was too much, the five minute advantage, because the fox disappeared entirely leaving the dogs snuffling round in mad barking circles, chasing each other through the forest and
cavorting in the lake.

It was because it was all just a show, Alec said.

“Mark you, it's no accident. That fox is in cahoots. He's part of the team: they lets him get away early so's they donnot have to go to the bother and expense of trappin' a new one ever' day. He'll be waitin' somewhere safe and he'll surely get his share.”

I hid a smile at his unselfconscious humanizing.

I smiled flagrantly when we opened up and galloped: he looked great on horseback although he wasn't actually as proficient as I. “Not used to all this fiddley stuff!” - The reins, saddle, martingale he refused to use..

So since fox was off the menu, as it were, we tied our horses by the lake and had a go at some ducks. Despite their soft quacking and placid drifting, the little blighters knew exactly when to take mad flight in a group!

“I rather clay-pigeons myself,” I said, feeling I was wasting bullets. “One knows one's targets and it's simply a matter of timing and trajectory.”

“Or mebbes, you'd rather a quarry on the same intellectual level,” said Alec, as he squinted and aimed.

“Could well be,” I said agreeably. A beat or two. Or three.

“Hay!!”

Alec could afford to josh; he was having more luck, due to having more skill. It was rare the duck he missed, and he had commissioned one professional-looking beagle to be his afternoon retriever.

“Good girl!” he would say, taking the limp duck gently and tousling the dog's ears robustly. “There's a lass!” This was all she wanted in return, as she wagged and panted and strained against his leg. I probably would have been the same way, her position.
The catch was supposed to be bagged up and handed to one of the stewards, who would de-feather and what have you while the revellers watched; Alec would have none of this and set about cleaning the fowl himself. Sat on a fallen tree trunk, laughing with the lad who'd led us, with the dog lying worshipfully at his feet.

Perhaps he was enjoying a taste of his old life: the last few months had indeed thrown the pair of us for a loop with change following change. Yes, it was nice after all the running – together and joyously, hands joined, not exactly away from the past but barrelling towards the future – yet, still running – here was a chance, even just a day, to relax.

To give Alec a break from my discreet but adoring gaze – from my very presence – I wandered off to the banks of the lake and watched some of the others slowly punting and cautiously fishing. Both activities I politely declined in favour of laying back on the soft ferns in the warm glow of the sun, a wisp in my mouth and hat over my eyes.

I may have dreamt for a while – it's hard to tell these days, to distinguish – somewhere externally I thought I heard grass sinking underfoot, and that voice, and birds chirping.

Perhaps he would come over, and find me, and be so touched and attracted that he would lay down with his head on my chest and I would feel him do so, but I wouldn't change position or react obviously, maybe merely a small, knowing smile -

* SPLASH *

“Ah – ahh – ahh!!” I sat up rapidly, my heart racing and my mouth gasping for air. When I shook the water from my eyes, I made out Alec standing over me with one arm folded behind his back and, completely unashamed, a dripping tin cup on the other.

“Oh good. You're awake! Lunch time,” and he strode off laughing.

We were blessed with the weather: I wonder what we would have done had it rained; gone chasing after the bobbing parasols one supposes! As it was, we sat around on coats and rugs picnicking on sandwiches, cold meats, cakes, sweets, fruit; employees and customers alike, gabbing and singing and sharing swigging bottles of ginger-beer.

Alec was just in transports of delight, and I was pleased and relieved that, different as we were, and
social outcasts really, all the same if we were careful and canny, and avoided full disclosure (which the respectable Englishman does anyway), - there were still other people, we could still tentatively interact with the human race.

Here I am with my words, 'careful', 'avoiding', and 'tentatively', yet also wanting Alec to come draping himself all over me on the common! Just as well one of us has some good sense – I must draw upon Alec's exasperated but unending reserves of it.

After the meal, people were inclined to doze and bathe and cluster and converse; Alec however leaped straight up, wiped his hands on his trousers and plucked me upstanding by the hook of my elbow.

While I still crunched on a crumpet, he led us into the woods, choosing the wilder trails or inventing his own, until we were more climbing than walking, scrambling, now strolling. We came to a clearing.

“Now here.” He stopped and pointed in an arc. “This is just the business. Be perfect.”

We hadn't spoken in the last twenty panting minutes, hadn’t discussed why we had ventured woodsward, where exactly we were going or what would be the signifier of our arrival. But I knew; I knew exactly to what he referred. I saw, caught and rode his wavelength easily.

“It is indeed. Ground is good and substantial.” I stamped an experimental foot. “Lots of trees for shade but not so many that they would block out the sun. It would look lovely in summer!”

“River's only a stone's throw,” said Alec – by Jove he must have heard it, because I couldn't see it. “Village only a cart away. We could get more chickens – and turkeys – remember how much you loved them.”

“Quite right. I showed them exactly how much I loved them – did I not?” I swung the imaginary axe.

“Ha! I shall have to remember not to piss thee off!”

“Just keep the gobbling to a minimum, you'll be fine.”

He slotted his arm into mine, but still took the leading role, walking us to the edge of the clearing facing into the thicket.
“There,” said he, pointing with his free hand. “There’s grown too thick and crowdin’. That's where we'll chop 'em down, thin 'em out.

“And over there,” he pointed to the far right, “By the edge, in the east where they'll get most sun, and it's a bit raised – that's where we'll pile 'em to dry 'em.”

“Extraordinary,” I said, and reflecting: “And yet – perfectly ordinary. We could do that. Easily.”

“That's the plan,” said Alec, and there was no sense of laughing excitement or heady romanticism at the idea of our cottage in the woods. For it wasn't, in fact, an idea, it was a plan; a solid ambition, an aim and a goal, a surety. And so: determination and confidence and mutual agreement.

How could it possibly be other-thus for us? What could stand in our way? It would have to be something big.

On the pleasantly weary way back to the city, Alec slept soundly while I merely dozed, wanting to have my faculties with me when going from carriage to train, train to bus, and bus stop to wrapping arms and bundling him home again.

Up in the flat I lit lamps only to extinguish them minutes later, too tired myself to attend to any chores.

As I backed up into his curving form in the bed, I said: “Alec. It only just occurs. What with one thing and another, I've not given you an actual present for your birthday. You must..”

“Of course you have. You gave me.... Couldnnae give more. Only...”

His serious tone encouraged me to roll over and look at him, his face pale in the faint moonlight, melting onto the pillow.

“...Don't hand us a steaming pile.”

“A – what?”
“I mean it, Maurice. Don't put me on the long finger.”

“At this time of night? And us both so worn weary?”

“Quit codding around. I'm main grave: don't jack me around.”

I felt his hand on the lapel of my paisleys and he pulled until my forehead gently touched his.

“Don't fuck wi’me. Put your money where your mouth is. Gimme a date.”

I blinked rapidly, my breath caught, my shoulders tightened and I felt floods of tingles – now it wasn't quiet contentment, now felt I the rush of excitement.

“July twenty-eighth,” I breathed, and he nodded solemnly, his hand sliding slowly down my neck to my chest, and that was all it took – everything, our future was all it took – I fed my arms under and around him, and swung my leg over his hip just as he pushed his in between mine.

“I wish we could go there now.. And skip over tomorrow.”

“Oh, you're so darling.”
More do! There sure are a load of brillopad pieces turning up in the Maurice corner! *cries* why can't I write fluff? It's like I don't want to sleep..

Pimpin' ain't easy: More Loveliness from the Honourable keyboardclicks

Smiley face ;)

Can one help what happens externally? How others view us – how circumstances effect, how the world reacts? And if one could – would you bother?

 Seems like a lot of fuss, to conduct an entire orchestra. Best to just concentrate and contrive towards one opinion, the happiness of one little individual. And, as it happens to coincide, one's own.

“Hall! How are you, old chap. Great job you're doing there! Making waves!” It was Mr. Harris, the manager of this section of the office, and he had waylaid me as I made my way down through the desks on a short-cut.

“I'm very well, thank you sir. And you?” I pulled my hands out of my pockets and very deliberately desisted travelling them upwards to my tie, which I'm sure was askew.

If the fellows at the stockbrokers' could see me now! Or from college! The one-time top-dog now creeping in servitude. And yet I didn't see it thus. My eyes now wide open, I felt no less human than he – sucking up was mere protocol and conducive towards a steady pay packet and a quiet life. Which I appreciated at work: life a home being still something of a fever dream. (A man! My very own! Who loves me!)

“I tell you,” said Mr. Harris, patting my back as we walked along, although I was now going the opposite direction to where I had been heading originally, “It's good to have a fellow of your stature, and professionalism, and dashed decent work ethic right here on the floor among the masses! Keep going as you do and you'll be looking at management! Come see me about the exams – eh? Good
lad,” And I was offered a benign, walrus-moustached smile and a cigar.

“Thank you sir! Um.. Right you are!” Off he strode, humming, and I turned, at last, to finally slip off to the accounts basement to fetch out the file I wanted -

Only I didn't, because I took only a step back down the desk-aisle when Miss Rathbone, usually my friend, wheeled in a circle around her chair to cut off my path, loud-whispering furiously: “I heard all that – that's just completely unfair! You're here only a wet weekend and you're already being plucked for promotion! I've been here, God, two years, running the show! But I might as well be invisible!”

“It isn't fair to blame me either Miss Rathbone! What am I supposed to do – tell him to do one? I need the job too – I've got – mouths to feed..”<

“It's because you're a man,” she said bitterly. “That's all you have going for you.”

“Likely true,” I said, hoping that joining in her criticism would simmer her down. I don't know if she meant it – or if perhaps it was true. Certainly being a man on the bottom rung here was peculiar but not unheard-of. And maybe it was only my sex which recommended me.

And yet, there had been more than one occasion in the office when everyone would be working away, perhaps more lax than usual in the absence of a manager (as he was always disappearing to urgent meetings at the Club or Course), and Miss Rathbone AWOL too, and a newcomer would arrive – perhaps a messenger, or a manager from another section, or someone from maintenance or Public Records or Central Office.

“Anyone in charge?” he may ask. “Who can I report to?”

And everyone around would avoid eyes, and creep back to their desk, didn't matter, men, women, anyone! And then it was, “Oh, Mr. Hall, there's a man...? Would you know..” It could be Miss Ellison, or Miss Joyce, or any of the Misses or Misters around.

Authority was somehow always deferred to me – whether it was because I was the tallest man, or the most immovably droll one, or – forgive me – tended to be wearing the most decent gear.

Either way it constantly fell upon me to deal with people, deal with issues, and liaise with senior staff while my cohorts squabbled with each other around airing their complaints. So I was stuck being wretchedly responsible – just like back home at Mother's – did I ask for it? Was it natural? Was it
“Why not sit the exams as well, Miss Rathbone?” I asked in an attempt to bridge. And really, I thought it might appeal to her.

At this suggestion she curled her lips into an alarming expression of sardonic incredulity – had she been the type, like Alec, she might have snorted.

“You haven't the slightest.” She shook her head and swivelled away to stride towards her desk. Before she quite reached it, she slowed and turned her head to give me a tight, thoughtful glance.

Far be it for her to actually express appreciation for my idea. Some women are so very sparing with their affection but then again I suppose they have cause to be: it is their currency.

Maybe it's not just women, and one can be, if appeased, oh so generous.

It was a Wednesday, and raining. I'd stayed late at the office, and it was cold. Starving, I'd gotten some meat pies for us at the German café, but the bus was horrendously late.

Back home, however, I gratefully unpeeled the outer layer of clothes and left them – coat, socks, scarf, hat, shoes – on and around the hot tank in the cellar. Alongside my things were items of the others': jackets, jumpers, slips, bonnets, undergarments. No shame, not a speck of it: couldn't afford it.

I left the clothes to steam and made my careful way up the five flights: here and there the stairs were wet and one step could see you crashing down like an avalanche. Behind me I pulled Alec's toboggan, to which was tied firmly with rope a bag of coal.

Ergo it took some time before I opened our door, dragged in my baggage, made some blustery, disgruntled noises at the transition from cold to warm and finally went over to greet the figure lying on the bed, thrown like a drooling rag-doll, still in its work-shirt and boots.

Always so sleepy these days – some mornings I had to guide him round the kitchen and bathroom getting ready, shaving him myself for fear his droopy hands and half-lidded eyes would lose track of the razor.
I leaned over to take a moment, absorb him, breathe him in – how lovely – but hullo, his slumbering face was blotchy, eyelashes rather damp and he was breathing mostly through his mouth due to his nose sounding congested. A handkerchief was clutched in a tight fist.

“Darling..?” I whispered, not necessarily to waken him, but he did anyway, was only dozing, opened those big brown eyes – tinged red tonight too – and slowly looked up at me.

“Oh.. hullo,” he said, and wiped his face and swung himself quickly off the bed out of my view and potential clutches. Making for the kitchen, he hooked his suspenders, which had been hanging below his hips, back up over his shoulders.

“Kep' late, was you? Yeh, you said would would be an' all..” Back to me, he clattered around, scraping lard into a pan for the fire, and beginning to chop cold leftover potatoes. “Sorry, I meant to come down an' meet you.”

“That's alright Alec, it's mighty cold outside,” I said. “You were quite right to stay here.”

Though I wasn't sure this had been a positive course for his evening either. Another mood – just his ways. Nothing in moderation.

At least he wasn't sulky, or surly; but this was actually worse, there was a forced brightness in his manner when he said: “That's fair true, could even be snow in it! If we was back out in the woods I'd be able to tell from the hints and changes. I'd put it in my almanac. Did I show you that ever?”

“On numerous occasions.” I got up from the bed with a squeak and lingered into the kitchen. It was on me to tread softly: a man's feelings can be all the more sensitive and untried for being hidden and wrapped up so long.

“Oh, haha, I s'pose I did do..”

“Alec,” I said, making my voice sound nonchalant for fear of causing him embarrassment or annoyance, “Are you alright?”

Those shoulders under that thick grey shirt tensed even more, as he cracked eggs: “You what? Oh, grand, grand, Maurice, never better.”
He turned around with the pan in his hand to make for the fire; the moment he looked me full on the face and our eyes met his smile wobbled and fell; his eyes shut in anguish and he gave a deep, terrible sob that must have been brewing for God-knew-how long.

Immediately – instinctively – I reached out to him, took the pan and left it aside, and though he turned his face away and tried feebly to push me away I took him in my arms, pressed him desperately against me and gave him a place to go, to let go, bury his face safe in my embrace.

It wasn't for me to be selfish, to panic, to worry, to fear; it was all about Alec, and helping him, and attempting to transfer my strength, such as it was, into him, through arms and chests and chin resting on crown.

I didn't ask again, only sighed and murmured nonsense and rocked him, as I had times before, tightly and rhythmically.

It occurred to me that Alec had always, right up until his young adulthood, been somewhat coddled by his parents' graceless and sincere devotion. Certainly he spoke of them so fondly, and clearly he was a boy who had known, and felt entirely entitled to, open love and affection, as he followed suit and gave his own so freely.

I was a whole 'nother animal: from my first term at prep-school – perhaps from the moment of Father's passing, though in short pants I remained – it was my role and duty to be a Little Man, then a Middling-Sized one, and finally a grown up professional Adult Male – the most sophisticated person there could possibly be.

The girls.. They carried on into adolescence and beyond, indulging in kissed greetings and play-fights and gossip... Mother and I never trafficked in that sort of thing. I missed them all – not constantly, but a sight or sensation – a post-card, a particular flower, clang of a certain church-bell – reminded me of Home, and youth, and my own ones, stranger as I was now: it was, sometimes, a stinging loss.

Alec, on the other hand, was accustomed to free-flowing appreciation and camaraderie from all corners and the adjustment to our current pariah-like existence was more of a problem for him. Consequently I was taking on the role of parent, friend, sibling, neighbour, as well as lover.

“Oh God,” he hiccuped, drawing away from my neck to wipe his nose on a sleeve. “I just can't take it anymore! Oh I weren't goin' to say anythin' – oh I still oughtn't!”
“Say what? What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” and he pulled away; I held onto his arm and he didn't shake it: “Oh come!”

“Can't tell you.”

“Of course you can! You can tell me anything. Especially if it's bothering you to such a degree.” Although it wasn't cold, I draped a thick woolly cardigan round him while he scrubbed his eyes and nose to a terrific mess with a bare hand; I led him back to sit beside me on the bed and wiped his tears with my own handkerchief.

“I weren't goin' to say..” he tried again.

“Well, now you are – if you like of course. You can talk to me.”

“Well it – oh – it's – oh it's work – I hate it! I hate gettin' up and I hate goin' to it, I hate that fuckin' Tunnel and it's gettin' more – oh, it's not fair and I'm so unhappy -” And his crying took over again, and I enveloped his racking wailing form once again.

Of course I had seen him cry before – and he me – we tended to communicate, oftentimes, with emotional outbursts of some form or another – and I had long gotten over the cognitive dissonance of witnessing a man dissolve, give free vent to his weaker nature. It would have been akin to suicide at school!

It felt – well, not wonderful, my poor sobbing boy – but relieving to know that he felt safe and comfortable exposing his naked vulnerability to me, and as I held him I felt the lines that surrounded and separated Alec and Maurice as individuals soften and blur some more.

“The hard work,” I whispered, rubbing his arms that ached him; and taking his hands that dropped cups sometimes because he had been clutching and twisting sopping, rusty old pipes all day, and I squeezed his knees that limped slightly from the untold loads he carried.

As he tired himself out and breathed deeply more than whimpered, I closed my own eyes briefly. How could I have let this run on so long, so awful? He'd not let on. He was doing, now.

“It ent that.. Well, not just that. It were alright at first, when I was was easin' in.. But, I'm supposed to be liftin' two-and-an-'alf ton of clay an hour -”
“Good lord!” I spluttered.

“And the other fellows what started the same week as me are managin' two but I can barely stretch to one till I'm fair fecked and the other navvies wi'their tree trunk arms what've been there years make fun of us! And they mock my hair and my accent. Day in an' day out and I can't bear it!!”

He covered his face for another paroxysm. I patted his back, feeling almost choked with tension myself.

“They say I'm like a girl,” he said, barely audible through his pressed palms. “I wouldn't mind so much – I like girls – but the way they say it, like as if it's an insult. And anyroad, I'm not one! Still, if they ever knew..” And he looked at me uneasily.

“If they ever knew you properly,” I said, taking his hand from his face and patting it between both of mine, “they would find so much to admire. Who wouldn't?”

“I don't want them to know me,” he mumbled, looking away, over at the piano which was covered in books, garments, empty bottles and boxes. “I don't want anything to do with them at all.”

He returned his gaze to me then, sadly, begging, was he – imploring, it wasn't enough that he had gotten his troubles off his chest, he was basically saying: 'Fix this!'

My heart beat fast and I knew a kiss wasn't the answer to his question. But maybe it would do as an ellipsis, and I saw his eyes close slowly as I leaned close -

A sharp rap-rap-rap on the door stopped and froze us – we sprang apart like illicit lovers. Which of course we were not. But one – or two – must adhere.

It was Elisa, a woman who lives two doors down, 5B.

“Evenin' gents,” she said, when I opened the door.

We hadn't been doing anything remotely untoward – although maybe we'd been about to. She might have sensed the atmosphere or noted Alec's collapsed shape on the bed – for there was a hint of
hesitation when she pushed her hands into her cardigan pockets and said: “Er.. Fancy coming to catch a flicker? Our Wes is taking us, and a few of t'others are well up for it, so thought I'd ask around..”

“Yeh,” said Alec, brightening. “Yeh, we'll come along, sounds good.”

Perhaps he sought a diversion, something to distract him from his woe; perhaps he just couldn't resist her familiar accent.

Either or, we duly dappered (to a degree) and caught the bus downtown with the others to the picture-house. Alec did seem much cheered up, though it would be difficult to focus on one's worries – or any inner thoughts at all – when one is confronted with loud clattering music and flashing figures on the screen some fifteen feet tall.

Afterwards there was the usual melting towards the pub – whereby the plot of the picture was misremembered but the actresses tucked away in memory; if not their names then various other aspects of significance.

Drink flowed and music played and jokes cracked; the usual methods of blocking out the prospect of work in another wretched morning. I gazed from afar at him; he didn't react much to his surroundings, laughed a beat too late after the rest of the group, idled over the same pint all night, looked at the ground too much for my liking. It wasn't working.

Work.. Of course it's a pain in the nethers, whichever way you look at it. Why else the need for base remuneration? And yet.. There are wide varieties of labour and the sufferings involved.

My own position, for example, had its up- and down-sides: which I myself had not hesitated to inflict upon Alec nightly. Oftimes, say, the office would hum with bonhomie and positivity after a good joke or a general praising from higher up or a brought-in cake or a break in production.

Other times you would find those with whom you had thought yourself quite chummy stalking off to lunch passing right by your desk, cackling and laughing with noses in the air. And you'd wonder. Next day they may be all over you again and some other poor sod in the outs. It was enough to make one want to hide under the desk all day: Other People!

I often went out for lunch as a combative measure, citing 'appointments' and 'associates' when really it was a leaning on a wall for a relieving lungful.
And to the work itself: sometimes there was so much paperwork coming in, and simply volumes to be trawled through, and innumerable precise calculations to be made, and logged, and tallied with other tellers – all by the end of business hours – but believe me, beyond – that everyone was practically ready to commit mass murder. It was only a question of who got a spare second to snap first.

Other times, and it was almost worse: no new files, or cases, or audit logs coming in of a morning, and there was nothing to do but walk about, letting on one's busy, while slipping off to the lesser-used back stairwell, smoking with one's desk-mates and hoping none of the supervising officers would come by to dish out a shrilling for shirking.

So it fluctuated, but it was fair. Which couldn't be said for Alec. My Alec! Getting bullied about at that infernal tunnel and only now breaking down enough to admit it to me. Why those horrible louts – it made my blood boil. I could hardly go in fists swinging. Not unless I wanted to compound his victimization.

As the faraway steeple chimed half-eleven, the pubbers took this as a sign, not necessarily to rush home to bed, but to start the night-search for chips.

As people walked in chattering groups or pairs, I approached Alec and tugged his arm to separate him from the bunch and led him over to the railings of a park entrance, where there was some semi-privacy. He gave me his attention from under his cap.

“Listen,” I said, and then I said what I realized I had been planning to say all evening; since, truth be told, the moment his little face had crumpled back at the flat. “Now hear me out. Here's what you'll do, if you agree, and you like. Go to work tomorrow morning, because there's always time for common courtesy, find your foreman and tell him you're handing in your notice. That -”

Alec's mouth dropped open in surprise, or to speak, but I steamrollered: “- that you've gotten another position nearer home, or that you've finally come to your maiden aunt's inheritance, or that you're running away to sea. Any reason – just clarify your commencement. Then, you come back home, right back to the flat, and go straight to bed – No, you must, you've earned it, darling.

“Af...
“Now it's just an idea,” I said, to cover myself in case he went off on one about my giving orders again. “Just another way of doing things. Merely – that if the Underground is so very dreadful, and you are under-appreciated, then you need never work a day at it again. There's a choice.”

Alec managed to frown even more without looking angry, only muddled, and he stuttered: “Yeh – but – like – ye – can't – like that – it's not – I can't.”

“Can't what?”

“Can't just up and quit! My job! What kind of a man does that?! I'll need to bring in income! What otherwise?”

“I can't see your reasoning there,” I said. “A man doesn't exist just to work, to suffer.”

This released some of the old scorn. “Ah – there you go again, I told you a'fore – you've no clue what it means to have to bring in means. To work 'cause you have to, not only 'cause you fancy it.”

How well did I remember him telling me a'fore – mere months ago – when he lectured me patiently about the realities of the labour market on the morning after our wonderful second night together at that hotel. Pretty supercilious he had been too, for someone tugging on his wrinkled trousers.

Fully dressed now, his voice was more soothing: “You're awful sweet, Maurice, talkin' that way. But a fellow can't just chuck in regular work on account o' not likin' it.”

“We left our jobs at the quarry,” I said stubbornly.

Alec took me by the elbow to walk the footpath home slowly, said with maddening reason: “That were different. Seasonal. And we had to move somewhere a bit less rough. And..” And it was me who needed the change, he didn't say.

“Anyroad, that only tears it further,” said he. “I can't go up and leavin' every job I land whenever the spirit moves me! Land! I were at Penge, tossed that in for t'Argentine; I skived off that without even givin' it a chance, then the quarry only a few month – now this! What must you think of us? What lousy chancer have you saddled on thysel'? I can't go leavin' another position!”
“Why not?” I pressed.

“Be-because o' what I just said! Look I'm a man, whatever about everything, after all, and I want to work and provide for you.” Instantly he blushed – having blurted this out without due care and circumspection.

“You honestly think I think less of you because you turn on such whims and change so frequently?” I said. “It's quite the contrary. I think you're wonderful.”

He stopped walking to look at me, to take this in. I chanced a glance around, all clear, and I faced him, taking both of his hands in mine.

Pulling him a bit nearer, I said: “You're so fearless and decisive. You don't rest on your laurels or sit around grateful for your due. You know more. When you get restless, you act. Whereas I, stagnated so long, and followed other peoples' paths.

“You're wild,” I said, and his eyes widened. “I should have known the City could never change that. Don't pin yourself down miserable on my account – let me help you.”

Sparkling rain, or a fine mist, began to descend, visible from the street-lamp and on the curved corner cobbles and perceptible on our exposed faces and joined hands. I touched his shoulder to encourage him to walk on again or we'd never make it home!

“We have a bit put by,” I said, and as he started to protest, I continued: “For the cottage, I know, but for emergencies too. And this is one. We won't have you unhappy. I have work – and I'll support the pair of us for the time that it takes – I know you would do the same for me.”

“I would – I would!” He tugged at my arm desperately.

“I know,” I said. “Cheer up! You've laboured your last at that place.”

He shook his head, looked away, snickered, put his hand over his mouth. “He he..”

“What's funny? You're so odd.”
“It's only... I fair knowed it would be fun, havin' a fella for a – bein' with a fella this way, but.. I didn't figure on it bein' so.. *nice*!”

“Nice?!” I wasn't sure I was flattered.

“I can't believe.. That once you're grown-up.. That someone would come along and take care o'you, take the weight off your shoulders..” He said, eyes closed mirthful.

“Oh – well. Yes. The onus to work, you mean? Consider me a cushion.”

This proved simply too much to handle, and the wet street, the railings, the dark, damp trees, the house-fronts with sleeping windows all rang with his maniacal laughter. I took a cautious step away from him but he followed me right closely, threading his arm through mine.

“You idiot!!”

Next day started off just as normal, with we rising and shaving and preparing and rushing off to our perspectives. I'll wager that it was with an entirely different outlook that Alec went to work that morning though; and consequently for me too: I was a bit nervous over him.

I didn't know if he really would go through with the plan when it came to the crunch: whether he would give up the job he hated and surrender his keep to the man he loved.

As far as I could see, it was a no-brainer. I was as responsible for Alec as I was for myself, and I knew – I'd heard shrilly – that he felt the same towards me. But had I not said myself, the night before, that he was capricious to a fault?

That evening, when most of the clerks were departing *en masse* and much relieved for home, I went to the heavy wooden front doors also. Not to leave, but to linger. I had but taken my first drag when I spotted him. Alec ambled up, hands in his neat winter coat pockets, hair combed under his hat and a dear and restful smile on his handsome face.
There it was again, that almost painfully acute spike of pride and elation: Alec was happy, and it was me what done it!

“Alright?” said he, and looked about ready to burst with pleasing. I blew out some smoke and said: “Just fine, thank you. And you?”

“Bloomin’! That is, I – er – well, I done what you said,” and he looked alarmingly like he was going to embrace me, or grab my hands, or some such simple, wonderful contact that would have told me wordlessly everything important about his day, his feelings, his relief, his triumph.

I beckoned him to come inside. “Come on, it's chilly. And I want to get these final bits done so we can go home soon as.”

We walked leisurely through the foyer, turned right, up the stairs, down a long dark-panelled, dusty, photographed corridor, turned left, and into our office. At this time, after the five o’ clock exodus, there were barely any stragglers still dotted around the room and Alec drew no particular notice.

At my desk I sat down, motioning him to pull up Miss Ellison’s chair and do likewise. He was just that bit hesitant to take initiative, do anything, and so I had to gently gesture. Quite like what he did for me at the quarry. Or indeed, in the bedroom..

“Bloody thing,” I muttered, pushing the leaves of the grotty plant by our table out of the way and straightening a stack of papers.

“Oh that's right,” said Alec. “I didn't consider.. You been workin' all day and you're still at it! And now I'm here naggin' on you.”

“Don't worry,” I kidded. “We'll find you something to do.”

“Alright! Name it! I'll help!” He leaned eagerly over his joined hands on the desk.

“Such uncommon enthusiasm in the Service! You'll soon learn. Anyhow never mind that for the moment. Let's get some coffee and you can fill me in.”

Alec was mystifyingly thrilled about the prospect. On the way to the kitchen I sneaked down to the boiler room and threw on another load or two of coal to give us another couple of hours' heat; against
regulation of course but do you think there were managers present at that time of the evening?!

Back at my desk, I leaned back in my chair, and flung one leg over the other, ankle on knee, while I began sorting the pile of papers in to two separate – no, three, dammit – heaps. 'Misc' always ends up being employed.

“Won't be a jif,” I said around my cigarette. “Only this lot have to be in the post by tomorrow latest, or it's on the department's head. Or in other words, mine – everything you do leads back to you.”

Alec tutted. “Call this work? Tha'rt just movin' papers about. Money for old rope, this.”

I laughed. “I know. Ridiculous, isn't it? I – oh, just a second..” I spotted a miscalculation and cursed under my breath, swinging my feet down off the desk and dragging over the bloody typewriter from Miss Gardiner's corner. Alec stared with open curiosity as I pulled off the cover, set the ribbon, loaded a fresh page and twisted the wheel to tighten, it clanking loudly. He edged his chair closer to watch.

“I've to type this one letter out all over again,” I explained. “Because this client was being advised on payment in the lower bracket when in fact he's in the higher.”

“Oh right,” said Alec. “I see.” Then more honestly: “What exactly are you doing? What's all these papers?”

“They're alerts going out to small business owners and tradesmen,” I said, “Reminding them to return their accounts before the end of April. And that if they – for example, in the event of a partnership, a conglomerate, or family business – wish to avail of their co-operative tax credits over the course of the corporate year, they may do so incrementally.”

Alec sighed.

“Well,” said he, bothering his coffee cup. “Can I help?”

“Oh! Well, of course. See this pile of papers I've sorted already? They're done and ready for posting. The addresses are already on the back. So you can – see here – fold 'em, seal 'em and frank 'em.”
“Frank?”

I hauled over the franking machine and demonstrated, the letter shooting through the wheels and cogs. Alec marvelled – he has a boyish appreciation for machinery, despite his country background.

And so the evening was turning out quite productive, with Alec’s assistance, although that wasn't the primary reason I'd invited him round to the office.

“Burning the midnight oil, are you Mr. Hall? You poor wee dote,” said Ms. Newman, as she buttoned up her coat and adjusted her hat just so.

“Please, don't tell me that it's midnight already.”

“Oh really,” she laughed, and ran her eyes to Alec: “And bringing in helpers, by gum!”

Alec had to laugh, again at her accent. He can spot his own a mile off. “I'm on the payroll miss, or he'd not get a farthing's worth work out o' me!”

“Right enough too! Well, goodnight to you,” and off she went, bustling her umbrella.

“Nowt poor about thee,” said Alec. “This cushy number!”

“But day-in, day-out – would you like to do it really? I could ferret -”

“Oh fuck no – I couldn’t handle the indoors all day. I'd go stir-loopy. And all this'd fair fox me..” He reached over and plucked at the letter I was reading, my other hand occupied with holding my chin up.

“I mean..” He took the letter and studied. “I just don't have a bull's notion what this means! Makes me feel a bit.. Well, I s'pose I'm nowhere near as clever as thee.”

“Me? Pah! You don't need to be clever to understand something. You only need to be shown it before. If you were to reverse, you could say – should say! - that I'm rubbish at so many things at which you are highly skilled. Outdoor pursuits for example. Your game, survival, sort of thing.”

“You'll soon pick it up,” said Alec. “When we're settled in the – greenwood proper like. I'll teach you, no bother.”
“Well, I thank you, in advance, for your wealth of knowledge.”

“Fat lot of good that knowledge is to me now, though, here.” Alec swept the franked letters into the wooden box on the floor. “No game to be got, by gum.”

“There’ll be myriad things you can turn your hand to. Bright chap like you.”

“What had you in mind?” He leaned resting on the high stack of papers and looked at me over his folded elbows.

“I in mind? For you?”

He nodded.

“Well I had no strict plan, old man,” I swirled and took a drink of lukewarm coffee. “Further than you leaving a place that made you unhappy. London can be a bit intimidating but there's vast opportunities. We'll look in papers, shop windows, back to more agents, word of mouth, to hunt you out a new position. Or maybe you'd like to retrain for something? You could come along with me.”

I had started taking typing classes at a local (very local) Municipal Institute, and I hated them, and moaned constantly about them, which may have influenced Alec's polite reply of “No, thank you. I didn't like school as a bairn and I can't figure I'd find it any improved since.”

“But you might've -”

“Nah. It's not for me.” And that was that.

“All the same,” I said encouragingly, “We'll find you something. In the meanwhile you can have yourself a little break.”

Clearly an alien concept to him, judging from the scepticism on his face but I was used to that reaction by now: part and parcel of our variance.

“You must be glad, at least, that you needn't return to the Tunnel,” I continued, folding and stamping myself. “Tell me, how did it go?”

He brightened. “Oo – well, that, yeh. Like you said, I went along, morning, found the foreman, and put it to him straight like – said I were leavin' on account o' I was done with workin’'ere and I were
off to find somethin' more befittin' me.”

“Ooh – so you told the truth, in effect!”

“Yeh – why not?”

“Well – I don't know. They mayn't have – reacted well.”

“Oh they didn't, don't fret on that. Fell abou' laughin', he did, Mr McCabe, and called his mates over and they had a right taunt at us, sayin' sure and right I ought to be off befittin' summat else..”

“They said that?” I put down the papers, concerned. “Oh – now that is just exactly what I wanted to avoid.”

“It were alright – seein' as how it were the last time.” He patted my knee. “That's the gift you gave me, Maurice – I laughed along a minute and then told 'em to stuff it were the sun don't and left.”

He closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. “It were oh.. Right wonderful.. Except.. Well, it don't seem fair, like.”

“Fair?” I said.

“'Alla the other fellows. Down there – me mates, t'others who were right decent and just as caught as me.”

“I know,” I said softly. “You empathize. It isn't fair. I wish I could – could proliferate the loaves and fishes. But as it is, you're my – you're the one person I love. It's got to be you.”

Alec busied himself over the paperwork, manner confident. He didn't respond; didn't need to.
Some weeks later the impatient boy clattered into the flat of an evening and by way of greeting, pulled his jacket, waistcoat, shirt and vest up around his head to show me his body.

“Look! Would'ya just look! I'm all over bruises. Are they very bad? Are they purple and black? I think they're aimin' for me.”

“You need to keep out of the way,” I said. Even as I did I put down the wooden spoon and touched his flank lightly with some fingertips.

“Do you want me to dress them for you,” I said hopefully, even though they weren't bleeding.

“NO!” said Alec, from behind the layers of material; he was only mainly grumpy because he was just in from work and needed a little time to unwind. He tugged his upper garments all the way off and tossed them on the floor, before pulling on his blue and navy fisherman's jumper that he'd found on a walk, on a rock, on a mountain – and deposited himself onto the bed.

I whipped the mashed potato some more and went to rattle the coals underneath the cooking-pot. Soothed by these routine, domestic activities, Alec loosened up, as always. Turning back the sleeves of his sweatshirt, he bent forward to pick up his jacket and shirt and began to fold them properly.

He said: “It's my fault really. I were late, and by the time I got there they'd all picked their lads and I were lumbered gatherin'.”

Alec was indefatigable. Upon resigning at the Tunnel, he had, out of a sense of masculine pride, or fear of failing to pull his weight – or boredom – marched out early next morning, at the same time as me, in fact, and came with me downtown. But when the bus pulled up for Lissom Grove he gave me a friendly pat on the arm and departed to beat the streets.

All I could do was implore him not to exhaust himself; all I got was his insolent cackling in return.
Through the channels of inquiry – lads at the pub, down the Working-Men's Club, at the local football pitch, the churches and soup-kitchens for all I knew! - he used his knack for easy friendship to secure a few suggestions and recommendations for casual – there it was again – work.

So that evening when, tired but smiling, he met me off the bus, I said: “How did the job-hunting go?”

“Ah, I didn't do it for very long.”

“I can understand why. Did you go home then?”

“No, I been at the Golf Club all day.”

“....”

It was really that simple, he said. You land at the club at the right time – mid-morning, not too early but well before lunch – and join a lot of other fellows who mill about, more or less presenting themselves for service.

Then the gentlemen come along, tap their chins and decide which lad they want as their caddy for the eighteen. Alec always got chosen, when he showed up on time.

“Dunno why,” he said to me at the kitchen table. “Mebbes I look stronger than I am. Or not too gormless. Or could be just dumb luck – I dunno!”

“Don't be modest,” I said, turning a page of the paper. “Mebbes I look stronger than I am. Or not too gormless. Or could be just dumb luck – I dunno!”

“Don't be modest,” I said, turning a page of the paper. “It isn't just about strength. It's fashion, a competition of style, a lot of it – and you are so very handsome, and would lend a real earthy glamour to a fellow going about the course all day, in view of his contemps.”

“You played a lot of golf then,” he said, grinning.

I hid behind the paper. “Just an observation. You know, there can be an appreciation for beauty without it being -”

“Homosexual?”

“Well I certainly hope not,” I said. “In your workplace.”

“Don't care if it is or it isn't. The tips are good if you're cheerful enough. But no-one'd lay a finger. I'm all yours and tha' knows it.”

I knew it. I helped him get ready in the mornings, and evenings I massaged his aching shoulders. I taught him all the different clubs, putters and drivers; strokes, courses and scoring-sheets, all in the interest of making things easier for him at work.

Naturally he rankled against being in a position of servitude again, but for the time being it suited him well: he got on with the other caddies, was treated well enough by the stiffs, was out in the open air all day and was under no strict obligation in terms of working hours, though it was in his best interest to rush over and present for the most festive – lucrative – times.

Saturday mornings were one of those such times and as he bounced around the flat pulling on his green-plaid, fleece-lined jacket, tying his laces and snatching up his satchel, I wiped my mouth of toast crumbs and said: “I'll come with you.”

He paused. “What?”

“I'll come along. May I? Just as far as the course, to keep you company.”

“Oh – no. No, there's no need, thankee, Maurice.”

“It's no trouble, what else would I be -”

“No! Please? I'd sooner you didn't.”

“Oh.. Well.. Alright, if you -”

“Don't take it hard.” He came over, knelt down by me and took my hand seriously. “It's just – I don't want you to see me like that. Doin' that.”

“Well,” said he, “Suppose you come along, even just to the outside entrance-pillars, and happened across someone you knowed? Someone you used to play with?”

“Hardly likely,” I said. “My club was miles away, clear across London.”

“And if we happened to be in that part of London?”

I was silent. Dash-it, it really does take me ever such a long time to get The Picture.

Alec stood, preparing to leave in a deciding sort of way. I must have looked especially dejected, for he leaned down to leave a lingering kiss on my cheek before swinging out the door.

So the class war waged: here subjugated, there resurfacing. It was a constant combat and I reached for ammunition – the *Times* had never let me down, and didn't.

As usual, and as always, we were of one mind: the golf course did for a supplemental occupation but was not a comfortable long-term prospect. And Alec's comfort was paramount.

This next scene is set in the rather aspirationally-named 'parlour' on the ground floor of the boarding-house; it was the room to the immediate left of the stairs and which had not (yet) been converted into a single apartment for rent.

It retained the features and fuddie-duddies of the original occupants; that's to say, it was hard to imagine any of the boarders clubbing together to furnish the room with worn, overstuffed armchairs, dark wooden dressers and bookshelves, heaps of framed pictures, mottoes and embroideries, dusty rugs, tasteless brass ornaments, spotty mirrors and lurid wallpaper.
A bay window faced out into the lane, taking up half the footpath in fact, and generally had people out on the street with their elbows on the sill to listen to the wireless inside. Sometimes these leaners were people from the house who couldn't fit in the cramped room, sometimes neighbours, oftentimes complete strangers.

I tended not to leave so much as a handkerchief lying around as the place was a bit of a roving free-for-all; Alec on the other hand dumped his belongings any old where in the house, then engaged a reign of terror when they turned up missing.

This evening, the radio was sailing out some Strauss, and I was lingering on an armchair with my arms folded and my pipe, while the others in the room – oh, I think it was Joanne, a lady on the second floor I believe, and Nigel, her husband or at least significant friend – I never asked, specifics, and they returned the consideration in kind.

Joanne worked as a seamstress and Nigel as a bricklayer, but on this particular night they were sitting at the coffee table trying to put together a wooden horse toy for their daughter Alberta, who was at scouts. I wasn't told this directly but they didn't trouble to lower or cease their conversation when I entered the room – neither did Alec when he landed home from work at eight o' clock fit to be tied.

Bootsteps stomped up the stairs, shaking the pictures on the wall, disappearing up the stories, several bangs, then they raced back down again. “Where are you?”

“In the common room,” I called, steeling. I stood, even. In he swung the door, knocking it into a dresser.

“Bad day?”

“Ugh,” he said, and he shook his head and collapsed on the couch. “Don't even ask.”

I knew I needn’t: he'd tell me.

“I were late,” he rolled on, “Got caught in the ruckus behind a huge veg delivery at t'market. So I got stuck wi'this right slimy git at the course, I wouldn't mind only he's a lousy golfer too, and fucked his handicap right up and blamed it on me for the green bein' too wet! As if I went and tossed bucketfuls of rainwater all around my own self just for spite!
“So I got no tip and an earful and I had to wash and rub down all his clubs he got muddy; I had to ‘cause all the other players were nearby, strollin’ into the club-bar, and I don't want to get a bad name for meself, I want to make sure I get picked again.

“Or do I? I'm gettin' awful sick of bein' bossed around. And it's such a slow, boring game and I get hungry. And I'm thinkin’ on revisin’ my decision on bannin' you from comin' to the course. I miss you meetin’ me from work summat dreadful.”

I shot a nervous glance at the Thornes and their parts of horse but they were fairly engaged in their task. Neutrally, I said: “Well, let's see what we can do about your situation.” As if I had no emotional investment in Alec's plight whatsoever. As if satisfying him wasn't my top priority.

I took up the newspaper and tilted a lamp towards it to see better. I looked at so many minuscule words and figures all day at work that focussing on the newsprint took some squinting.

Joanne stood up and tested the horse on its wheels.

“Alright, how's about this?” I read: “‘Assistant wanted to take charge of Bar, apply at 'The Grape', Cavalier Street.’ There you are – you're well familiar with bars. As long as they mean pub, and not the Legal Standardization Board..”

“Assistant,” grumbled Alec, who was flopped ungainly back on the sofa. “Sounds like another word for servant.”

“Look, here's another.” Nigel caught onto the game and peered over my shoulder. “‘Apprentices wanted immediately for Greengrocers and General Shop. A good honest boy will be well treated.’”

“Well that's me out. Nay good nor honest.”

“Oh shush. Of course you are. In spades,” I said.

“But not the other. I'm not a boy, I'm a man, last I checked! I'm sick and tired of bein' condensed down to as if I'm twelve years old,” he whined.

Ignoring his fulsomely ironic tone, I took a toke and read on: “‘Wanted a Junior at a Hardware and Ironmongery.’ That sounds hardy, and like as if it'd be outdoorsy..”
“But again,” he sighed, “It's 'Junior' this and 'Assistant' that. Am I fated now to be forever a subordinate, even when I'm sproutin' grey hairs?

“Reminds me of when I were preparin' on the Argentine. I'd to fill out all these forms and that, and answer questions at the deporters, and they were like, 'Oh, you're off emigratin'! Well done, what are you, sixteen, seventeen?' I'd say no, twenty-three. S'pose they just figured I were a bit slow off the mark. Fred were dead embarrassed by me."

“What, you were gonna emigrate?” said Nigel.

“Yeh.” Real off-hand.

“Well – didn't you?”

“Does it look like it?!”

“Then why not?”

Alec made long-suffering grousy noises; it wasn't the first time he'd had to justify his judiciousness in remaining in England – because most people saw it has hardly that, the chance to emigrate being his equivalent to landing a university place, as it were.

Most people regarded his refusal to go overseas as nothing short of a shocking waste of a job opportunity and an untrustworthy disrespect for the customary. But of course Alec wasn’t Most People. And when others detected this, he was interesting.

“Just didn't fancy it.” He downplayed expertly. “When it came right down to it, sayin' good-by to my own and England and everythin', and startin' over in some strange new what-place – well, the mood didn't strike me.”

I knew this was partially true, Alec's influencing factors for staying; though I hoped the lion's share of his reasoning was me.

“So now you're searchin' round.” Joanne took the corner of the newspaper for a peer. People are so
very interested in people.

“That's it exactly,” said Alec wearily.

“Cept it has to be summat that' don't involve handlin' clubs and balls all day,” said Nigel.

Alec closed his eyes and joined his fingers over his tummy.

“And that won't require you to shave your sideburns and wear short pants,” grinned Joanne.

Alec curled into a little ball; he was too tired even for the repartee!

“Then how about this?” Joanne flapped the paper and read out: “Tea Man wanted. An intelligent, well-educated young man for the inside, City-based Retail Tea trade, will be provided with horse and trap, to be ready about the first of the month; must be a strict teetotaller and well recommended. Apply H.G. Nangle, Harcourt Street. ‘There you go!”

“What,” said Alec, “Have thee been smokin'? There en't one holy thing there what describes me! Some kind of nancy-boy they're after – a teetotaller, I ask you – and strict?!”

“Oh, they just felt they had to stick 'gee' in there somewhere, so as to flog their product. Extra advertising for them.. Mind you, wouldn't half mind a cuppa. .”

“It is rather promising,” I said. “It says 'man', not 'boy' or 'lad' or 'prentice' – well likely to have some clout, if that's what you're after.”

He sat up and pulled at his sleeve. “Yeh, but..”

“And after all you are intelligent.”

“So you say. And anyroad, I'm not well-educated, my land -!”

“Those two tend to be mutually exclusive. Anyhow you're expected to lie a little about these things.
We'll invent some story for you. It doesn't matter.”

“Easy for you to say!” burst out Alec. “When you've had ever'thing handed to you all your life – now you can pick among your advantages to see what to keep and what to let.”

“Oh God..” I flew a hand to my forehead. “God!! Are you ever going to let that go? That I went to a good school – not my decision, by the way! - way back in the past, and I'm sorry, it annoys you, but I can't un-do it – do you think it was some kind of holiday? It was hellish! And lonely! And the lessons were awful! House-politics! And canings! That wall game! You think it set me up for life, as some kind of a boon – my land, you just don't realize, if I'd had even an ounce of your charm, and confidence, maybe I would've.. I wouldn't've…”

Alec stared, startled at my outburst; Joanne and Nigel were flush with English embarrassment at the display and affected to test the horse-wheels again.

“What I mean is.. Erm.. I believe you could easily turn your hand to anything, and be a success at it.” But I felt I'd overshot, somehow, vented at an unexpected and peculiar time, and I was keen to put the lid on and resume. I folded the paper and tapped out my pipe for refilling.

Alec shuffled over on the couch, nearer to my armchair.

“You have confidence alright,” said he, “Totally misplaced, o' course, in me. Alright, then. So you say I could blag me way into this. Well, likely, yeh, sell a pack o' porkies. But,” he took the paper, “Well recommended’? - there's a fence. What's it mean? Spoke of? By whom, like?”

“That simply means you need a reference.”

“Oh? And where am I meant to find one of those?”

“From a previous employer, naturally.”

“Oh – no. You don't mean – No, you couldn't -”

“Beg pardon? What?”
“From – Durham,” he stage-whispered furiously. I admit it still gave me a bit of a start to hear the name, then, even now. Not a pine. A prickle.

“If that's what you're suggestin' – the strings you're thinkin' on pullin' -” He ran out of words.

“Worked in Durham, have you?” said Nigel brightly, perhaps hoping to ease the fraught tensions, surely detectable. “Grand place, that, always nice to get up true North. Hardy.”

“I've always found it rather wet,” said Alec, glaring at me.

“Alec..”

“And cold.”

“Alright, do behave yourself. Honestly. If you'll only stop and listen, I could tell you that I meant the other work-place. Right after – the original estate. You know, in Shropshire.”

“Oh,” said Alec. “Right. There. Oh – but we – I – weren't there long. Why would they vouch for us? Who of 'em even would? And how'd we go about it, gettin' a recommend?”

“Appeal for one of course; 'Dear Mr Montmorency, I venture to write to you.' I'll draft the letter tomorrow. I could type it up too but that might take all day..”

“You really think old Monty would – recommend us?”

“No harm to ask,” I said. “I know you-all thought he was an awful old fudster but he really was alright, and quite professional.”

Taking the folded Times, Alec sat back on the couch, thoughtful.

The 'teetotaller' proviso, I noticed, was garnering no credence or consideration whatsoever.
Effort, in this incidence, proved happily fruitful. While Alec hated Eighteens and prayed for Nines, 
his fortune was formulating – not due to mere fate but from the manoeuvring of his friends, I chief 
among them, I hope.

Because by Jove he done it. We planned, and prepared and adjusted and adapted; approached the 
task with the precision of a military strike.

“The organized plan has no holes.” I plucked a hair off his stiff, suited shoulder. “Like a bucket.” So 
very doubtfully he looked at me, but managed a smile.

As promised, I had written to Harold Montmorency's Leicester office – dug the contact details out of 
a *Who's Who* I found at work. There was no subterfuge, lies or trickery: I simply requested a 
reference for the time worked and signed it Alec Scudder.

Three days later an envelope arrived, addressed to that very man, and he opened it apprehensively 
over his toast to reveal a sealed and signed letter on rich cream paper, along with a short note of 
Good Luck, signed R. Posner, the legal secretary in training we had met at the rainy old estate.

“Well upon my word.” Alec poked at the blue wax.

“ Likely Miss Posner wrote the reference herself, and had Harold stamp or sign it. For the better, I 
should say; she was a sensible sort!”

“Good of her.” Alec was probably even more fired with curiosity as to to the contents of the letter.

More letters. The country is not run on train tracks but papers flying everywhich way. We wrote to 
this H.G. Nangle, endorsing Alec as the prime candidate and emphasizing his intelligence, 
respectability and professionalism.
“What absolute rot,” said Alec, reading over my shoulder as I wrote purplely about him.

“Slight exaggeration,” I said. “But it's only to secure you a meeting, a consideration. Once you are invited to present yourself, your agreeableness and good nature and charm will be the clincher. Well they certainly were for me!”

“I'll hazard they'll be inspectin' me for features other than my smile and eye colour and legs.”

“Talk up a storm.” I stamped the letter. “Don't you always?”

“After I've drunk up a brewery.”

But he was taking this attempt to bestride the career ladder seriously, even more so with every circle round the golf course. I used to think of Alec as so effortlessly, almost mindlessly, confident, so unselfconscious, content to a fault, untroubled by life's slings and arrows.

Yet I'm constantly amazed at his amazement when he receives a boost or compliment or reward or great chance! When he got another letter in the post, from the rep manager, Mr. Parker, at the Tea Company, inviting him to interview, he tried to dole out the credit.

“It were you,” he said, holding out to me the letter; I put my hands behind my back. “You done all the – organizin' and applyin' and what.”

“You're the actual applicant, remember. I told no lies.” I hadn't mentioned drinking at all. Lie of omission?

“Well then – old Ruth, that's who it were. She must have played up my qualities right creative in that reference – nowt like how I am really.”

“Nonsense! She'll have stated the truth exactly.”

“She met me for about two hours!”

“And clearly you made an impression. Now look: all of this bureaucracy and bluster was to nab you this meeting on Wednesday morning – you're the one who has to close the deal, as it were, so that's on your shoulders.”
He looked rather pleased to have something hefty, but not heavy, back on his shoulders.

In the interest of creating a favourable impression, and allowing the dapper appearance do half the talking, the girls from the Theatre came round on Tuesday night to trim Alec's hair and see to his face. Frank took measurements and sat at the table then and there adjusting a green-and-navy two piece Burberry of mine so it would fit Alec perfectly.

Catherine contributed by helping herself to the whiskey, before she pushed all the books and boxes off the dusty piano onto the floor and set to tuning it by ear and by a key she borrowed from one of our neighbours, who likely didn't realize he'd be giving up his night's sleep with it.

“Don't want to chop it too short,” warned Chuck to Jens, who was snipping. She smiled at Alec. “He's so handsome.”

“Mind my whiskers,” said Alec. “Leav' em and all – don't cut 'em away.”

He grunted when Chuck pulled at his sideburn. “What, these? But they're so unruly and boorish.”

“I like 'em,” said Alec. “Anyroad, I look about twelve years old wi'out 'em. Don't – tha' dare!!”

Recoiling as Jens playfully brandished the scissors as if in swordplay.

All good fun; helped relax the poor boy, at least until the next morning when I walked him to the front door of H.G. Nangles.

“Crikey, I could really see to a nip,” said he nervously. “Swear it'd ease.” He looked at me. “Only jokin' o' course, though I can handle it rightly, tha' knows.”

“All the same,” I said. “Might be an idea not to drink on the job.”

“I'll think about it,” he promised.
Verily, he must have made all sorts of promises that morning, because he came round to my office
beaming around noon with the saunter back in his step and a contract in his pocket.

“Met the horse too,” he said, hunkering down at my desk and crossing his arms over my log; the
women stared obviously. “She's a good sort, reckon we'll get on.”

“See?” Proud of my fellow, I risked a pat on his shoulder. “You are clever, and upstanding and
estimable and all the rest of it.”

“But am I. Mebbes I'm just a good actor – Cath gave me tips.”

“Right, well – whatever it takes. Now! This calls for a celebration!”

“Yeh – don’t it! Sure has been my year! First you, now this grand position! When was I ever as
lucky!”

“Shh Alec!”

“Ha, ha.. Alright. So what, a drink after work? Usual?” With a thumb he tilted back his bowler.

“How about we go to the golf course?” I said.

He frowned. “Wot – caddyin’? Sure I'm finished at that place.”

“I mean, let's call in for a quick round – we can get our own caddies. Hire clubs too. I'm sure you've
picked up the basics.”

“But,” he laughed, like I was making a funny. “Wonnot that be odd, that I were workin' there only
yesterday as a skivvy, then today I show up all Hooray Henry lookin' to play mysel'!”

“No laws against it.”

“But – they wouldn't let me. It's exclusive, and all that guff.”
“Oh exclusive. Don't worry about that. I'll smooth us in – *do* come along, it would be ever such a tickler!”

“Wouldn't it be very strange?”

“Yes,” I said. “It would.”

Thus began earlier mornings, but pleasanter days. As he as now in the trade biz, which, all honesty, amounted to, at this introductory role, the delivery biz (“But room to climb! Rung o' the ladder!”), Alec had to be up and away circulating his tea from the absolute crack, to ensure he had the Nangle elbow in the door before the best hotels and cafés swing fully into the breakfast boom.

As such, we rose and bathed and shaved and shoved on our toggery in the pitch, though by the time we were slamming the back door shut the Spring morning was dawning.

I dug out the bicycle from the communal shed in the yard and off we would fly around the Quay Loop to Harcourt; I pedalling furiously and weaving in and out of traffic, and Alec propped behind me with his arms wrapped round my shoulders and his scarf flapping in our wake.

“Alec, I keep telling and telling you – wear your clips!”

“They look stupid! And I lost them.”

“Tuck your cuffs into your socks, then.”

“Aw.. Surely only you need do. You're the cyclist.”

“Your feet are nearer the spokes, you plank!”

Somehow we would make it to the Tea Depot by seven and Alec would disembark and hare off to sign for the mass delivery, account for his own quota, find his cart-mate Robbey who was supposed to be waiting with his 'A to Z' but was usually sleeping or smoking on a pile of canvas sacks, load up
the crates, double-check Bonnie's tack and hooves and off and away on his rounds.

Meanwhile I was biking the several miles it took to get to Lissom Grove via the smaller side-streets; the bigger vehicles can be intimidating in the morning as there isn't a scrap of patience going spare.

Occasionally the two of us met for lunch, depending on Alec's route and my workload; generally though he strived to finish his deliveries and sales pitches and afternoon price-totting and stock-tallying and creditor-count – he learns daily that lad, for one who eschews education! - by around the 5pm. This released him free to meet me and we would walk, or cycle, or leave the bicycle and hop on a bus or tram if all we could manage was weary smiles at one another.

Alec said – privately, to me – that one of the main conditions he really wanted in a job was one that allowed this – enabled him to have roughly the same hours as me, so we could spend our spare time together.

“You're sweet,” I said, absently playing with his hair; we were lying on the bed – fully clothed, mark thee – I on my back against the pillow with my legs stretched and ankles crossed, and Alec wedged beside lying on his front and the Swiss Family propped against the headboard. The flickering lamp was almost dangerously near on a chair so he could squint at the print.

“Well, that's my priority,” he said. “Time off the clock. I dunno if it's against Marxist or what, but I see meself now more of a lover than a worker.” He took my hand that was bothering his curls and kissed it.

“How delightful!” I took a sip of beer. (Money had run a little tight for whiskey.)

“O thou my lovely boy’,” I added, “‘Who in thy power dost hold Time's fickle glass, his sickle, hour...’

I forgot the rest and so said the last word or two in a finalizing sort of way. Alec was impressed.

“What's it mean?”

I racked. “Means erm... That your soul will never grow old.”

“Well – that's right. How could it? It's the part of you what 'ent the body after all.”
“Yes but – you particularly. Or, whomsoever moved the Poet to those words..”

“Aw. Now who's sweet?” He rolled and reached for the beer.

“Alec, dear, with you..I do feel we are the highest, happiest and most honoured in the city, I can hardly believe it. And yet no-one has the foggiest! I do hope nothing will ever change, rock us.”


“Well... One can never be certain. Look at Wilde – he had the world at his feet – the most beloved of London – and came crashing back down to earth spectacularly.”

“Oh..” Alec shifted grumpily. “That cove. Well -” He struggled - “You know the Irish. They'll shag anything – I doubt even Davey has met a sheep he could turn down, especially after it bought him a drink or two..”

“You're missing the point quite breathtakingly.”

“What's the point? In raking over alla that tabloid bull-twaddle? Alright, alright, I do geddit.. It were a travesty of justice, like you said before. He done nowt wrong.”

“Oh well.. He was married, I suppose. If not horribly immoral, like it was all made out to be, it could be at least considered jolly bad form.”

“Married too, were he? To a woman?”

“That's right.”

“Blimey.” Alec took another swig. “Weren't he the playboy.”

Replacing the bottle on the chair, he rolled around on the bed and regarded me, and said slowly: “Hay.. Didn't you ever feel any itchin's in that direction...”

I cracked an eye.
“...towards women?”

I opened the other eye fully and glared at his hatefully curious expression. Damn him and his soothing presence, musical voice, casual tone!

“No. Alec, you know...”

“Nowt at all?” He pressed, and the incredulity stung.

“Nowt. I mean, I did try, and I was as exposed as the next lad to women at events, or friends’ relatives.. And I did think, or told myself to think, 'Well, she's quite pretty!' or, 'How nice a person she appears.', but nothing.. No lightning bolt of attraction. Or even a dull spark, really...”

“Mebbes you never met the right girl,” he said encouragingly.

Well – that – just – about took the bloody biscuit! Alec, and everyone; I felt the weight of every single single girl on my shoulders and again why why why I didn't like them.

I sat bolt upright, and was leapt across the bed and racing over to the flat door, which I wrenched open as Alec was still rolling over in surprise and stammering, “Hay – where are you going? Oh wait – I didn't mean – wait! Wait! Wait!”

I wanted him to shut up, to shut him out; for all I couldn't live without him, I couldn't bear him at that moment!

I shot through the door and slammed it shut after me, locking it deftly so he couldn't follow me immediately; he would have to search through all of his coat pockets on the hat-stand to dig out his own key and that would buy me time.

All the same the handle rattled futilely and the door shook when he pounded on it in frustration. “Maurice – come on! You know I didn't mean 'owt! Oh – open the door you daft mare!”

Somehow I wasn't softened. I was terrified, to be honest, by Alec's words and the panicked effect they'd had upon me. Thought it was all behind me.
Oh the archetypical Right Girl, the ever elusive, problem-solving, normalizing picture perfect doll!! I tell you, it is a gift to women everywhere that they shall never be landed with me!

To a litany of fading curses I ran along the landing and down every stair without pausing for breath, until I reached the cold, moonlit street and puffed out cold fogs of gasping. I wiped my forehead with my sleeve.

“Hay!!”

I looked around, then the other way, then upwards, startled to see -

- at our window, the one above the bed, Alec was glowering down at me. Before I could gather he pulled himself up onto the sill, grabbed onto the gnarled trunk of the thick, creeping clematis beside the window, and began climbing down the trellis as quickly and dexterously as a monkey.

Instinctively I backed away in base alarm and turned to run; I was rather afeared of his speed and his tenacity; will his strangeness ever cease!

“Wait right there!!”

And I did, of course I obeyed that voice, oddball that he is, I paused. Skipping the last few feet of tree, he dropped onto the footpath on his hunkers, and sprang up towards me with arms outstretched.

“Hay.. Come on..”

“No.” I pushed him away, not very hard, by the chest.

“Maurice, please..” He knew I wouldn't push him away twice, I wouldn't have borne it; still he hung back a little, with his arms still beseeching, cautious.

“You're horrid,” I said, and immediately amended, “You're being horrid. I suppose it's been so long since I was judged so that I'd forgotten what it felt like.”
“Oh, what – no..”

“I've gotten soft. My trouble,” I said resolutely, turning away, scrabbling for dignity even as I still panted from my mad flight.

“Oh for God's sake, Morrie! I'm sorry – really I am. I was an idiot – I didn't mean 'owt harsh – Oh please don't be cross.”

“I'm not cross. I'm...” Hurt, I couldn't say, and scared, and sick, all the old onslaughts I used to suffer. I covered my face with a hand. All of them. Bar one.

His arms slid around and circled my waist from behind, and I felt him rest the side of his face on the middle of my shoulder-blades. We were on the public street; there were stragglers, and carts, and windows and eyes all around. But I let him hold me. I might have slumped without his anchor.

“I really did try,” I said gloomily, pocketing my hands and looking at the street-lamps lining the uneven road. “Well not at first. At first I waited, waited for the point when I would, would grow up from a child and develop that sudden, amazing interest and obsession with women that boys get – lads whisper on it, poets write reams, old fellows shake their heads fondly and remember. Well it never happened for me.”

Alec rubbed his cheek against my shirt and waited himself.

“It – whatever it is – started going the other way, towards other boys, to my horror and I was awfully frightened, and tried to deflect it – it took me a long, long time to realize and accept that it wasn't the case that I couldn't love women, it was simply that I didn't. Pure unequivocal fact. So,” I looked over my own shoulder into his doleful eyes. “That's your answer. No, I never met the right woman – there isn't one for me. Never felt any physical longing for women – not like you. I suppose that makes me more – queer – than you.”

“There's no-one more queer than me,” he said, coming round to face me. “I'm sorry I upset you. I weren't tryin' to infer that you were – strange – or – lackin' or summat – it's only that I'm so curious over you, Maurice. I mean – look at you! I can scarce believe it. You said you kept your innocence till college and then you'd Clive. And that's it.”

“That's it. Well...” I put my hands on my hips and looked away. “Ahem. There may have been the odd schoolboy pash along the way. Nothing significant – nothing worth showing my hand over.”
Alec smiled hopefully, and I felt like groaning, because he is irresistible.

“Certainly not worth attempting trust in another. It's been a very private thing, this lark – I wasn't so green that I thought it normal, or common, this – defect.”

“Not defect,” said Alec quickly, as usual trying to re-arrange the world to suit me. “Not defect but difference. You just wanted another type of lover.”

“Oh Alec,” I said. “Run for parliament.”
Chapter Notes

Has it been a month already! Where does the time go. I really ought to chug these chapters out faster.

Mhm but will I..!

Best will in the world. Thanks again and again for any comments or reads, pull up a chair cause it's a long'un! :)

Ravenously I opened the paper bag while the shop-girl disappeared up the ladder to fetch down my tobacco. I'd not even paid for them yet but I was so hungry I pushed three toffees into my mouth and chewed with desperate relief.

I'd been cramming for the civvies over at Miss Rathbone's local library; coffee had been copious, and she had offered dinner, but I said truthfully that I was expected at home.

“Was it one pound or two?” called the girl behind the counter; she had descended and was miniature shovelling.

“Un,” I said, and couldn't begrudge her her confusion. I held up one sticky finger, before being jostled aside by some housewifely types demanding the proprietor’s attention, calling for whole lists to be filled.

“Just one moment, sir,” said the girl, as she reached for the paper the lady was waving over the counter-top. “While I find one of the lads to take care of this..”

I shook my head, waved a hand, still chewing. “Not at all. No hurry.”

Clearly I had lost some of my gravitas, and was now regarded as someone more amiable and less immediate than the formidable Mrs who was standing on tip-toe to peer down the back of the shop, where her list had sauntered off to.
More customers hurried in out of the rain, and I stood near the door to leave them room, reading the various notices and papers pinned to the cork wall: adverts for jobs, furniture for sale, holidays; scribbled notes, highly colourful professional posters for shows and concerts and circuses; political pushers, rooms to rent, items offered and sought.

“'Scuse me,” said a shortish fellow, edging past me to reach the wall. He began moving posters and cards rapidly, making a square blank space in the middle by squashing, as it were, all the other notes aside.

Under his arm were several rolls of paper; he drew one out and unfurled it, and pressed it flush against the wall with both hands. I was only very idly aware of his doings but I looked over when he cursed and he shot me a grin.

“Hey there fella,” he said brightly; I was startled by the strong Americanese but then I ought to have guessed: a suede brown newsboy and a moustache, anyone? And a yellow shirt underneath his open jacket. One can only sympathize.

“Er – yes? Sorry? Did you mean me?” I said.

“Whadder you apologizing for? Look I could use a little help – you mind holding this here in place while I scout out some pins? 'Preciate it!”

He had the whole thing narrated before I'd even agreed. Pocketing the toffees, I hurried to his aid, as if I were ashamed that I hadn't automatically helped, like he were a lady struggling with her packages.

“Great! Lemme just -” And he began straightening the poster, this way and that, and fishing out pins.

“Say,” he said, sliding his gaze along me. “That's quite a structure you got there!”

“What?” I said, pulling my hands back and attempting to hide my – structure? Whatever did he mean? “I beg your pardon?”

Brazenly he grabbed my arm and held it horizontally, peering at it as carefully as one would at a spirit level.
“Long and strong! Oof!” Here he was squeezing me just above the elbow. I looked about for rescue from this embarrassment. I didn't want to cause a scene. Maybe this was normal formal greeting in the States.

Now he came to face me full on and put his hands on my shoulders, pressing and patting.

“Something I can help you with? Further?” I said lightly, glancing impolitely at the counter for the shop-girl and my tobacco. I wouldn't mind, would have escaped, but I still had to pay for the dashed stuff and it'd be asked after.

Asking was getting me nowhere here.

“Are you quite finished?” I said, edging back – there was nowhere to back into, such a small shop – and finally he released me, took a couple of steps back himself and gave me the whole once-over with approval.

“You box,” he said, one hand on hip and the other tapping his chin.

“Oh, well...” I demurred, with a lop-smile.

“Or – you did,” he amended.

“Oh.. Well.. Yes. How did you guess?”

By way of reply, he sent a nod to the poster he – we – had just affixed to the corkboard, obliterating most of its neighbours. Though it had been right in front of me, I hadn't taken any notice of the contents – I could never be accused of being over-observant.

'Come one! Come all! Who'll be First to Fall!' was the title, in the middle of the page in a circle, with the silhouettes of two boxers squaring up either side. Surrounding them were more, lesser-important details, such as their names, the venue, admission, local bookies.

“You own the gym?” I said.

He shook his smiling head, leaned an elbow on the wall.
“Nah, I use it. To train the brawn. AJ Shields, pleasure to know you.” He stuck out his hand.

“Hall, Maurice Hall.. How do you do?”

“Great. I'm doing real great, Maurice. I tell ya.. I got a mighty good feeling!”

“Oh you do?” I inclined at the poster myself. “Which one's your boy?”


“I'm sure he's good and hardy,” I said encouragingly.

“Oh he sure is! No question! 'Specially with the regimen I got him dancing to. Although of course. Form don't hurt none..” Folding his arms, he shot me the sidelong.

“Certainly it doesn't. Well, good luck – nice to meet you!” I turned back to the girl at the counter, laying down the toffee and tobacco money and reaching for my parcel.

“Hey now – just wait a minute!” He chased after me. “Now it just so happens that – we got a couple spots open - good and all as I've gotten little Donny – I'm still on the lookout for talent – and potential – try and up my credit down at the gym, so to speak.”

“How nice,” I said, berating my own complete lack of skill at social disentanglement.

“What I'm scouting for is a rookie – an unknown – but one that will come up with the goods.” He grinned.

“Of course. What's the point otherwise?” I said.

“What's the poi – well, right you are, Maurice, you are right! I do like my fellas with a bit of brain to go with the meat! So what do you say?”

“S-say?” I stammered, realizing at long, long, long last. “Me?”
“Yes – you! You got the right frame – tall – broad – nice light movements when you were trying to escape just now – I saw you! And strong I'd say – what's most you can lift?”

I thought back on the largest of the rocks at the quarry. “I don't know. A fair bit.”

“A fair bit! I'll lay odds to that! So now -” He extended his hand showily for another shake - “Do we have a deal? Can I say I have another boy up for trial?”

“Oh – well. Oh – I don't know.” I was at sixes and sevens with myself. This was unprecedented! The sporting life was one of the many facets of my old existence that I'd assumed I'd left entirely behind, as I fell in with Alec and we two forged our destinies a brand-new. Boxing had been for leisure, enjoyment – and I certainly have no lack of those in my current days.

Still I was piqued. I remembered the exhilaration of partaking in base, physical indulgence, for no other purpose than the beauty of the sport and the punishing but fulfilling challenge to the body and its limitations, its skills, its endurance, its surprising feats.

Of course back in the day I'd hoped boxing might go some way to quelling the sexual urges. It didn't. But my sexual urges had a happy home now and I wondered what it would be like to pitch my body back in to the competitive arena, free of anxiety or anger or shame, and all for pure sport.

AJ Shields saw all this in my averted gaze, because he is a professional and had pitched perfectly. “I'm not asking you to sign away your life. Or sign anything, come to that. Just come on down to the gym and let's have a look at you.”

“What – now?!”

“Sure. It's only down the block! St. Barnabas' Sports Hall. It's a dump but got all you need basic and sometimes new stuff gets donated.” He had me by the arm by now.

“I can't. I couldn't. I'm sorry – I'm expected at home, my – er – I've to meet my friend. Having dinner.” I took up the tobacco at long last with an extra shilling to the girl and made for the door, stuttering apologies all the while.

“Oh that's fine, fine, I completely understand – But here – take my card. You'll come down to the Sports Hall and give it a try? See if you can put yourself through the old paces? Won't cost you a
dime. Hell, *I'll* stand you a coffee! So win-win!” AJ followed me closely to the footpath.

“Alright,” I said. “I'll come sometime.”

“Tomorrow?”

“To – well – right.” I was by now too hungry to argue.

“Great! See you then! Bring your sweats!” And with a tweak of his cap he sauntered off. Ludicrously I waved after him, then made for home. I dug out the toffees on the way.

I didn't come across too strong, did I? In terms of enthusiasm. Then again, I hope I didn't seem rude either – it was hard to strike a balance, because I had been caught on the hop rather – not only accosted by a stranger with all the patter of a Friendly Society recruiter or God-forbid, Jehovah Witnesses; not only that, but he had thrust under my nose something of myself I had relegated far into the past, to Old Me, something I hardly thought of and didn't remotely miss until the instant he marked me, and then I did acutely.

I was living on love. We both were, Alec and I – completely entwined in one another, emotionally and bodily – we had exactly all we needed: each other and the means to go on thus as long as possible.

Be that at it may – or is – I couldn't dismiss the idea of seeing, tentatively trying, tasting, remembering – of *fighting* – altogether out of hand, now that the butterflies had awoken. And so without even my usual dithering, I brought some gear to work and stashed it under the desk, used the office phone to call up a jubilant AJ, and dedicated myself to calculating, typing, filing and repeat with much more satisfaction than usual, nudging my foot against the gear-bag every so often.
I hadn't realized until now quite how many stationary hours I'd spent sat in that chair barely moving and yet leaving of an evening with back aching! Perhaps this would challenge the old corporal.

'Old' is right. Old is exactly how I felt when I got to the gym and changed and was immediately ordered to laps, stretches and warm-ups.

AJ sat on the edge of the ring, watching me circle the room and now doubt hearing – but politely not commenting on – my wheezing, which echoed off the walls. I was glad we were alone.

“What age are you, if you don't mind me?” he said when I came to a sweaty stop at the vaulting horse, leaning on it for support.

“Twenty-four,” I said apologetically. Being with Alec had made me feel like a giddy, sprightly young adolescent. I'd forgotten that I was no spring chicken.

“I figured as much. That's great! You're fully-developed – or you will be – without being anywhere near fatigued. Plus you'll have stamina: it's all in the mind. I find there, the youngsters don't have a lick of sense.”

“You just won't be put off, will you?” I grumbled.

“Hey. Look at me.” He put his hands on my shoulders. “I believe in you! We're gonna whip you into shape – or my name ain't what it be. Now – turn around, palms flat on the wall, and – stretch – that's it, one leg at a time, or those strings will burn you for days.”

I complied, even though the after-stretches are possibly even more draining than the running. I hadn't realized just how utterly out of shape I'd gotten! Grown complacent, I suppose. If there was a choice between going out on a gruelling training session, or alternatively, hopping into bed with Alec, or even just sitting around the flat talking to him, or going for a drink together, I know I'd opt for all of the latters. Tunnel of love vision, it must be.

AJ hovered around, checking my shoulders were level and dropping to his hunkers to see my feet were flat on the ground, one a step ahead of the other.

“Christ, those tendons in your calves are hopping!” he said. He slapped my shin. “Quit that for now. Bend down and touch your toes, or as near to them as you can, oh – you can! Great! Now, that'll
take some of the pressure off. No, don't stand up again yet, stay that way for a minute, I'll time you."

And so forth for a while. It was agony.

It came as almost a relief when AJ brought me over to the weights. “Now,” said he. “Don't think you gotta impress me or anything! Let's just find out what you're packing – realistically. Start easy.”

“Alright,” I said, and made light work of the few medium-sized dumbbells, which felt as easy as lifting bags of sugar. Even the barbells posed no great effort, although my breath started to struggle after AJ slotted on a third weight to each side.

“Try that.” His voice was measured. Obligingly I squatted, and gripped the bar, and tested it with my shoulders before I even attempted – this was going to be more difficult, I could tell.

“If you -” said AJ, noticing my hesitance.

“No – no, I can manage,” I said, preparing; he came over anyway and stood in front of me to check my arms. He gripped beside my hands and said: “Lift as much as you can, now, Maurice. If it's only a foot – less – we don't want you getting a slipped disk this early in the game.”

“Ha! Nonsense,” I laughed, which was a shameful waste of energy. Girding, I yanked that weight up from the earth's determined pull – like a magnet, and brought it, in panting, grunting fits and starts to my chest, where my arms trembled and teeth gritted and AJ grabbed the bar deftly saying: “Lower, lower, slowly now, atta boy. Okay!”

I went on wobbly feet to a chair and flopped.

“O-kay! That was good!”

“It was?”

“Well, not really.”
I crossed my arms on my knees and bent right over.

“I mean you gotta be a lot better than that to be in the running.” AJ was pacing about now, one arm folded behind his back and the other tapping his chin.

“What – compete in a tournament?” I gasped.

“Just a match will do for starters, a bout. Don't think about it. Okay, so to be up to standard you still got a ways to go – but if anyone has the ways, I do. I can get you back firing on all pistons. Whaddaya say?”

“Well I couldn't really -”

“If you come three, four nights a week you'll be tossing tree-trunks around in no time.”

“Four nights! Gracious, I wouldn't have the ti-”

“Now you're an absolute beginner, or you are again, so on me it's a debt, a gamble, but you will be doing a lot for me so will we say two pounds a week?”

“It's really immaterial -”

“Alright – man, what a Yankee! Five smackers a week and that's only if you show me some promise – some real dedication and spirit. Got me?”

“Er – yes. Right.”

“Right. Great! You'll not regret it. You go get yourself cleaned up in the john and we'll hash out the details.”

Bewildered, I did, for some reason, as I was instructed. When I emerged from the changing rooms the hall was ringing with laughter, and talk, and the squeak of training shoes, clatter of equipment.

“There you are,” said AJ, coming over to me. “Didn't realize the time I'd booked was up – look it's gone nine! Look it's a bit crowded here – you think? Let's hustle, don't want to bother anyone – yeah?” And he drew me towards the door with only the most clipped of replies to the men in various states of undress who greeted him.
Beside the door was a framed tapestry bearing the words: “Come the three corners of the world in arms, and we shall shock them.” It had brown stains on, which looked a little reminiscent of blood, if one were of a morbid disposition.

“Not supposed to be there?” I guessed as we gained the streetlit pavement.

“Hm? Oh no: no, just want to keep this a secret, of sorts, for now. You want to keep them guessing – understand? Long as possible. I guess you'll be cutting down on those too, if you're serious?” He smiled, but a bit anxiously at the cigarette I'd just clamped as I dug for matches.

“Oh. Right you are. Of course. Pure force of habit.”

Disappointed hands (to say nothing of lungs) returned my habit to my pocket. “Look, I live only a few streets away.” I said. “I'm aching to take these shoes off. Come there for your detail-hashing or what have you.”

He gave a big side grin. “Well now! That's damn hospitable of you. Much obliged.”

“Well I never did thank you for giving me the opportunity to consider this again. I'd forgotten about sport, seemingly.”

“Do I have you convinced?”

“No.”

“Ah..”
Five gruelling sets of stairs later, I was knocking, then unlocking the flat door and pushing it in to allow AJ to go ahead of me.

“Hellooo, are you decent?” I called, a little redundantly, as we were both already in the flat and Alec looked up from the kitchen table, which he was standing at ironing.

“When amn't I,” he responded wittily; he was a little surprised but recovered well.

“Never of course.” I pulled at AJ's shoulders to prompt him out of his jacket before shucking my own. “Though I see you're being especially decent this evening!” I indicated the haphazard stack of ironing on the kitchen chair.

“Yeh well... I were down at Sharon's to collect us'washing, and she says, 'Oh, I ain't had the chance to iron it, I'm that sorry', and the rest, so I says, 'Oh, that's alright, Shar, I'll do it mysel', and she says, 'Oh you will? You can? 'Cause I got a few more bits I ain't had time to do for other customers neither' and givin' me the cow-eyes so what else could I do only tell her to chuck 'em in here with ours!

“So now muggins here has been spendin' most o' the evenin' a-pressin' every gentle-vest in the building but our own! And I got to be special careful not to burn a hole in 'em, on account o' they're other folks' garms and there'd be such a riot..”

“Cow-eyes,” said I, shaking my head and sweeping a chair of a pile of newspapers for AJ. “You could've said no, you know..”

“No I couldn't. You wasn't there.”

“Well the Good Samaritan enjoys his charity work. My room-mate Alec Scudder,” I said by way of off-hand introduction to AJ, who was by now sat with arms crossed and one leg propped jauntily over the other, ankle on knee.

“Alec, this is AJ Shields, from that gym I was on about.”
“Oh, yeh?” said Alec, a bit cautiously.

“That's right! Alec, was it? Nice ta know ya!” And another vigorous hand-shake.

“How do you do?” said Alec.

“I do just great, thank you – great! So it's just the two of you up here? Mighty cozy!”

“That's right.” I sat down and pulled off my shoes. I wondered if he was sussing us out – you've always to wonder – either way I smoothed on: “With prices the way they are, the only way to lay your head in the City is to split the rent.”

“Oh good Golly. Ain't that the truth! My most least favourite week of the month. Every month! But I didn't figure you – what line did you say you were in again, Maurice?”

“Civvy. Bottom rung.”

He nodded sympathetically. “And yourself?” A smile to Alec.

“Oh – deliveries,” said Alec casually, flapping a shirt.

“Tea trade,” I said bolsteringly.

“Bottom rung,” he said, pointedly.

“I know all about it fellas. Just about able to keep the wolf from the door – right?” AJ leaned right back with his hands around his suspenders, evidently satisfied with us.

Ah, the relieving solidarity of poverty! If Alec and I were a pair of well-heeled, eccentric aristocrats, chances are we could get away with shacking up and going about together in the guise of being a couple of roving playboys, too frivolous and immature and cagey for long-term women.

As it was now, where we were ever a few cautious yards from the breadline, it was seen as perfectly acceptable that we live together in a cramped city space ostensibly for the sole reason of financial constraints.
Were we slap bang in the middle of the classes, however, the first question anyone would ask would be: “And your wife?” I wonder how women fare.

Alec brought the iron to the fire to re-heat and cleared away the clothes while I lit a smoke, not without an anxious look from AJ.

“Will you stay for supper?” Alec asked politely. “Nowt but bread and eggs and grillin's, but..”

“Well that's mighty kind of you,” said AJ, and I wanted to grab Alec's wrist fondly as he passed but of course I didn't. Couldn't. Never mind!

I got up. “I'll do it Alec, you've been laudering.”

“No I haven't!!” He sounded defensive. “Ironing only.” As if that was more masculine in some fashion. I suppose it does utilize the word 'iron'.. “Anyroad, you sit. You been wrestling.”

“Boxing.”

“Sure.” He cracked the eggs into the hissing pan.

“Ever tried it yourself, fella?” said AJ to Alec, the promise of food mellowing the air even further. The bacon hissed and spat and I opened the window, letting in a cooling breeze, traffic sounds and faint music.

“Boxin’? No.” He sniffed. “Bit aspirational.”

“Alec plays football,” I said.

“Football! Pardon my frank but I wouldn't have pinned you. Kind of a little build on you.”

“What!!” said Alec.

“Soccer it is,” I said; I was used to how easily Alec got all riled up.

“Ah – that'd make more sense. Yeah – I can see that – you've a nimble way about you. Too bad
there ain't any money in soccer.”

“And there is in scrappin'? Only in the flutters I s'pose.” Alec sat down heavily into the last kitchen chair and let the eggs and bacon get on with it over the fire.

“Exactly. That's just it! Took the words right out of my -”


“Okay, okay.” AJ held his hands out, palms up in a gesture of performed humility. “You got me. I'm honest – I got plans on you Maurice. Sure I am always on the look-out for fresh talent – but just at the moment I could really use a rookie – you know: damn-bad odds, and no real look of a winner..”

“Charming,” I said.

“But underneath, and with some true work and effort, a champion we can make!” He clenched a fist triumphantly.

“Why'd you need a big win so bad?” said Alec, scalding the teapot. “You lose a packet or summat?”

“Oh. Well. I – er – yeah, as it happens, I'm only training in a few boys at the moment, great fellas, but not too committed or regular in terms of time. My – last little headliner, was just about to turn pro when he lost an -”

“Eye?” said Alec.

“Arm,” nodded AJ; Alec raised his eyebrows for my benefit.

“B-but it wasn't through fighting! It was an industrial accident, actually. When you think on it, he would've been safer in the ring than on the building-site!” AJ 'reassured'.

“Where's he now?” said Alec, as he scraped the pan.

“Well – I don't know,” admitted AJ.
“Tha’ doesn't sound very caring,” said Alec, and it was difficult to tell whether he was testing AJ, in genuine protective mode, or if he was just winding him up.

“Oh, hell, I'll ferret him out and send him a card! God!” AJ turned to me. “So what do you say? We'll build you right up cracking – handsome rewards if you start easy and capitalize on your wins! Of course we may tweak that strategy..”

I leaned my elbow on the table and tapped ash into a saucer. “Hm. What do you think, Alec?”

“What do I think to what?” he said, playing along.

“AJ and his scheming,” I said.

“What, do you need his permission or something?” said AJ, a bit less diplomatic than he hitherto had been.

“Not his permission but advice. You'd want to listen to him too, AJ. After all, Alec knows me of old, whereas you are only very briefly acquainted with me! And penning me into your plans! Why, for all you know, I could be most awfully lazy, or quarrelsome, or temperamental, or stubborn..”

“Oh Maurice,” sighed Alec, who must have been in a particularly sentimental sort of a mood to add: “You are none of thems.”

“That settles it! Join my team and grunt for glory!!” The showman showed me his hand for another affirmation – thankfully he didn't spit on it.

“Alright then,” I said. “I'll give it a go.”

“Great! Just – you won't regret it!” He took a mouthful of celebratory egg from his plate. “Oh.. That's a fair amount of butter you're piling, there?”

I looked up from my toast and knife. “Oh yes. I do love butter!”

“And jam. He's a divil for it! Ha! Ha!” said Alec.
“I am, aren’t I? Ha! Ha!”

“Ha... Ha...” said AJ, lifting his cup uncertainly.

 Doesn’t that all sound very jolly? On paper perhaps. But even now, sat at a comfortable desk with a cup of tea and the lamps lit and the typewriter’s familiar clacking, I can still feel the pain in the Achilles, the Hamstrings, the Glutes, the Abdominals, the wrists.

At the time, I’d forgotten it; remembered at the quarry, then forgotten again! How could I have! I suppose Alec had dashed away every negative, sore or listless body-memory I’d ever had, and trained me to be mostly a pleasure receptacle. However: this was supposed to be pleasurable too, or at least to have even a small measure of enjoyment for me.

Yet it was hard to think of sport as a leisure activity when one is getting up early to jog, or spending four, five, six evenings a week doing callisthenics, and stretches, and weights, and breathing exercises, and shadowing, and bagging, and getting alternately yelled at and pleaded with by an increasingly erratic AJ.

I was getting rattier with every passing week; I had to go and cram with Ms Rathbone for those wrenched exams on several evenings also; I’d to repair the bike and fix the pipes on our fifth floor at Rain Lane; I’d to stop smoking, and drinking, and eating dripping – Alec’s speciality!

Thank goodness I didn’t take my curmudgeonliness out on him; by the time I got a spare moment to go home, I was so glad to see him he was like a life-giving saviour, warm, welcoming and relieving. We still slotted plenty of that into our schedule too, so was it any wonder I was walking around like the living dead.

“Nonsense, boy,” said AJ one Friday evening at the gym. “You’ve never looked better! Show me that arm – bее-yоо-tiful! That’s what I was envisioning!”
Yes, I was crabbier – but, I was better too, from a sporting viewpoint. I was fitter – could run increasingly more, and faster – was developing quicker reflexes, lighter footing, more durability – and apparently, slightly bigger arms, the bottom halves of which Alec was now – lovingly? - wrapping in bandages.

“Hold out your hand,” he said softly, picking up the glove from the floor by his stool. Aside from lots of general encouragement and accommodation and support, all positive, Alec didn't really engage in deep discourse on the subject of my boxing ‘career’, and I wondered what he really thought about it all.

Being of the sporty type himself – cricket notwithstanding – he seemed to appreciate and understand my new hobby. Still. As he moved to slip the boxing glove onto me, his hands shook a little. Or maybe they didn't. I wasn't sure. Deftly he tied up the laces and I stood, bouncing a few times to loosen the muscles, and said: “They feel grand, thank you Alec.”

“Yes, thank you Alec.” AJ came along and chivvied me away towards the centre. “Terry? Over here – come and hop in, do some sparring with Maurice. Don't go easy on him.” He gave a wink; Alec coughed and pulled his stool towards the wall out of the way of the approaching joggers. I managed to shoot him a helpless smile before Terry bounced over, shortsed and shirted and all gloved-up.

“Hullo,” I said awkwardly, trying to pull up the ropes of the ring to allow him to pass before me.

“What?” I said, but he'd gone on, hopping about the middle of the platform. I scrambled after him, and we squared up, practising cuts and punches and footwork, where speed was of the -

“Owch,” said Terry, as I caught him and sent him stumbling to the side.

“Barely touched you!” I said, bouncing back and waiting. “Must be your balance. Oh – whoop!! -” And I ducked his answering lefty, and quickly following right swipe, and sent him a nice neat forward jab in the centre of the chest – best place for him to absorb the impact, rather than the ribs, but he rolled back anyway.

“Oh come on!” I said cheerfully. “Give me some sort of a test!”
“Fucking upper-class ponce,” said Terry sourly, keeping his distance.

“Hey, Maurice.” AJ approached with some papers in his hand. He stuck his head in the ring and pointed at me. “Okay, your attacks are greatly improved, all credit. But I wanna work on your defence. Terry, you give Maurice some goings-over – good variety now – and Maurice, you block ’em. In fact, let a few in.”

“Let them in?” I said. “Just allow him to hit me?”

“Want to test your resilience,” said AJ.

“Alright..” I said.

“Alright!” grinned Terry, rotating his arms in preparation. I raised the dukes to my face.

It is very arduous, to take all of the knocks and not retaliate: I fancy my teeth were gritted twice as hard as they would be were I actually fighting, as I blocked and stopped; as Terry threw punch after gleeeful punch, I contracted my shoulder muscles to prevent myself dodging and gripped my fists almost bloody in my gloves to resist thrashing him back.

Opening one squeezed eye, I saw AJ had hurried over to the pointed doorway where there was a flurry of activity; Alec on the other hand was watching the ring avidly, scrunched up on his stool with his arm around his knees and chewing on the odd nail anxiously.

“Is anyone – AAARRGGHH!!” I spluttered as I got a right rattler to the jaw and nearly lost my footing.

“First blood to me!” said Terry, jumping about.

“Terry, don’t go nuts on him for Chrissake!!” AJ stormed over, Alec at his heels.

“Just givin' him the variety, like you said,” said Terry, using the inside of his elbow to swipe his hair back. AJ climbed into the ring and came over to inspect my hips and shoulders and feet. He didn't seem concerned about my head.
“Yeah, and you lived up! Hey, Maurice, he didn't send you backing up at all – you kept your footing staunch the whole time.”

“Well, you said to defend,” I said.

“And you know how to take orders. That's a great trait,” said he, patting me on the back.

“Well, thank you,” I said. Now that we had stopped sparring, I was beginning to feel cold.

“Some blocking talent is good, kid, just as important as offence!” said AJ. “It'll help you regain some energy and focus, so we can – you know – prolong. Keep the fun going as long as possible.”

“Why?” said Alec. No-one answered him, and of course he wasn't having any of that.

“Why long as possible?” he demanded, coming round to face AJ. Terry tittered, but I as always felt proud of Alec's pluck. God knows he's likely faced down tougher men than AJ. Or women.

“You little pest,” said AJ, who was nothing if not honest. “Because the punters will want a good show of course! A good entertaining night and a bit of excitement and tension over whether they'll clean up at the bookies. Either way they'll drink the place dry.”

“I see.. So this is for some specific match. Not just in the 'name o' sport'.”

AJ laughed along with the others. “Ain't he sharp!”

“So how much is the prize, then?” Alec glanced at me and then back staunchly at AJ, who faltered.

“To be confirmed,” he replied cagily, and he was both irritated by and impressed with Alec. Relatable.

“Fifty guineas,” said a voice, striding over from the doorway. I should say the voice belonged to, and emanated from, a tall man with a long black jacket, a black trilby pulled low and – I'm not sure still – a gold tooth, or else a badly neglected cavity.
Approaching, he stood outside the ring and scrutinized my arms and shoulders, which was something that was getting rather tiresome. Far from experiencing the elation of the touted and treasured hero, I felt more akin to a side of meat on Alec's father's butcher's slab.

“Sixty,” said the fellow, “When I get to see him in action.” And he nodded towards the ring.

“Like fun you will,” said AJ, bristling and moving in front of me like as if it was some defensive gesture. I looked down onto the crown of his head. “You'll wait two weeks till the bout and then you'll have no choice but to stare – that's if you can even bear to look.”

The man was nonplussed.

“Who's this?” said Alec, because AJ was ill-equipped in the formalities of English etiquette. Of course what Alec had said was completely beyond the Pale of impertinence too, but at least he was turning the wheels.

“Oh – of course. This is Bill Knox, from St. Jarlath's Centre for Criminal De-steering. He's the manager of your opponent in the upcoming fight.”

“I had to go to market too,” said Knox smarmily.

Upcoming fight? Specific? What was this? Surely it would have been mentioned to me? It must have been. Better not ask questions. Instead I smiled and extended a hand: “How do you do?”

The hand was gloved, and rejected.

“And where'd you come out of?” Knox asked a bit rudely. “Who're you?”

“Mm... Erm... Michael. Yes, Michael – Landing,” I supplied, actually more credibly than it seems in text, if you can imagine it. Perhaps he would assume I was brain-damaged from practising.

I wasn't. I had my few wits left about me; if this was illegal and all signs pointed, I favoured leaving my name quite out of things. My short but intensive period with Alec had taught me much about carefullness, and trust, and vigilance and awareness, and not to take risks because my life wasn't just my own, anymore. To be in love is to be a constant protector.
AJ smiled and looked away, while Alec cackled openly. But he drew no attention.

Knox said: “Well Mr Landing, you're many miles now from your country estate.”

“Don't I know it.”

“Ha!” said Knox, and pointed at AJ. “Keep on him, Shields. We don't want him falling to pieces before the fight.”

“Oh he won't – not until after!” cried AJ to his back.

The door slammed.

“Prick,” said Alec.

AJ, who had hitherto been no great friend to Alec, considering him (not erroneously) a nuisance, turned to him. “Ain't he though? Coming in here bolstering! Thinking he's calling the shots when we're both needed? Asshole!”

“What's this about a fight.. And two weeks.. And an opponent...?”

“Ah Maurice. You know, I was impressed with you this evening. Real impressed. Not just that you're beefing up, and getting quicker and smoother – but your endurance! That's the golden nugget. You're doing fine son – real fine.”

“Oh, thank you. Oh good. So can I g -”

“One more time over those reps – okay? Do your stretches, and laps to warm up, then weights. You -” He pointed at Alec - “You spot him. May as well make a full session of it!” And he went off to smoke and twaddle over papers at the coffee table.

Alec unlaced my gloves and I began unenthusiastically to stretch, and run laps, and struggle over the dumbbells and barbells and lay down on my back, panting under the dead-weight. Alec was poised
above, upside down to my vision, smiling uncertainly.

When I could talk again, I said: “I could just lay here now and sleep for a century.”

“Why don't you?” said Alec, glancing at AJ.

“What? Oh, no... Best get on with it, here now..” I reached up to grip the now hatefully-familiar bar. Even at this moment I wouldn't have been able to explain the unintellectual, thoroughly bodily determination that takes over when one is in the throes of a sporting endeavour. The challenge calls and – I don't know – one's muscles jolt to answer, to react, to try.

I waited for Alec to position his hands outside mine and said: “One – two – three – ah – ARRGH..” As I lifted the bar from its hooks, suspended it, and began to lower it to my chest.

“Ah Alec,” I puffed, “Don't do that.”

“What?”

“Y-you're taking all the weight. That's – argh – not helping me, leave it go..”

“Not hardly! You're doin' it all. I'm barely touchin' it,” he insisted.

“I can manage,” I said determinedly even as my hands burned and itched. “Leave go, just stay local..”

And he watched miserably as I heaved the bar back up, full arm length in the air, back down to chest, again and again...

...And I went at the punching bag for a solid twenty minutes while he held it...

...And I jumped and ran on the spot and did press-ups and sit-ups and lunges and stretches...

Eventually we were released and allowed to walk the three streets home, I hobbling alongside, the muscles and tendons merely twitching yet, a warning for the pain they would later unleash.
“That were main difficult,” Alec sighed out.

“Oh that's alright Alec,” I said benignly. “I'm getting more used to it.”

“I mean it's difficult for me.” He looked away in frustration. “I don't like just sittin' there idle while you're gettin' pounded on.”

“It's only sport, Alec,” I said, though touched.

“I know but-” He caressed my shoulder where I'd taken a pretty sharp jab earlier; I winced. “It's a funny-lookin' sport to me, as I reckon there ought to be some sort of reason for a fight, like. Seems kind of gruesome or summat to show up to a match just to watch two fellows bashing chunks out of each other.”

“Did you always feel this way?” I asked, knowingly.

“No,” he admitted. “I never done it, truth, but I used to think boxin' fair entertainin', before – you, well. Before I met you. It's different now.”

“Do you want me to quit it?” I knew full well I would have, had he only said the word.

But of course he said: “No, no.. I can see you enjoy it, in a way.”

“Well.. I do, yes.”

“And you want to keep going. For love of the sport.”

“Not only that,” said I. “Because I'm going to win.”
Easily said of course; especially when the confrontation was a whole fortnight away. A lot was packed into those two weeks however. A lot of it I can only remember very generally: when I wasn't working or sleeping, I was sparring with every athlete at St. Barnabas': practising punches and blocks and dodges, or jogging to try my muscles, or lifting weights to bolster my arms, or carrying loads to develop my balance, swimming underwater to improve my breathing.

It's all rather a blur; my mind was somewhat numb while my body took the helm. Alec better remembers details and specific instances that I detailed to him at the time.

One day, for example, AJ came over while I was having a rest at the gym, snatched the chocolate out of my hand and informed me stoutly that I had to lose more weight in order to be considered eligible for the fight.

“You're joking,” I said; it was another blow to my clobbered spirits. My eyes were still on the Dairy Milk.

“Would I joke about something like this? Come on, it can't come as much of a surprise to you. Look at that gut!” And he slapped it with the back of his hand. It jiggled; Alec, who was nearby, bristled like a cat. He is the one with the real fire of a fighter in him, not me!

“You're a tank,” said AJ, clearly feeling like he hadn't done enough damage to my esteem. “That's good in some ways, but your opponent, he's a middleweight. You'll need to lose – oh -” He leaned back as if he needed more room to take me all in! “- About twenty pounds.”

“A stone and an 'alf! In two weeks?” said one of the listening lads. He looked me over. “He'll never do it.”

“Just something more to bet on,” said AJ, walking off, munching the chocolate. He waved a hand: “As you were.”

Isn't he something else?

Another evening, AJ had asked me to meet him by the quays at the Lower Bridge, I thought it must have been for a nice friendly talk and relaxation because it was near to the social district. I needn't've.
When will I learn? What did I say about my brain being off on holiday during that period?

“Ah – there you are, you rascal! Why did you wear that big heavy coat? You won't be needing it – here.” There was another man lurking behind him with his hands in his coat pockets, scarf wrapped closely, puffing out cold air and stealing curious glances at me.

“Oh,” said AJ, tossing another careless hand. “Mau – er, Michael Landing, this is your challenger, Brian Dawson, St. Jarlath's. Well, not there exactly but they've him on contract, like yourself. He found out what we were doing tonight and invited himself along.”

“Just wanted to get the practice in.” said Brian, and he came forward with the hand out shake-wise as I was still struggling out of my coat – and so I wriggled around awkwardly for a bit before taking his hand. The amount of people I'd met and made nice to in the last while made me more sympathetic towards old Clive and his canvassing – almost.

“How are you,” said Brian Dawson, who seemed a cheery sort, from what I could see of his face behind his scarf and woolly hat. He was that bit slighter than me, more in the way of Clive, actually. Middleweight... I noted his neat frame and slim torso enviously. For his part, his eyes travelled up from my feet to my head with measured care and he smiled again, nervously.

After this seizing, (during which I wondered how random this meeting was, really), AJ said: “So now you see what you're up against. Both of you! Real fine! Hope you're not discouraged any – no backing out now! Ha! Ha! But seriously, I mean that.”

“Is that all? You brought us out here just to deliver your little threats? Really, AJ..” I said, tutting.

“Ain't you the funny one tonight – Landing. Now, haven't you noticed just where we are? This is a little treat for you. I'm that thoughtful.”

I looked around and finally up at the building behind us – a fine grey-bricked structure, with fake embedded columns and the sign between them declaring it to be ‘North Side Rowing Club.’

“Oh.. Right. Is that it? You row?” I said, confused. Why couldn't he just tell a fellow exactly his intentions I didn’t know. The show man must show I suppose; he was more like a medicine peddler.

“No. But you sure do. Or you did! You told me used to at school or something. Where you got those
“That was absolutely forever ago,” I objected, fearful of what was coming. Jesus Christ, I had already done laps, reps and several daily dozens today; my body, couldn't, wouldn't, don't...

“Forever is back,” grinned AJ. “Take a gander over the dock there.”

Reluctantly I did, and I saw bobbing gently on the dark sparkling Thames, a long boat with oars all ready. I groaned very loudly. There wasn't even any point in complaining – I'd already taken my jacket off.

Besides... I looked furtively sideways over at Brian, who was peering over the edge curiously too. This was not the time to show weakness. However off-hand and casual I acted to Alec about this being all 'just a laugh' and 'a rag' and a mere hobby, now that I was in this deep I had re-discovered the competitive drive and it would be quite infra dig to back away from the physical challenge now, right in front of the opposition.

It was my duty to defend the honour of St. Barnabas' Sports' Hall, the existence of which I had known nothing about a month ago and about whose ethos of practice I was wholly ignorant. Yet the loyalty! This was now suddenly a race.

All the same – we were rather the same!

“Now fellas,” said AJ, “Don't both leap into action at once!” We hadn't moved.

“This is just a practice session – a little getting-to-know-you. After all we're all friends here!” He went to the steps to descend to the boat, beckoning us.

“Do you know what your odds are? To win?” Brian whispered to me.

“Haven't a notion,” I said. “You?”

“It varies,” he said, then shook his head. “Takin' the Mickey Bliss, your bloke!”
“He’s a character,” I said.

“Where did you stroke, Mau – er – oh for Chrissake – Maurice?” called AJ from the bottom of the wet steps.

“Six,” I said.

“Well, you're promoted. Hop along there to Bow.”

“Swell.” I wobbled along the boat, plucking the oars.

“Brian, son, you join him – just to make up the pair, I reckon we won't break any records tonight!”

“But might break some bones,” said Brian, in a familiar tone, dropping down into the seat in front of me so that we swayed madly.

AJ folded himself cozily into cox – he was wearing my coat. He raised his speaker: “Okay, men! Ready..”

My arms tensed, and feared, but by God they were going to hum: “STROKE!”

We struck.
Two horrendous hours later – a regular training session is supposed to last only twenty minutes but AJ, being American, was ignorant of that fact – I staggered to the bus stop to meet Alec. He had been spending the evening doing a stock-take at the Tea Company, then going out for a drink with Robbey and the others, the other delivery men and the packing girls, the labellers.

“Thought you was going for a drink yourselves?” he said, taking in my slumped form. I dozed on his shoulder all the way home; he smelled wonderfully of cigarettes.

Back at Rain Lane, he kept pace with me all the way up to the flat though I was very slow. I made dry toast and sugarless, milk-less tea. Despondently I dropped in a bit of lemon. Alec had the same.

“Don't be silly Alec,” I said. “Have something right.”

“Nay,” said he. “I said, didn't I?” What he'd said was that he vowed to go on a diet if I was too, so I'd have company in suffering. It did help the willpower, but didn't actually quash the hunger, or the accompanying short temper.

“Why deny yourself? You needn't. Anyway, you've already had alcohol and smokes this evening – I can smell them.”

Patiently Alec chewed his toast.

“Really, darling,” I said, half delirious. “Why not have some of the treacle cake... Or butter and jam... I'll watch you eat it. It would be a great indulgence for me.”

“I'll give you yer great indulgence,” he said, brushing crumbs and getting up and tugging me gently towards the bed. I complied readily; can't imagine ever being that tired.
Looming nearer to the Date, various parts of my body calmed and acclimatized themselves to the daily punishment; still others awakened and wailed. For example, the area above the chest and just beside the armpit – the upper pectoral or thereabouts – was absolutely irate at being awaken from its slumber, and retaliated by making it blessed difficult not only to lift heavy objects, but to even more the arm quickly without a stab of pain. AJ’s wife daubed me with deep-heat and gave me the tube to take home; unfortunately it didn’t work for numbing headaches.

At the office, I did my best to slope in unobserved and shuffle down in my chair all day, buried, so it would seem, behind piles of work. Secretly, behind the typewriter, and odious in-trays, I scribbled out plays and bouts and sequences of movements on the back of some old contracts for shredding.

I studied AJ’s sketches, and tried to visualize the corporeal execution of his program – because I couldn’t very well practice here. I begged off the canteen and miserably ate fruit. I still drank coffee like it was about to be outlawed, though.

“More coffee, Mr Hall? Are you quite sure no cre- Oh my word!!” Ms Ellison put down the pot and came round to my desk; I naturally recoiled, tried to hide behind the newspaper.

Still she took my hand in that fussing, motherish way women have, always presuming the authority of care. Mind you, I could hardly credit myself for being the most accomplished in the way of care just then!

“What in the world have you been doing with your hands?!” she squeaked, examining my scraped and bloody fingers – I tended to practice on the punching-bag bare knuckle in order to improve accuracy of landing. I didn’t say that though. I didn’t say anything at all, because I was tired and hungry, and every so often – whether I moved or say still – a twinge of pain shot somewhere. I felt like a machine with no oil or petrol.

As I considered this and still brought no reply, Ms Ellison filled in the blanks herself.

“Mr Hall,” she said, horrified, “Have you been fighting? Did you get set upon on the way home from work by a gang of youths?”

“What! No!”

“Or did you get a clobbering when defending someone, your wife, your family?”
“Oh Ms Ellison.. What? God, no..”

“Then you've been out a-wrestling for sport – is it? I've heard that some men sneak off to do that under the cover of night, leaving their kith and kin all unawares, using it as a way to meet out the masculine aggression. But I thought only the *lowers* would do that! For shame Mr Hall!”

She dropped my hand and crossed her arms haughtily.

She looked around. She leaned close and whispered, “Where do you do it?”

“Ms Ellison! I see copy that won't type itself!” trilled Ms Rathbone.

Ms Ellison peeled off, and I examined my fingers.

“*Typing, Mr Hall!!*”

A right royal brouhaha was being made of this upcoming ding-dong. I mean, really. At the gym, the intense training, the excited predictions, the contradictory advice I was given; alternately mocked and encouraged, all the while I was running and jumping and never really standing still.

On the streets and pubs and parks, whisperings and swapsies and backhands and tickets and tips
regarding the odds of the outcome.

Stuck wonkily to walls and poles and in shops, centres, parlours – libraries – churches for all I knew! - were posters advertising the Big Bout on Fight Night featuring arch-rivals Brian Dawson and Michael Landing, with a rudimentary etching of the two of us squaring off. I had enough insight to wonder if Brian was operating under a pseudonym also; Alec nicked one of the posters from a lounge and pinned it up on the kitchen door at our flat.

 Mostly I was alarmed. Friday threatened. I was drenched in regret, and wished furiously that this was a normal weekend coming up, of the sort I ordinarily longed for.

But I couldn't back out now. Well I could of course, but I couldn't – you see? A matter of honour and obligation and holding one's head up, sort of thing. Though if I could manage to hold it – or anything – up on Friday it would be a feat; such was the state of my starved exhaustion.

Even AJ started to look worried; not for me per say but for my abilities and readiness for the match. To be fair, he told me honestly that he had pushed me perhaps beyond the limit and though he wanted me in tip-top shape, it oughtn't come at the price of rendering me over-wrought and worn-out for the fight. “Or,” he said, as an afterthought, “Causing you genuine injury..”

So he bandaged up my knees himself, and bought new sports plimsolls light and comfortable for me, and had me wear leather headgear for sparring so I wouldn't look all roughed-up and beaten when taking to the ring on the day. I couldn't appear weak; I was supposed to be the up and coming rookie.

“Shoo.. It's all just a load of cockaloopy,” muttered Alec to me, his arms crossed, I snatching a moment between practice-fights at St Barnabas' – I was being pitted against fairly every athlete at the gym in succession. “Tha' has to look strong! And yet seem new and inexperienced! Win! And yet not by too wide a margin! Katherine puts less plannin' into directin' her plays..”

Complaining thus was his own way of showing concern. In general he was very supportive; if not hurrahing me on, then at least always hovering around in the periphery.

And so came the un-red letter day; the Friday of the fight. After work I was a bag of nerves; I finished at five and AJ was outside to meet me, which I was jolly appreciative of, until it became clear that he was not doing it to be friendly, but to make sure that I did indeed go directly to the gym, and so he could lecture me on timing, tactics, ducks, dives, nabs and knock-outs all the way there.

At St Barnabas' Centre, the warm-ups were careful and deliberately preliminary. AJ directed me distractedly, but spent more time shuffling papers, being called to the phone, and sending errand lads
and girls off with messages.

All of that do wasn't my prerogative though. I concentrated on fine-tuning my performance and let the outcome fall as it may – that's the way to look at it. I practised my punches and as long as I didn't stop to think – I was in control.

I had to stop though, when we packed up the gear and made our way to the location of the fight, in Camden, and only then again had I to think, and imagine, and fear.

The dilapidated area itself went some way into hinting at the kind of audience we could expect to attend this evening. We drove down crowded, rainy streets, where raucous punters queued, all dollied and dandied; up a narrow back-alley to the rear doors of a pub or night-salon of some kind – chaotic, rowdy and swinging.

AJ bundled me through the back door and – wouldn't you know it! - down a flight of stairs, wet from so many rain-soaked shoes. Loud music, and glasses clinking, and a huge, ear-filling hum of chatter filled the dark corridor, but we hustled past the heavily-flanked door that led to the main stage and instead we continued to a small room, with file cabinets, brooms and boxes. I sat down on a wooden beer barrel.

One of the gym fellows, Adam, worked my legs, stretching the knees so they wouldn't cramp when I proceeded to over-work them horribly, which I was consciously about to do, for God-only-knew how many gruelling three minute periods.

Terry was shadow-boxing for my benefit, demonstrating the strategies AJ had drawn up for me: cross, jab, followed by uppercut, dance to the left, duck, jab, weave, take the hit, shake the head, bob to the right – gut punch... I watched him soberly.

AJ paced, looking at the clock on the wall and muttering and being entirely unhelpful in terms of alleviating the nerves.

“Five minutes. Five minutes till bell. Oh Gawd!!” He swung himself down onto his hunkers in front of me. He spread his hands open and the old half-smile. “Okay Morrie. What's your motivation?”

Alec, I thought instantly. If the question related to general motivation, ie. reason for living. But if his inquiry, and it did, related specifically to fighting, and this match, then.. No, it wasn't quite Alec. He didn't mind whether I boxed or no; he loved me and only wanted me to be happy. Which I was.
There was nothing left to prove to Alec, no reason to impress him: he’d seen everything of me, good and bad, noble and contemptible, and he had decided nonetheless that he liked what he saw and would hang onto me. No, this was something other than Alec, though he gave me the strength to realize it. Other cracks to fill.

Was it, maybe, a physical challenge I had undertaken, in order to convince myself I was still manly, still strong and capable of aggression and intimidation and studly prowess, even while being – well, of 'that sort'? (Odd, as I tended to call it. Special, as Alec said, daft boy.) Was I suffering from a crisis of masculine confidence, because homosexual sorts are supposed to be fair and faint and fairy-ish, (though who wrote this cultural rule-book I don't know), and I would never now display my robust nature by fathering children – was this base and boorish bout of brawling a kind of over-compensation?

I didn't think that this was the case either; certainly I wasn't daily plagued by wrenched insecurity and teary fear, the way I used to be back when I was single and everyone merely thought I was biding my time before picking from a pool of women. With Alec by my side – albeit in secret, but so very, very present – I felt stronger and more capable than ever.

Could it be that I just liked boxing? Could things really be so wonderfully simple, free of double-meaning and motive? Perhaps so, with a tinge of...

“I want to fight,” I said to AJ, who was patient all through my reverie. “I want to get in the ring and box, because it was something I enjoyed doing before, months back, a year ago, when I was miserable generally. And I thought by falling – er – making the changes I did, in my life, that I was happy to leave everything – all I every was or did – behind. I determined it! Clean breast, sort of a way, or rebirth, don't you know..

“But there are elements of my past I don't want to forget, that I quite liked. That I want to bring to my new life. My family for one.. Yes, actually.. And this. The old sparring. It used to be the only thing that exhilarated. Well, now I don't need to do it. But I want to. So I don't look back in anger.”

I had been given quite the platform for my little address; the other stared.

“And of course it – it feels good to win!” I said with the goofy, and that was more like it, AJ beamed and grabbed my hand in both of his and shook it.

“There it is! There's the spirit! But I must say that was a damn fine speech you just done. Damn fine!
I had no idea you were that deep Hall, figured you were all meat.”

“Oh.. well, thank you..”

“Alright! Let's go! Get those gloves tied! And them shoulders loosened! And for God's sake take that thing off! You want the crowd to think you're a pansy, and your stock plummet? C'mon!!”

What he deemed pansy-ish was a thick, strong roll of bandage that Alec had recommended I wear round my abdomen when lifting increasingly heavier weights in order to prevent a hernia. He'd seen more fellas, he said, with busted guts from lifting things they oughtn't! You'd think the back or knees would be the first to go but no!

Why didn't you mention this up in Shropshire, I'd said. We’d tools then, he said, and if you used them right the load weren't too excessive. I surmised that I mustn't've been using them right...

I wondered if he was blowing smoke or exaggerating, as usual, but there again, the idea planted itself into my head as a possibility and so I subsequently always wore the hernia belt as a precaution. It was a comfort.

Unlike AJ. “It makes you look positively geriatric! Why not limp out there on a walking stick?!”

“Alright! Keep your hair on! I don't need it now..” and Terry deftly unravelled it and I was ushered, with only shorts and socks and rubber soles down the hall and to the ante-chamber, where I stepped my emaciated form onto the scales, and by a whisker mercifully passed the weigh-in – too right, as I hadn't even had a drop of water since the night before.

Then without any more dawdling, straight into the huge, cheering, jostling, smoky, music-filled, people-thronged cellar. I was bricking it but jogged after AJ in a slow of jauntiness; he was waving with clear delight.

As we approached the ring, the crowd was loud, thick, sweating, almost overwhelming -

And suddenly I was whelmed-over: with thrown, squeezing arms about my neck, a stubbly face on mine, warm, soft jacket material pressed against my body and quickly let go -

“Sorry! So sorry I'm late! Ooo, I were at work all cleared up wi'Robbey and ready to head here when one o' the little grooms come through, got word his sister's havin' her baby an' he had to get over there post, and the ass that I am I had to bring him, and stop by his ma's and collect her, and
give them blasted well-wishing money for t'bairn – Oh!"

For AJ had gently but firmly – mostly firmly – tugged Alec from me and was now elbowing me into the ring -

“That's alright Alec! I'm glad you're here – thank you so!” I called over the din.

“Good luck! Good luck!” he shouted back, and other things too, judging by his lips, maybe 'I love you', and maybe not, it didn't matter, what mattered was that he did love me, I knew it.

If I had been aware of AJ and Terry melding by the wayside as I made my way to the middle of the platform, I would no doubt have felt a jolt of fear at their loss. As it was, I easily enough walked towards the waiting ref, even though I was half-naked in front of what felt like hundreds of people, my hair surely a mess from warming up..

What did that matter now? All priorities were crumbling off, narrowing down: just me and he. Brian Dawson threaded himself through the ropes and approached, still with a towel about his shoulders. I hadn't had a very good look at him before when we'd been rowing, but now the bright basement light revealed his big blue eyes and shock of chestnut hair, and when he smiled his greeting and his cheek dimpled I knew I was done for!!

“Hullo!” he said.

“Hullo.. Nice to see you again,” I bumbled, and again automatically, awkwardly held out the gloved hand to shake.

“Not yet men, you can touch gloves in a mo,” said the ref. “Let's us straighten, fellas. Now. Familiar with Queensbury?”

“Yes.”

“All too.”

“Twelve rounds, or K.O., ropes or countings. Right?”

“Right,” said Brian.
“Grand,” said I.

“Clean – well not too clean, obviously. No biting – but other than that – just not so much blood that we’ve to fetch a mop out – right?”

“Sorry – what? What was that?” I said.

“Not too much bloodshed, I said. I know, I know – but take it easy there, slugger!”

“No I mean – what blood? In any case? I wouldn't normally – it's not -”

“Don't tell me you ain't never done it back-street before!” The ref laughed loudly – hopefully the huge volume of shouting and talking from the viewership covered his words. “Bleedin' 'ell, you are as green as they say. Where you from anyway, Buck House?”

“Hardly,” I said, affronted. “Look, I can't do this if it's all hell-for-leather and end up with a face like minced meat. I've got work on Monday.”

“Nor me,” said Brian. “I've got work tomorrow.”

“Oh really?” I said. “What do you do?”

“Postie,” he grinned. “So I do every third Saturday. And I reckon it won't go unnoticed if I'm there pushin' letters and makin' the chit, wiv' me face all black and blue!”

“Quite!” I laughed.

“And what about you?” said Brian.

“Office drone,” I said.

“Oh dear, sorry to hear that. Still, it wouldn’t -”
“Alright, alright, break it up, break it up!” said the ref, irritated; we were sent to our naughty corners.

“What's all this about blood,” I hissed to AJ, who was leaning on the rope beside my stool. I gave a few preparatory punches to the air as we waited for the bell. The tension was skyrocketing.

“Oh, just to make it interesting – Landing,” he said, smacking me on the thigh. I leapt away as the first bell rang, huffing: “You're interesting. You're a bloody case study!”

“Knock 'em dead champ!”

“Make nice,” said the ref, and we stood and panted and stared at each other, maybe I smiled too, can't remember.

And the bell rang CLANG and I put them up defensive instant, as I knew – I just knew Brain Dawson was going to be in attack mode, the desperate desire to get the lead early and only hope to maintain it; but I blocked one, two, then he got me on the left shoulder but barely, and I had a clear go at wherever I wanted on him, defenceless, but I – jabbed for the ribcage, and he stumbled back with not nearly as much damage as I would normally have inflicted, come on -

“Come on Michael!”

“Awe, get right out of it! Come on Brian, I've a pony on you!”

We tussled, and dodged, and shuffled about – hardly even gotten going and the bell rang Round One.

“Good but – God, son, attack more, Chrissake! He's leaving himself wide open at least three-quarters of the time and you're there tapping him like you're trying to nudge him awake!”

“Right, right,” I said, swilling, and he tended to my jaw, to be sure.

I don't know what kind of speech Brian got from his coach – perhaps what a home-owner says to a dog when he wants it to intercept an intruder – but the next few rounds were a hot mess of his crazy, wayward jabs, knocking my head, and side, and shoulders ceaselessly; and him being completely careless in his own defence meant that I had ample opportunity to purple him all over – about half of these opportunities I took.

Truth to be told it had been so long since I'd taken a proper beating that I myself was wrong footed
and clumsy, and though my punches were solid my aims weren't true.

Brian gave me a beautiful one to the side of the head, right on the ear, which I felt to my core and seemed to sap him of all his energy too, for he cinched me immediately and I was glad of the relief and the support, even though it felt as though part of my jawbone had been sent into my brain. The bell rang and back to our corners, whirling and dizzy-headed and trembling we both.

“What the hell is the matter with you, Hall! Give it some fucking welly for Chrissake!! He's handing you the match on a plate and you're going, 'No thanks, I'm full' – Jeezum Crow, go for the face!!”

“I can' – I can't. Ez – ez too hansum..” I wheezed, through my puffy lips and mouth-guard and spinning perspective.


Lights swirled above me and my face was being dabbed with a cold wet sponge, my gloves were relaced, and the cramped room was now brimful of conversation, and glass breaking and roaring and excitement; and as I sat resting on the stool, I thought, What care I? I leaped into this for sport, not for glory, dear me no. If it were a casual thing I might enjoy it, but AJ and his bookmaking nonsense..

Really, what was it to me to succeed or no? The world was my oyster already. Really, it's been eight rounds. We're getting tired. The crowd's going crazy. I really ought to let Brian go ahead, let him win... End it at last. Skin off my nose.

But – Could I? How could I – actually? Brian had been coming at me with the force and uncontrollability of a runaway train from the get-go. He'd pummelled every legal part of me – no biting, though, gentleman that he is – and all I did was edge round him, landing my own tentative scores, while I endured his bruising blows. And yet -

The bell rang -

And yet – Look at us. Look at him. He is stooped, panting, drenched and – shit-scared. He's thrown all of his resources willy-nilly at the problem – me – and hoped for the best, to secure his win. Which he won't get. It's just not in him, poor sod. He won't win this match.
Which means I'm going to bloody have to! Because I ought to! It's as fair as could be that the better man win!

The ref left, and we stood, bouncing, stepping, face-to-face, his markless and by now exhausted, teeming, his hair stuck fast to his forehead and cheeks and neck; still I waited, wondering – he shot out and got me firm and fast in the gut but – oh dear, I barely felt it.

I shook my head and stood back up tall, some several inches I had on him and I felt it: despite the noise and flashing lights and the squeaking mat underfoot, and the hot humid air – it was two men - we were facing each other – all to win or lose – each of us – one of us – and the spirit of base competition coursed through me as I took a jab to the head, then a swerving uppercut to the jaw -

And then Brian backed, now totalled, and without planning or thinking – I merely honed in on the spots – I built up to delivering a strong, savage one to his right bicep, which I knew would be already throbbing in pain and over-exertion, and as he winced from that I steeled, and sucked in a breath, and shot my last one home – not too hard but enough to end it – above the stomach, under the ribcage – the absolute core – and he stumbled back – reached for me helplessly – his surprised eyes – I ached a little, in the heart as well as all over – he hit the ropes and closed his eyes and sagged.

Time seemed to still, as he slumped further, his swarming over, his balance gone, all strength sapped and fled and fatigued, and, heart hammering, I kept bouncing and weaving nervously, I kept my fists raised and my stance ready – as if he could get back up at all, leave alone come back swinging!

But the adrenaline was still bolting around my body, forcing my into military mode even though I knew, somewhere, above the animalia, that the match was mine and after all it was just a match, not a real-life combat situation! But intellect had been forced into the back-seat and the primitive instinct was driving.

I heaved a breath as the referee went to Brian and examined and counted, counted.. Seven.. Eight.. Nine.. “TEEEEENNN!!”

And suddenly I was aware of my surroundings again.

And oh the roaring and the shouting! It was not only I who had gone back to the primal state! Still with arms prepped, I looked around in mild wonder at the crowds of people, waving tickets and hats and glasses and bellowing...
...AJ slapping the ring-floor and tugging at the ropes, jubilant, with heaps of people pressing up behind him, Alec chief among them, my old striped college scarf tied around his waist, screaming joyfully and waving at me, pure exuberance on his young face...

My arm was pulled up, then I was tugged away back to my corner, where I was peeled down through the ropes to the floor, so many hands and faces and flashing lights and I couldn't see clearly at all..

“Out-fucking-standing, Hall! I just couldn't have dreamt it better! Man oh man if I'd my ruthers I'd turn you pro – whaddaya say? Here, where's your hand..”

I was grabbed at, my gloves pulled off, and my hand shook, again and again and pats on the back rained down but it was so difficult just to breathe..

“It's alright.. Hay, give us room! Here now...” And there he was, crouching down as I sat on the chair in the crowd, and I was so weak and slipping that I instinctively wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head on his chest. I felt him patting my hair.

“You're alright Maurice.”

“Yah, but is he?” rang another voice, I tried to place it. “I mean – look at his face! He looks like the Elephant Man!” It was Jens. I cracked an eye to see her peering over me, Chuck behind her gleefully waving a ticket.

I closed my eyes again and tried to bring my heart rate down; Alec's too was racing, I could feel through his jumper.

“Mr Hall! My goodness what a show! You were magnificent!” I goggled at Ms Ellison struggling through the crowd; she came forward and extended the congratulatory. Alec had to unwrap my right arm from around his body and offer it out for her to shake.

“Heavenly days!” she squealed, open-mouthed staring at me. “I declare, what have you done to yourself? You're skin and bone!”

“He'll be alright,” said Alec firmly, although he was having to hold me propped upright in the chair, rather. “Just training for t'match, it's only .”
“Are you mad? Look at him – I've seen more meat on a robin redbreast! Now Mr Hall, you be sure and eat something proper tonight – You see that he does!” She poked Alec.

He was amused. “Right you are, Miss.”

“Are you Alec?”

He was alarmed: “Er – well, yeh, happen I am..”

“Oh I know all about you.” Miss Ellison smiled. Women tend to!

“Oh – You do? All?” Alec toughed it out.

“Yes, Mr Hall has talks of you often. You're neighbours, is that right? And good friends. It's lovely when a coincidence like that happens, isn't it?”

“Oh yes,” said Alec. “Lovely.”

“Nice to put a face to the name,” said she. Her hand touched my cheek, gently. “Unlike this face! Not so nice! What'll he do for work on Monday? It's sure to be remarked upon. Might be uncomfortable for him.”

“Won't the swellin' have gone by then?” said Alec nervously.

“No! And the bruising will be worse.”

“And the cuts, they'll not have healed..” That was Jens.

“Has he still got all his teeth?” Chuck.

“Hay! That's enough, girls, quit pokin' and proddin'. We'll think of some excuse.”

“Say that – he had to go, called away on urgent business,” said Jens.
“Work is his business, they'd want to know.”

“Say he's broke a leg skating.”

“And recovered by Wednesday?”

“Say that someone died, and you had to go to the funeral – I use that excuse all the time, like say his mother or something.”

“Ooooh..” I let out a groan – no, a sob! Before I could contain it! I don't know if it was the beating, if the weakening of the physical self has any such similar impact upon the soul, but for some reason the instant someone mentioned, however in fancy, dying, and Mother, I felt like I'd taken another body blow! What if she ever were to fall ill, or die? How would I even know? What if I really never saw her again, and she had found out why I was exiled, and hated me? My eyes watered to my horror but I couldn't stop them.

Alec could – or he could shield them. He noticed my anguish and bent to slip an arm around me. “Alright, enough of all this – let's get you home, eh? Up you get, pet, if you can manage – C'mere, Chuck, give us a hand, you get his other side.”

I must have fallen asleep or something. Happy to.

In fact I was helped out the back way into a car, hired by the underground league premises. (Was it a pub? Club? Someone's private dwelling? No cigar.) In the back seat, a squabble broke out as to whether I would be taken to hospital or not (Alec say Yay, even though he confessed later to being very worried as to whether he'd be allowed to visit me should I be retained; AJ say Nay because if it got out that I was hospitalized it might dull the lustre of his – our – triumph.)
Apparently I was snoring so they agreed I was still myself, at least ("No doctor'll cure that!") and so we went to Rain Lane, where Alec gave me a fireman's lift up all five flights of stairs ("Weren't no bother – honest! Mind you, took us best part of an hour, all in."), and deposited me in bed where he finally got a break as I spent the rest of the night, finally, out for the count.

At some point during the tussle, I'd wondered if my nose might have been broken. Foolish, panicked fear in the fresh seconds after a knock – but people can and have been known to continue fighting – and win! - after such a circumstance.

Mine was intact but had been blocked bloody, both sides, although someone must have cleaned me up: I could breathe easily (though my lungs creaked with every movement), and in fact what woke me up – what was that – that – lovely – wonderful fragrance of yore, before, of childhood...

"Whassat -?" I mumbled, and opened my eyes, and tried to raise my head slightly all at once, which proved too much, and a headache rushed from all corners of the globe to my skull and throbbed and throbbed there. "Utugh.."

Shuffling, and I turned slowly and forced myself to see Alec, who was sitting with his feet up on the kitchen table reading the newspaper. When our eyes met he tossed it aside and came over to me, crept down onto his knees by the bed and took my hand. He had his cap on and looked delightfully windswept.

"Come to at last, have thee? Ee, I'm that relieved. Not that I thought there were 'owt really wrong wi'you, but.. Well, I wanted to keep an eye on you anyroad."

"Mm.. m'alright," I said.
My face he stroked lightly, maybe over bruises. “Well done,” he said. “You were, oh, just amazing! My word what a match! What a man you are! I were that – jaw-dropped shock-ful! Though I – well – I – has my misgivin's abou' you keepin' it up so intensive permanent-like..”

“You and me both,” I said. “Ah – ow..”


“Oh.. Just got a bit of a head.” I touched it, could feel bumps under my hair.

“Hang about.” Alec sprang up. “I'll get some aspirin. Got some lemonade too, in case you've a stomach..”

“Thanks awfully,” I said, laboriously sitting up. I was in clean pyjamas. And when I wriggled my feet – hospital corners!

Alec came back and sat on the bed. “You've not too many cuts, I dressed what I could last night wi' iodine.. Mostly just – you were bashed about so.” He held my face gently again with both hands, examining. He held his breath too, so as to keep inside what he really wanted to say: 'That was hard. You're precious to me. Please don't.'

Still he smiled and dropped his hands into my lap. “We'll soon have you cute as a button again. So – old Brian were too much of a looker for thee to let rip on, aye?”

“What!” I said, reddening instantly under my bruises. And brusquely: “N-nonsense. Where'd you -”

“Oh, well.. Somehow he never got a right knock from you, and you won anyway. I reckon I'd not exactly kick him outta bed either.”

I looked away, up at the ceiling.

“Too bad he didn't have the same soft spot for you!” And he took the shaving mirror from the side and showed me.
Oh my word. Oh good Lord. Oh dear. I hope I’ve never been a very particularly vain man – pride in one’s dress of course, but as to the delicacy of features – well -

“Some ice might calm that down, mebbes.”

“Stick it in some gin, and yes, might do some good.” I set down the mirror – turned it away. Alec gazed at me fondly all the same.

“I say,” I said. “What is all this?” For I’d just observed – behind Alec, on the table, side and chairs, and floor – sat bunches of flowers, loads, all kinds and sizes. So that was what the smell had been. The great outdoors, indoors.

“Ah.” Alec stood. “Right nice, ent they? Arrived this morn, all of a flurry.”

“Upon my word. Who are they for?”

“They’re yours, you ninny – here.” And he handed me several small cards. “Lots of folk are right grateful for your winnin’ last night – and well, this just seems their way.”

Alec had helpfully written down on each card the type of flower each gifter had sent, so they could be correctly acknowledged.

“Jolly organized.”

“Well, you're welcome,” he said.

I read: “Roses: 'Thank you for a wonderful fight Mr Landing.'” I looked up. “How’d they get here?”

“They all landed at St Barnabas’ and AJ shoved ’em into a car over. You shoulda seen the neighbours goggle!”
I groaned. “How weird it will look, two men with a flat full of flowers.”

He laughed. “Not the weirdest carry-on that's ever been here!”

I continued listing:

“Lillies: 'What a good show Michael Landing! I've landed a score. You're my new man.'”

“Gladdies: 'Top performance. The count and I will come again, marvellous spectacle. Get well soon – won't you.'”

“'Mums: 'Much obliged to your creaming Dawson, Mr Landing sir. Now my children can eat again.'”

“Look at how popular you are all of a sudden,” said Alec, pulling his chair to my bedside and folding his arms. “Like a tart that's a true giver.”


“He's a bit of alright, according to you!”

“Now really..”

“He's alright, yeh. Well, he can still walk anyroad, saw him staggerin' away. Don't fret thee! You did it! You won! Ah! Which reminds me.” He pulled something out of a pocket and handed it to me, a slip of paper. “AJ sent that over too.”

I unfolded it. “What's this?”

“Your prize isn't it! Your take.”

I boggled. “Thirty pounds!”

Alec whistled. “Some sum! Hadn't you any idea?”

“Not a notion.”

“Well, no-one could accuse you o' doin' it for the money.”
“Well I – didn't really -” I waved the cheque at him. “Here, you have it.”

“What! You off your trolley? It's yours, you earned it.”

“Oh, well I – put it in the cottage fund.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. That's where it belongs. Put it in the tin and then come join me in bed.”

“Alright. Although I do have to get ready for work in abou' ten minutes. Were just gonna do you a brew and -”

“Never mind your brew. Ten minutes is plenty. Come on.” And I rolled towards the wall, turning down the blankets.

He complied, and I felt the wonderful, weak relief of his warm weight pressed up behind me; his strong arms around me meant I could forget all about my own.

No regrets of course. It had been vitalizing, to be back in the Olympic sphere, but I didn't have time for more diligent training, nor, to be frank, the inclination. I had Alec to see to, neglected all those many weeks, and my share of the chores to start doing again, and the new Tax Year was in full swing at work.

Additionally I was still meeting Ms Rathbone twice a week, evenings, accompanying her back to her boarding-house common room or the library in order to revise for these horrifically dull exams; she did most of the hushed whispering and I dolefully copied down notes, hoping (not really believing) that some information would sink in and stay.
Thursdays I went to the Workers’ Academy (aka a dingy room in the Town Hall) to continue the relentless typing class. I was no natural and certainly all the boxing had done a fair number on the dexterity of my fingers.

Cantankerously I wriggled them inside my gloves, exhausted enough at climbing all of the many many stairs back up to the flat.

Where, to my surprise, the corridor was not unoccupied and a figure sat on a box, or a suitcase, at the wall right opposite our door; and upon hearing my approach, looked up, got up, and I was startled to actually recognize the round, smiling face of – wasn't it? - one of the parlour-maids from Penge, Wiltshire.
One would think, generally, that the spotting of a familiar face, however vaguely known, and even to the regional emigrant, would bring with it a rush of sweet surprise, comfort, and at least a sense of circular social order. Well, this is not always the case, in fact it is rarely the case, and you would do well to consider that, excepting of course where your own life experience proves the contrary.

In my life – in my past – I'd had entirely too much order and over-familiarity. It was what had made it so dashed difficult to break away from norms and search for something as ridiculous as love. But find it I did – we did – and we had established for ourselves a new, created normality. It was mad, exciting, innovative – was it sound?

To my credit, when the smiling girl came towards me, I didn’t freeze on the spot nor back away; merely slowing my progress along the landing until we came to a gentle stop facing each other.


“From Penge, sir,” she said, shaking my hand only a little uncertainly; her smile showed her rather overlarge but mercifully symmetrical teeth. “Sorry to land out of the blue like this at your own home, only it took that long for us to find you..”

“Us..?” I said, as she nodded for her moment and slipped past me, to the perpendicular bit of landing beside the stairs, leading to a window overlooking the forecourt; the sill of which was seat to a man in a tattery cap and worn green jacket, smoking, and now turning from the glass.

“Davey,” said the excited girl, “Look! He's here! I told you! I just knew I'd narrowed it down to a fault this time! Aren't you impressed? Aren't you pleased?”

“Aye, aye, well.. I'm one o'them. Well done indeed, loveen,” said the man, lurching over slowly and smiling tiredly at the woman. If she had started me, then he startled me: the thick accent and big but
sloping frame gave me no recollection at all.

“Told you!” she said, and catching sight of me: “Oh, I'm sorry! Please forgive. I should've -” She held her hand out again, flushing a little foolishly, and said, “I'm Miss Sally Manders, Mr Hall, as I say, from Penge.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I said weakly, feeling the fount of a headache starting in my forehead.

“And -”

“Davey,” said the fellow, his wince-making hand-shaking at odds with his afterthought, deferential: “Sir.”

“How do you do.” It was accepted, even by he, that this didn't actually require an answer and I continued a bit awkwardly, “Won't you come in? You're friends of Alec's aren't you? I hope you weren't waiting out here too long, I do apologize, I was at a – er – meeting – please -” And I held the door open for the funny couple to troop in.

“Don't apologize!” said Sally. “We were only there an hour or two. We gave you no warning after all and now you're sprung w'us.”

“Not at all,” I said, glad that the old principles of propriety, lain fallow so long, hadn't completely disappeared, as I encouraged the visitors out of their coats and bade them sit at the table. They looked wide-eyed at me, at each other, at the flat, which was a little untidy but retained the remnants of the morning warmth.

“I'll make tea,” I said.

“No!” said Sally, leaping up. “We don't want to be no trouble.”

“Sal, I'm gaspin'!”

“I'll do it,” she said bossily. “Where's the caddy? Ah, I'll get the fire going first.”

“Shift, woman, I'll do that -” And I was all but bowled over by the pair of them as they argued over the errands. I was strongly reminded of the early days, when Alec and I first got together – he would
barely let me tie my own shoe-lace. Dog days are over indeed!

“Please!” I cried. “Do sit down – honestly, I'll see to everything. Goodness! Whoever heard of such a thing. You are *guests*. Alec would have my head on a pike for this thusness.” The hell he would.

Hesitantly, they both got up from their kneeling on the hearth and returned to the kitchen tablecloth.

“Where is Alec, Mr Hall sir?” said Sally.

“Oh he's off with his friends at Wembley,” I said, and glanced at the clock as I filled the kettle. “He went straight after work. He oughtn't be too long now, depending on whether it went into extra time or what-have-you."

His present friends were agog. “Is – is that right..” said Davey.

I laughed. “Now don't think it's a regular occurrence. He and the rest of his five-aside team had a bit of a windfall in the pools, and decided to spend the winnings entire on going to one of the big qualifiers.”

“Well I'll be.”

“And here we were thinking ye'd be struggling,” said Sally affably.

“Oh we've done our fair share of that,” I said. “Now. The kettle will only be a short while. Oh, did you say before that you were waiting out there for a couple of hours? Have you had any dinner? Where on earth are my manners. Here, let me warm some plates..” In a pot in the larder was the leftovers of a chicken casserole from the day before, exactly two portions remaining; the dumplings would have soaked up even more of the broth overnight and I'd been fantasizing about it all day.

“Oh no – we couldn't possibly..” said Sally, trailing off for no real reason. Well of course I knew the reason.

“Not at all,” I said. “There's plenty left-over here and I've already eaten. Just needs heating up, let me fetch the pan..”

“Oh thanks, the Lord love ya!” said Davey.
Soon the ravenous pair were tucking into the chicken, leeks, mushrooms, creamy sauce and dumplings, their faces all but obliterated by the steam. I sat opposite and smoked, trying to quell the almost audible rumbles in my own tummy and to convince myself to be content with a coffee.

“Is this a retrieval mission?” I asked, blowing smoke away to the side and getting down to brass tacks in an Alec-like fashion.

“A wha’?” said Davey, between slurps.

“Is the game up, I mean. Were you sent here by Clive -?”

“Mr Durham? Oh Gawd no,” said Davey. “Haven't thought on him in months! Wonder how he's faring – the auld bollocks. Wasn't so hale when we last saw him, so he wasn't..”

“Davey, ssh, politeness, now..”

“Sorry, lovey..”

Not so hale? I bit a nail. “Then – this is a – social call? Can I presume that? I'm sorry, it's just I'm thrown a bit. I wasn't expecting, you know..”

You know what Alec and I are, don't you? To one another? Even if he didn't go boasting about us to his friends – as I had done – still surely they must have twigged, given that they had somehow worked out where to find us, and seemed completely unsurprised that I was here, in Alec's home, was Alec's home.

“I know,” said Sally, although I couldn't say to which of my unsaid questions she may have been referring. “I apologize again and again Mr Hall.”

“Please – Maurice.”

“I don't -” she blushed.
“Try it.”

“Alright – Maurice.”

Davey gave a little laugh as he slid a potato round and round the gravy of his plate; he then proceeded to mash it.

I retreated the five feet to the hearth to brew more coffee and with my hands busied, took the opportunity to discreetly appraise.

Sally was barely much more over five feet herself, but all the same had a way of making up for it, not with volume, but with activity and animation. Not entirely unlike the usual occupant of that kitchen chair.

Under her coat and bonnet, which she'd hung up neatly, her hair was piled yet falling in dark strands, here and there stuck to her pitifully powdered face. But her bright blue eyes shone with every spoonful and she used the napkin neatly to protect her blouse and skirt.

Davey, on the other hand, was almost comically contrasting in appearance, yet interesting in his own way; removing his own cap had caused his headful of dark red locks to tumble, they matching his cheeks and lips and painting his green eyes all the more startling. He looked like he's never set foot in a barber's, his eyebrows and sideburns curling, his freckled face clearly recently hewn – likely by the busy hands beside him. Though stooped was his stature, he was, inch for it, taller than I.

Who am I to judge about mis-matched couples? Yet I wasn't judging; I was leaning on the dresser, smoking, digesting and absorbing this new development: is there anything more real and effective on the person than human engagement, meeting, mutability?

They murmured pleased sounds to each other; Davey cheerfully picked up and used the hat-pin Sally had set down to peel a potato. Sally laughed, but sent me an embarrassed smile; I made as if to give a sweeping, generous gesture of the arm to show the sporting, but I knew if I stopped hugging my torso my stomach would gurgle so instead I dropped to my hunkers at the fire.

“I hope – um. I do hope there's not some sort of crisis, back home,” I said. Please God no, tell me you're not here to take him away, by force, or by coerce, or the steel-binding pulleys of Family.

“I hope so too,” said Sally. “Not been back in a while. Taken us that long to find you!”
Me? Me? Or we? I dasen't ask..

Noticing that they were wiping their plates (one of them with their fingers), I said, “Would you like some tea now? Or – something stronger? We have here – beer, or I could pop out to the offy for some whiskey, and I’m not sure what you’d like, Sally – Pimm’s?”

“No – Mr – Maurice! Don’t to go to any concerning.”

“Now, Sally, hear the man out..”

“No! Please don’t go to any trouble!” She was mortified, clattered the plates.

“Please! Allow me!” I was equally thus, something had triggered in my mind and I had the overwhelming urge to ply them with hospitality; not to loosen tongues but to stave off the inevitable reason for their arrival, which could only be -

Coming down the corridor towards the flat; the building was noisy at the best of times but I recognized his step and so turned round to the door before the others -

“Stone me! Had to wait ages for a bus. Robbey touched us up for the fare an’ all, and at me like, ‘Oh, I'll get you back for it’ but I tells him, ‘Leave it out, no fear’ – no fear of him ever stumpin', wot I mean o’ course -”

Alec spun away from me, untangling his long, stripey scarf - “And he – Jesus Christ!!” One could almost say he reeled, such was his astonishment at facing the occupants: Sally slowly rising and Davey still leaning on his elbows on the table.

“What in the fu – What the – Oh Jesus Christ!!” And he flung the scarf ferociously into a corner; it landed with a soft pap.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, NO!!” He roared the last one, stomping around the flat agitatedly and coming to a stop just behind and beside me. He clutched the shoulder and elbow of my left arm so tightly, painfully. “No, it's just not happenin'. Get out of here! Christ I been here foxin' him for months and I'm not having you two come along and ruin it!!” He was throbbing crimson and radiating heat.
“Alec -”

“And spoil eveythin' on me!!” He practically shrieked, teary-eyed and snotty – on the turn of a sixpence!

“Alec,” that was Sally, this time, reeling a bit herself, stood cautiously as one would at a rearing horse; Davey was silent and stunned over his crossed shirt-sleeves.

“Darling..”

He pressed his trembling face into my shoulder for a reviving beat, then shook his head and went up to Sally and said: “Alright – what goes on? What's yer game? I mean – how the hell did ye find us?”

Sally looked relieved at this apparent calm. “Aha! Well, a certain someone wrote your mother a letter.”

I cringed onto the armchair, covering the face.

“When I were over at your shop talking to her, I spied the envelope and made a note of the postmark on it. From that it was just a question of narrowing down where in the borough you'd be likely to live, work, and acclimatise to safely.”

“Well, bully for you -” Alec clearly struggled to come up with an insult he could actually administer to a woman - “Sherlock Holmes.”

“Thanks!” grinned Sally. “Have it here actually – the envelope, kept it on me. See? The letter, well.. Your ma sleeps with it under her pillow.”

Alec looked like he'd been punched in the stomach.

“Not that – I mean, she's grand, Alec, of course a little – er – sad – and, confused but – well, she was coping pretty well when we saw her, wasn't she?” Sally overtalked from nervousness, and her appeal to Davey was shrill; he got up slowly from the table and came over to her. Alec tensed – I tensed!

“Aye, she was bonny enough,” said Davey. “Fair amount of life to her, any rate.”
“Oh aye? Don't tell us you were over there visitin',” said Alec with a hint of a smile. “Nary a welcome you'd get.”

“Nary a one I got, too.”

“Me folks don' like Davey,” Alec snickered to me. “They's forever tryin' to stop us pallin' round. What effect do you suppose that had?”

I smiled faintly,stood,wondered if the ice was sufficiently melted so that I could relax enough to loosen the shoulder muscles.

“I think they've fairly gave up tryin' tae make sense o' the company you're keepin', Alec lad,” said Davey. Alec bristled again and I followed suit.

“A fine one you are to talk about Bad Company, Davey!” said Sally, rounding.

“Aw Jaysus! Like I told you back in Dublin, ye didn't have to follow me!”

“No! It's you that didn't have to go and join them! S'why they're called Volunteers! It's entirely elective!”

“The shite it is! I told ya! The North's began! You know what that means, so you do. Think I'm gonna just bone-idle while the Prods all bolster?”

“Oh God.. And I thought I had you convinced out of it all on the Ferry back.” Sally was almost in tears. Really the whole show was alarming.

“Tsk tsk,” said Alec, who was perversely enjoying this. “Davey, you bad boy. Always trouble. What you been up to, back on the aul sod? Tha' knows it's main dangerous. Sal, you ought to give him a clip round the ear.”

Now Davey rounded – everyone was rounding all over the place – and Alec jumped.

“Oh! Aye!” said Davey, “A clip, is it?! By God I ought ta put you over me knee and give you a bare-arse bollocking! You want to talk on trouble, and endangering others?” He loomed shadowy over Alec, who looked positively waif-like in comparison. I shimmered nearer, although it was
clearly a two-man confrontation.

“This fucking carry-on o’ yours!” Davey sounded like an enraged house-master. Apart from the swearing. “I could tolerate you tartin’ round here and there, s’long as you were careful, and didn’t go lettin’ on. But to go and take up rightly with a fella! And not just anyone – a fucking grammar!!” Here he slashed a finger at me like a rapier, as if there was any doubt as to whom he was referring.

“Jaysus Christ Alec, I knew you were an eejit but I never took ye for a bloody fool.” He sucked in more air. “Don’t ye realize – are ye blind?! Yer man -” Me again - “Will get thrown into the nuthouse, and you’ll get tossed off the end of the rope, and the pair of you’se will end up in – well...”

Seething and breathing, he stood there, red faced, red everything, unable to continue; or perhaps he’d said his piece. Certainly he’d gotten the crux across.

And it wouldn’t go unanswered. “Oooooo, I knewed you'd be like this!” shouted Alec in return, although he took a step or two back towards me even as he defended his corner. “Always was the case – you pushin' me round, barely lettin’ me get a word in – you're just mad ’cause I stolen a march on you – that's all! You wanted to run off wi' Sal and you were too chicken-shit to go for it! Tha' just can't understand how I'd do it first, do summat I want to do off me own bat for once, not me parents', nor Fred's, nor yours!”

“Is that right,” said Davey, cracking a knuckle.

“Yes, it's right!!” Alec actually stamped a foot! “I don't give a shit whether you approve or not. I love him -” And here he reached behind him without turning or looking and grabbed an indiscriminate handful of my shirt - “And I will be damned a'fore I let you stick in your oar!!”

And then he was whirling, racing – rounding, of course – wrenching and running down the stairs, with Sally scrambling in his wake.

A ringing silence ensued, for our neighbours, themselves so usually engaged in Domestics, were silent, likely listening; in fact no doubt poking their heads out of their flat doors to rubberneck at Alec rushing by.

Davey stood with his back to me and hands on hips – heaving and starring at the doorway.
I shuffled. Ought I throw a punch? He had upset Alec, and fairly insulted us. On the other hand, if one rummaged around in the debris of their argument, there seemed to be some genuine care there. And more pragmatically, he looked stronger than me and likely wouldn't think twice about tossing me out the window.

“Ah, to feck with this,” he growled, throwing his hands up. “I need a drink.” He stomped to the open door and took the handle, turning to glare at me: “Well? You comin’?”

“Oh – er – right, alright,” I said helplessly, taking my coat from the hook and he his and off we went down the stairs and towards the area where I knew the nightlife to be less than refined – it was where the boxing club was. We walked until we came to a pub with the requisite fiddle music pouring over the noise of the riotous crowd and Davey nudged me in: “Find a seat, I'll get 'em in.”

People were dancing, and singing, and back-slapping and ribbing all around; when a fellow was merely talking to another, well, that apparently couldn't be done without the maximum gesticulation either.

Still I managed to feed my way through the rough, cheap material: corduroy and fake velvet and cheap linen and crude canvas and cap after cap, atop red face after red. I found and sat at a small table near the back-door and thought: I shan't speak, I shan't reply, I shan't open my mouth lest I catch no small trouble from this fractious lot! Call it a hunch that I wouldn't be welcomed.

I rather wondered, actually, whether Davey might, Alec-like, bump into people he knew or strike up friendly with people he didn't; I didn't like to take out my pocket-watch to see how long I'd been waiting. I did check it several times within my pocket to make sure it was still there. My wallet too.. Ah, old prejudices we must shuck gradually, one-by-one, eventually. I was growing, still, hadn't grown yet.

After some minutes, however – the music was nice, although it never seemed to end, but keep going round in circles – Davey appeared in the sea, found me, despite my attempting to become one with the wallpaper.

“Here now, get that down you,” he said, setting down a glass of that very black stout in front of me, sitting down and lifting his own: “Your health, sir.”

“And yours.” Though I doubted the medicinal properties of this queer-smelling beverage, I took a sip. Bitter as the cogs, bless you! But somehow very strong and nourishing; it would do as a dinner as I was still starving.
“So, Captain,” he said, smacking his lips. “What's your story?”

Did he want an entertainment? Anecdote? Or some sort of grovelling explanation as to Alec and I?

“You first,” I said strategically.

He laughed a bit. “Aye, I suppose I should tell ye how we ended up on your door-step, is it?”

“If you like.”

“Well,” said he, with the preparatory air of one with a tale to tell and the faculty to foist it, “I'm guessing the trouble all started when the squire got married.”

“Didn't it just,” I said dryly. But I wouldn't properly interrupt. He had me hooked, now, of course he did.

“Things were idlin' along grand at the estate, so they were, and then when the Lady come along – changes. Right? Oh, she's not a bad wee scut. She's no dog, like, and fair – I wouldn't mind a go at her. And she with her title, and Durham with that old pile – they both thought they were marryin' into the future, and in actual they were both wrong – but how and ever.

“Weren't long before Durham seemed to wake up, so to speak, and take a look round and realize, 'Christ but this is some shithole Penge has slipped into' – after ignorin' it for his schoolin' or what-have-you for years and years. I tell ya, I seen it before many's and many's a time at manors I've worked at: there's no bigger dose than a guv'nor who has no ideas but a big mouth voicin' 'em.

“Wi' his lass on his arm – lord-love-her – he and old Simcox got to tidying – the Help, I mean. A groom we had wi'a stoop got the heave – wasn't becoming. Another lass – gorgeous she was, but a bit foreign-looking – she was a char – she got her marching orders too, probably something to do with the new Reverend and his fixation on clean souls and the like."

“Now hold on a moment,” I said. “Now see here! You expect me to believe that Clive would – that employees were let go because of – disfigurements or – an alleged lack of morals? Now, really. It's – just – not – cricket! You're pulling my leg.”

“I amn't!”

“Surely you exaggerate!”

“You're taking it too literal, man! Jaysus! For one thing – fuck cricket! The toffs do whatever the hell
they want because no-one questions it! For another – that feckin’ estate is in a state of disintegration, anyway. All the staff’ll be let go – everyone’ll be gone soon enough, mark ‘em. This is just the start of it.”

“I’d rather not believe that either,” I said glumly.

“I know.” He regarded me thoughtfully. “I kin see why you’d not want to think it. But – if you’ll forgive me – you’ve not worked there – I know, and so do Sal and Alec – why do you think they were both fixing to emigrate?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “Pastures new.”

“Well, they had their little collection of reasons, the pair of them. But as to me – I knew it was only a matter of time before I got the elbow as well – I’m fair regular in me Devotions, but not the type Borenius would advocate! So I knew, time was coming for me to leave myself – no chance I could get the money together to go to America, not a bit of it – and right about that time, last summer – we were hearing all about the ructions over the tram workers back in Dublin.”

“Oh yes,” I said, remembering. “I read about that in the paper. A national strike, was it not? Quite the undertaking. I sent a donation over, do you know – after deducing that it was, being still active, a preventative cause.”

“Keep your voice down!” said Davey, covering his eyes with despair. “Or at least, try and do something about the plummy, lord have mercy..”

“Sorry – sorry.”

“Ah, sure you've no idea. So I'll tell you: I was half hell-bent on going back to Ireland, to join in.”

“You were going to leave your job at Penge, and go join the striking workers in Ireland? But how would that work? When you'd technically be out of a job, how are you on strike?”

All I got was a dark look, which constituted his reply!

“Ah – but – ah – I see, silly me,” I backed desperately. “You hoped to go and bring aid and fund-raising yourself.” - He glared - “Th- that is, of course you wanted to go over and lend moral support, sympathy, numbers on the ground, as it were.”
“Aye, that's it,” said he, warming. “It were the case. I wanted to hear Larkin in person.”

“And of course it would be nice to go home to Dublin for a spell.”

“Home?” he said, icily. “I'm from Galway, if you don't mind.” As if that made any difference.

“Ho! My round. I'll get them in,” I said, downing the last third of my pint and grabbing his glass to the counter for the same again.

Davey was keen to talk, and to be honest, it was nice to listen, with a sense of respectful detachment, to someone else's tribulations for once.

“I were gunnin';” he resumed alarmingly, with the first mouthful of fresh drink, “On heading back, as I say. Only thing keeping me in Wiltshire was Sally, I... She never exactly told me to stay, but every day we talked more and more and the next thing you know we're in it.” It is possible for permanently red cheeks to rosy, just so you know.

“To be honest with you, I got fair distracted – one minute it was Ireland, seemed like, then suddenly it were Sal! All I could think on. And her about to leave! No more than Alec. Well, that was -” he tapped his chin theatrically. “Ho. There was three things that just about broke the camel's.. Put it on me downright clear to clear off, like.”

“Yes? Three? Go on.”

“First out – end of August, Alec up and leaving – well you know about that yourself, when you were knocking about Penge. I knew he was going to the Argentine, and that was awful, but – at least with Fred and all – gobshite that he is – he'd look after him, hopeful. Only for the little prick to skip the boat and disappear like a will o' the wisp!”

He stared at me as if for some explanation. “Like a – what, sorry?” I didn't want to insult.

“Took up and off with you, didn't he!” he said.

“Oh.” I folded my arms over the tabletop; couldn't help it, pleased mightily. It was wonderful to hear about Alec's mad passionate break for me from another – grumbling – but apparently benign source. “That's right. He did indeed. Oh but he was fine – is fine.”
“Well we didn't know that at the time, did we? Left all kinds of chaos in his wake: with his folks, the locals, the Master and the like, Sal and I scrambling round makin' all sorts of fobs and excuses to people while clubbing together to try and work out just where the fecker had gone. Though I had an inkling…” He regarded me.

“Oh? You did? He told you -?”

“Not in s'many words. But he'd been mopin' round the estate, and it wasn't just premature homesickness, no sir, he was up and down, giddy and then serious, clearly caught up in love with someone.

“It was only after it filtered through from the inside servants that you'd done a runner too, Mr Clive's chum, that I put two and two together and got to groanin'! I didn't want to believe it – Sally didn't at first – but was plain as day, perfect sense, especially if you know Alec.”


“Pardon? Oh.. no,” he said quickly. “I mean – it isn't – well, I mean.. It's out o' the every-day bu' ... nothing wrong with it. Say that safe. I tell ya, I've seen folk in some states, Captain. I've seen some shite. So whatever gets you through the night, is alright by me. Sometimes I even wonder ’bou the faith, to be honest with you.. When I get a bit bored in the middle of a Rosary..” He glanced about furtively.

“C'mere to me,” he said, resuming; I leaned closer and he laughed! “The reason I was so aching after Alec ran off with you, Mr Hall, was that I didn't know you from Adam! For all I knew, you were the very divil! You coulda been some bollocks who took a fancy to Alec, had his fun, and then cast him aside like some cheap scrubber! And then Alec all alone with no money or friends and ruined and too 'shamed to come home.. I was tormented so I was!

“With that and Sunday, Sal had to just about bind me to a chair to stop me racing off to Dublin get away from it all and feet-first into something else, to at least try and help where I could..”

I have to say, I warmed towards the fellow considerably; his concern for Alec was adamant and he didn't care to conceal it.

“I see,” I said. “Well that's perfectly understandable. From your viewpoint, Alec had taken off in the
company of an absolute stranger. You had no chance to size me up.”

He nodded.

“Are you sizing me up now?” I said.

“Sure and I am.”

“How am I measuring up?”

“Ah, sure lookit.” He raised it. “You bought us a pint, it's a start.”

“I'll buy you another,” I said, and did, with something akin to great relief.

Further lubricated, he continued with his storytelling. He was rather loud, and musical with it; I wondered if others might be listening.. And alcohol tends to be the enemy of discretion – still! There was no malice.

“Next thing you know – we got the call,” said Davey.

“Oh yes?”

“Aye – it came from home – me brother sent the newspaper and we all pored over it down the back of the 'alfpenny in Osmington – 'bou how the Ulster Prods were laying aside their class differences in the name of the -” he grimaced - “Union, and how the English army isn't nothing to shout about just now so the time was ripe for the pure-hearted, rightfully nationalist Irishmen to gather and break the shackles of our oppressors..”

“Hear, hear! 'Hon ya, boy!” came lots of surrounders, and Davey turned, misty-eyed, to nod at his comrades. I gulped more Guinness in order to look more acclimatizing.

“But what about Sally?” I said, because, bungler that I am, even I could tell that she was the heart of the history.

“Oh, Sal..” He looked even more misty. “Still and all she kept a 'hauld of me, said there weren't no meat in it and it was a fool's errand to go flying over there with the best will in the world and not a penny nor a plan! Of course.. She confessed later that she just didn't want me to go and leave her. Because.. Well, you know yourself..”
“Oh I do indeed.”

“So, not a couple months later came the absolute limit – that letter of yours to Alec's ma.”

I didn't know what to do – pale or redden. Oh those things I'd gushed! Blast that little guttersnipe for sending it! But bless him too – the darling!

“Things had gone a little quiet and dreamy round the Scudder place, but Jaysus I tell ya, that note – sent the village into a tailspin, near about, so it did, because the Mrs can't keep a secret and old Fred was roaring and screaming the place down fit to explode! Sal and me were summoned – me, with the greatest of distaste, mark you, but they knew we were mates – but the pair of us played ignorant.

“Though of course, she's anything but, old Sal – she calmed down old lady Scudder soothing, and snaffled that envelope; I shut down Fred with a friendly fist or two when he practically threatened thumbscrews on me for information! Tried to tell him not to tell Durham, unless he wanted to see Alec marched to the gallows.. I think he saw sense..”

“Good grief.. We – hadn't meant to post those letters, initially.”

“Letters? More'n one?”

“Ah.. You say this was some kind of a turning-point for you?”

“Oh aye.. Well, Alec were away, and by all accounts – well, one account – doing grand, I mean, couldn’t be sure but – it was a dove with the olive branch, you follow? What you wrote. But.. he was really gone, same's if he'd gone to America. And with Sally heading there shortly – her ship was at the shore already – I thought: that's it – I'm away – nothing left for me here, this mouldy old mansion with its endless fixing and shitty wages.

“So I – well, I'm not proud, but – I hopped it midnight for the ferry back home. Left a note for Sal saying good-bye and all – I mean – we couldn't ever hitch up proper anyway, I figured; can you imagine the faces of her family if she landed home with me! And my own – Mam'd kill me if she knew I took up with a Prod, and an English one, to say nothing of the reaction of the other Volunteers!”

He went on: “It – it was – ah.. It was awful, leaving her.. Hell on earth, to be sure..” He scratched a side-burn, then the back of his neck, then laid his face on an arm, while I waited patiently. Fascinating – moving - to see that heart-wrenching in another.
“I love her,” he said tragically, looking up with his green eyes.

“Yes, I surmised as much.”

“I does, and – and she must – me. Because – because, after I left, she wasn’t having any of it – what did she go and do only spurn her journey, kick her emigrating arse-ways, skip the ship and after a bit of burrowing, come after me.”

“I say! She never did.”

“She did, too! Sure as I’m sat here!”

“Well, well. I'll be bound! Nothing new under the sun, what.”

“Nothing like it. Oh she's an absolute cracker, that Sal. Stone lovely – stone. I dunno what to do with her – or what the bejaysus she's doing with me! 'What the fuck do you think you're doing, Davey,' she says. 'Leavin' me so. Don't you know I love you, you great bastard?' - she says to me – right on the side o' Sackville! Well all I could do was pick her up and squeeze her to see was she real or an angel come southly!

“Says I, 'Sal, ye beautiful, ye lovely.. Ye feckin' spanner, ya! What are ye doin', chasing me down when you should be – weeks ago - sailing away over the Atlantic?'... 'Don't want to' says she, and her little arms still around my neck. 'Don't want to go on serving – and I told my mother so – I sold my ticket to the green-grocer's girl in town – I'm not going.' She had decided that and sat and stayed put – so angered and injured that Alec and I were both gone on her.

“So what do her folks do only try and send her away teaching at the school-house with the headmaster who's got his eye on her and always has. No – she wouldn’t do that neither. These Mandereses – they're meithered with Sal, so they are, on account o’ she won't do as she's told and is such a queer one, to be sure.. Well it's they own doing. They done her a great disservice, sending her away to that fancy school when she was only a wee lass.”

“Away to school?” I said in some surprise.

“Aye, when she was just a young'un she was that sharp, and so her folks sent her away to some redbrick boarding-school in the lakes or something.”
“Is that so! Well, my, my..” Do you know, I had thought that I detected some cultured tones attempting to sparkle along her rough dialect, but I had dismissed it as my fancy; after all (rogue thought from Satan!) she was a friend of Alec's.

“What school, do you know?” I chanced he'd know, as she was apparently his pet topic.

“Erm,” and he came up, “St Elmo's I think..” And I had to raise eyebrows.

“Really! Do you know, I believe my sister had a friend who went there. Astonishing.”

“Is it?”

To Davey, perhaps all English schools are one. “Small world, I mean,” I said genially. He looked confused and so I added: “Jolly good for Sally!”

“Good? She hated every last blasted minute of it.”

“Oh..”

“Aye, she had the absolute shit bullied out of her every day.”

I couldn't even 'Oh'. God the Irish lack discretion! To even think of mentioning aloud..

“See,” said he, “She was smart enough to sit her exams and get her fees paid, or – waived or whatever-it-is.”

“Scholarship,” I said, realizing now utterly. Nothing new.

“But she was still a common mucker, way she talked, ways she carried on – the other girleens teased her fair awful, and then cast her out so she spent the whole six years in the freeze. Not a one o’ the cows would talk to her – 'cepting the teachers, and that was only to wallop her hands or box her ears, because she was clever but not as much as they thought she ought be.

“Well is it any wonder! Who could get a fix on their book-learning with their heart broke from the lonely? By Christ if I'd'a been there when I was a lad..” Here he closed his eyes and took in a long calming breath as if to temper a posthumous attack on Sally's tormentors.
“My little lamb,” he said sadly. “When she managed to finish at the school, she was supposed to go to some girls' college, but she botched her exams – sure it would have been more of the same lousy craic anyway – toffee-nosed bitches sneering over her!

“But when she landed back home she didn't fit in there no more neither – her sisters laughed behind her back at her lack around the shop, and she didn't know no-one right in her village no more and they pegged her for an odd sort, alright.

“So her folks tried to send her on some accounting course, up in Manchester with a half-respectable aunt: Sal said no. And then they tried to wrangle her into a post teaching at the school-house – first time they tried it – no, again. Well they were fit to be tied, she says! And I believe! Jaysus can't imagine giving my old pair that kind of cheek!

“You has to do something, her ma said to her, and Sal says yeh and talked her way into a position at Penge, two towns over mind! All off her own steam and she packed her travelling bags, school trunk, caught a cart and was away! Don't you know her parents were scarlet – can you imagine it, their fancy-schooled eldest: in service. Well the shame of it. Family name ruined, so they said, but think she cares?”

“She doesn't?” I said eagerly.

“Well, she does, but only a bit, mind. Oh there's no power like the guilt from a mother and that's the truth of it. Sal was dead right to do what she did though, dead right – Penge might be a right kip but it was the making of her – she got on right grand with all the girls and all the fellows fell in love with her – at least, from my viewpoint.

“It's why it took me so long to make a move on her, why I tried to resist – well. A beautiful, well-bred, well-read lassie like she? And a rough like me? But she don't see things like that – differences. She's different.”

Evidently he had been bursting to sing her praises for simply ages now. I might have done the same, had I been able to get a word in edgewise!

“So as you see,” said Davey, playing with his glass - I motioned to the bar - “When she come to me to – well, to rescue me, she says! - I knew she couldn't stay, I couldn't keep her there in Dublin. Not just because of what the fellows would make of her – and me family! By Christ! - but – she's so refined in her ways.
“And it breaks me heart to say it, but there is no work over there, no way of living. Is it any wonder people are leaving in droves? And even if you make your way back, like me, you find it changed – worsened, no place for you no more.. So Sally, she said, 'Come and we'll go back to England', plans she has, and it was with a heavy heart I agreed, don't mind saying.

“Still,” he said then, perking up – might've been the fresh drinks just set down - ‘Sal, she says, 'Let's go to London, find Alec – I bet you I can find him, track him down in two weeks – just dare me.' So – 'Alright', says I, and were agreeable enough to this, as Alec was someone we knew in London, and at least we'd see he was alright, and he's a cheerful sort of a person to be around. Well, usually he is!"

“Eyyy..” And Davey shook his head and widened his eyes. “Weren't he something back there tonight? “

“Something, yes, though what..” I said.

“I mean,” he emphasized. “He was wonderful. Such a passion he flew into! I've seen him have his grumbles and his sulks, but – that conniption back there at your flat – what fire! I've never seen him stand up to a body so before – surely not me, anyway!”

“Oh, I've heard him squeal louder than that,” I said off-handedly. I blinked: “Oh wait – I don't mean _”

“HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! I'll bet you have guv!”

“I didn't mean in that – capacity!”

“Hoo! Hoo! He! He!” Davey was doubled over, and I was only on blind faith that he wouldn't share the joke with curious onlookers.

“Oh hush-up – will you?”

“Ha-ha.. Oh that's mighty, so it is.. I'm fit to burst..” Rising out of his seat he slapped me on the shoulder hard and turned into the crowd, returning with small glasses – nonetheless liberally splashed with whiskey.
“Cheers!” he said, or some word equal to it; I still smarted over my slip of the tongue regarding poor virtuous Alec, but a snifter is one, so I clinked and drinked.

Little did I realize, until later informed, that this served as a kind of binding contract, to seal us as confirmed bosom buddies! Not that I would have objected, per say, but it would have been nice to have been warned!

Verily the Irish are a curious lot – their strange rituals and customs and papal mumbo jumbo and magic and fairies and the like – they don’t seem to live like the rest of us in the real world. Then again I suppose the real world hasn’t been very kind to them.

As we walked back home though the fine mist, Davey said: “’Tis true, since he left I been just aching to give old Alec a lash o’ the tongue, but.. Think he’ll be still fair bulling for me?”

“Oh you know Alec,” I said, because he certainly seemed to. “If he’s not flying off the handle he’s going round the twist.”

“That’d be right, surely.”

By now we were approaching the boarding-house, and I led the way up the stoop to the front door because it was quicker.

“I’d have some brass neck on me, so I would, pointing the finger at other folk breaking the law,” said Davey, his hands in his pockets.

“Hm?” I said.

In answer he nodded attention to the window at the right of the front door, which had a sign on it: 'NO BLACKS – NO DOGS – NO IRISH'

“Bottom o’ the pile this time,” remarked Davey, “We must have form here.”

“Well I never! Was that sign in the window all this time?” I wondered.

“Likely about eight hundred years.”
“Incredible. Honestly – all this time, I never even noticed it!”

To this Davey took on a not-un-Alec-like look of reproach, as if to say, ’Why would you?’

But he said nothing aloud, which was just as well, because we entered the hall, which was echoey at this time of night, and the stairs always creaked under the newcomer.

“We'll try and be quiet,” I whispered, “If we wake people up it'll cause an absolute storm with Matron – er, that is, M'zelle.”

Five floors up just about did me in: if not for the numbing effect of the booze that kept me trudging I might have slept it off in the downstairs front room.

Awaiting in the flat were things to be dealt with, however. When I rattled in the door, I was greeted with, and by, Alec and Sally sitting on the edge of the bed; he cross-legged with his chin resting on his hands, elbows on knees, and she with her legs stretched out in her long skirt and her arm around Alec's shoulders.

“What-ho,” I said, for defrosting.

“Well,” was Davey's greeting.

Alec smiled wanly and Sally said hopefully: “Hullo, how is it out there? I think you just about missed the rain coming..”

“Barely misting,” I said, taking off my coat, and yet still going over to the window to close it. Davey lingered awkwardly by the table.

“Oh – thanks awfully for seeing to the fire,” I said, examining it; it had clearly been recently rescued.

“Not at all, Mr Hall, we're only back half an hour ourselves.”
“Thanks all the same. I'll put the things to dry.” And I set about draping coats and scarves, the others watching.

“You really think I'm going to hell, Davey?” said Alec softly.

A physical shock went through Davey; his back stiffened and relaxed and he sighed and went over to the bed, sitting close to Alec's other side and putting his arm around him too.

“Arrah no, no, not a bit of it,” he said. “Sure why would the Lord Our Father forge and then flung out his finest?”

Well! Silver-tongued devil. No wonder Wilde was able to talk just about anyone into his bed, and likely did; I'd not have the energy myself.

While I made the tea, for a change, the three murmured assurances and low laughs to each other; it looked like a representation of the bloody Penge Union of Workers getting together to lobby for a pay-rise. I heaped the lovely familiar Liptons.

After some feeble protestations it was decided that Sally would get the bed - “Because tha'rt a woman, gel!” - and by close association, Davey too; when I went out to the landing to pinch some clean sheets from the linen cupboard, Alec followed me.

“Hay,” he said, catching my arm.

“Yes?”

With no immediate reply, he played with the sleeve of my shirt between his fingers.

“I'm starved,” he said then, looking up. “No dinner yet.”

“Oh? I assumed you would have gotten something after the match, on the way back.”

“Nay – I waited deliberate so we could eat together..”
“Is that right.”

A pause. “Alright alright – I were ravenous ready for some tucker but alla' the chippers around the stadium were wedged. H'ain't we got summat in the larder?”

“I gave the rest of the casserole to your friends.”

“Oh.” He tried to look displeased. “Right. Well – what's for our tea?”

I considered. “Cheese sandwiches.”

“Sounds good. And for pudding?”

“Jam sandwiches.”

He squeezed my hand. “I'll do 'em.”

“Just a moment, Alec.”

Hand on the doorknob, he turned expectantly.

“About earlier,” I said. “What you said when you first came in and saw the visitors. About how you had spent months foxing me.”

He fidgeted.

“Well? What's that about?”

“Oo..” He grabbed the handle. “Mebbes I still need pinching. Mebbes I still don't believe in you.” He banged into the flat and I heard through the door: “Mebbes I never will!”

“You better had,” I called, knocking on the wood. “You just better had!”
A half an hour later and we were all ready for bed – not that there were enough of those to go round. Sally was in the bed, by the wall and window, with Davey besides, shielding her from Alec and I, I suppose.

We two were stretched out on various arm-chair cushions and clothes and blankets on the carpet; pillows propped against the chest-of-drawers and our stockinged feet resting pleasantly in front of the hearth. The couch could really only have fitted one man and of course we had to be together so the floor suited fine.

“Thank you ever so, for taking us in and being so nice about it,” came from beyond Davey in the dim curtained moonlight, and I must admit it was very jarring to hear a girl's high tones when one is lying in the dark, drowsing and deliberating over drifting to sleep.

“S’alright, chicken,” said Alec, and I felt him say it too: I was lying on my back, while he was on his side curled against me with his face and right arm on my chest. “You can pay us back when you has boatloads of money made from your business adventure.”

“Oh, she told you about that, did she?” came the amused, gravelly brogue.

“Now, Davey, don’t you start with the smartness!”

“You're in business, Sally?” I said. “Isn't that jolly! What's your line?”

“Horticultural, Mr Hall.. I want to grow and sell flowers and – and that.” Sally kept her dignity, despite the fact that the bed was rocking with laughter. So was the heap on my chest.

“Is that right! Extraordinary. I can definitely see the merit in that – here in London,” I said. She sat up – or at least, the darkness moved in a little human-shape above and to the right of us.

“You – can?”

“Certainly, yes. That is to say: middle of the urban frame – not a lot of plant-life to be had. Gap in the
“...In the market,” she echoed, wonderingly.

“Sal, you do know that all them flower-sellers are on the game, don’t you?” Alec, displaying his usual tact and conversational decorum.

“What!! You young pup you! Why – you take that back!”

“It's true! Here I am only tryin' to give thee fair warnin'. I know 'cos I – well, I did go and buy flowers from one o’ them lasses -’” He turned to me quickly - “Nowt untoward – and – anyroad this were a year ago or two or three -”

“I'm unshockable at this stage, darling,” I said wanly, folding my arm over my eyes.

“Well, so I gets some flowers off this bird, and – y'know, on account o' what I been told – I asked her for – y'know -”

“What?” said Sally.

“A little something for the weekend!!” said Alec triumphantly, adding: “And what does she do only she went and decked me one! Now, what's that prove?"

“Just shows that not only can Alec not give it away, he can't even pay for it! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” said Sally – yes, Sally. Perhaps I do retain shockable!

“Nay – you prat, Sally! It just proves she were pissed I were blowin' her cover – I suppose I did speak pretty loud.”

“You? Never,” said I, tugging him to me to try and get him to mellow; the other two heaving with laughter. Getting our own back, I suppose, on the neighbours and their endless string of all-hours poor relations.

It was cramped and yet quite cozy.. I was exhausted, yet it was nice to lazily listen to the talking. Rather reminded me of the dormitory at school, or being at an away match with the rugger, or going with the chaps from college to the chalet in the mountains... In the spirit of bonhomie I decided to
voice this thought.

“I say.. Isn't this companionable. Do you know what it puts me in mind of?”

“Borstal?” said Davey.

I lapsed.

Another break, during which the rain battered the window and the fire gave the odd jog.

“'Ey,” said Sally. “My ma would stone kill me if she could see what I'm at now. Holed up in a room in t'East End, with three fellows, none of whom I'm married to? Stone kill me.”

“Probably be more scandlin' to her if you were married,” said Alec, non-reassuringly. Sally sighed, and there was the sound of material shifting and the mattress reacting, nesting.

“Ah, don't be worrying, Sal. Not a thing wrong you're doing,” said Davey lowly.

“Mebbes, but Sal has a point,” said Alec. “Hands up anyone who wouldn't mind their mother seein' what they're doin', right here, right now.”

The several feet of dark air above our beds remained undisturbed. Then, a laugh – and another. A tentative, guilty, helpless smattering over the droplets of rain pouring outside.

Chapter End Notes

Fan-art of this chapter to be found here
The Unpresumptuous Insect

So small, and compact, and cramful was our flat, that the idea of having a spare room, or as Alec riffed, a 'guest suite' was so superfluous as to be ludicrous. From our tenure at Rain Lane, the tiny room to the right of the stove we had hitherto used more or less as a storage space, or as Alec cracked, the 'junk room'.

I suppose we – certainly I – never envisioned us ever entertaining guests! Yet who even dares to wonder about the future these days, when really it seems like anything could happen – however fantastical. Sometimes I reach out and touch him – just to make Sure.

At any rate, thus, over the course of several evenings, while the visitors were out beating the streets, the two of us made fair headway in clearing out the extra room, ridding it of broken furniture, old curtains and drapery, lampshades, spotty mirrors, old bottles (Not ours! Cheap cider!), rusty tools, a mangle that Alec brought down to the laundry for communal use, and a birdcage which he gave to a little girl in the building who had no bird. But a cage was a good start.

After some labouring, the floor was almost clear and the bed visible; we threw the blankets aside for washing and tossed the mattress a few times, to extract some of the dust. With my elbow folded over my coughing mouth I groped for the latch and opened the window; Alec lay on the bed to test it.

“Grand comfy. And see – listen! Mattress springs don't squeak – yet ha-ha! Oh – 'ey-up, what's this..”

For between the bed and the wall beside, he pushed down his hand and extracted a large, cheap-looking painting – the back of which looked to me like chipboard. Alec said You and Your Nonsense – it's the art-part what's for marking.

It depicted a mawkish scene of a little golden child crying against a wall, all petulance and unrepentance – while a dog to her right appeared, rather preposterously, to be pleading on her behalf.

Hideous. Alec was very taken – typically. Hard to describe which of the characters he related to more.
“Ent it beautiful!” He held it in the light of the dirty window.

“Looks like a pat reproduction you'd see in a cheap hotel,” I said.

“How many cheap hotels you been to?” said Alec.

“Only the one,” I said. “You?”

“Ahem. As I say. Anyroad. Where shall us hang it? Beside the window? It'll add a bit of interest, if nowt else. Here – fetch us a stool. And nails. And a hammer. And the spirit level.”

“Hadn't we better set a fire,” I prioritized, “and see that it will actually pull?” Because we were so near the top of the building, one small advantage was that the chimney flume was mercifully short and I hadn't to use too many lengths of brush-handle to clear it out. At that state (and in truth, at this), I still lacked confidence in my house-minding abilities and continued to defer to Alec for assurance. He was quick always to assure and encourage, to play the part of supervisor!

“Ah,” he said now, hopping down off the bed. “Well said, that man. It'll has to be cozy – do Davey a service. Do you know the one major difficulty when tryin' to get your leg over wi'a girl?”

“Amazingly, I don't.”

“Well,” he said, tossing a matey arm around my shoulders. “Here it is – and heat's the hurdle. Or lack there-by, I meantsay. The cold: that's it principally. You could be makin' great headway, fair slappin' on the sweet-talk and her gigglin' fit to bust and complyin' to de-knickerin' – when suddenly, it's all – 'Ooo! Alec, wait, it's so cold!!’”

“...What's cold?” I was forced to ask.

“The room! The place you're in! She notices all of a hop when you think you had her spun crazy on you! I'd never notice the temperature, like, when I'm in the middle of gettin' down to the business. But wi'lasses...You'd think that she oughter be eager to get to it, y'know, warm up, but.. I mean it's a fix you're in, when the cold makes her tits go nice and pointy but she won't let you anywhere near'em – or anything – till she's cookin'... Then still might take an absolute age to get her off.”
“An age? Days, weeks, months..?”

“Could be an hour of hard work!” He nudged me. “Actually. There's one o' the reasons Argentina originally appealed to me – supposed to be nice and hot, there's half the work done for you!

“Whereas in England,” he sighed, “The gels is right fine but not always ready. Cain't hardly blame 'em, this rainy old island. So, you has to prepare, make it a bit more warm and homey, like.. Fair effort, it is, though.. God but it's worth it.. Sends a girl right moony and eager..

“Now, wi'fellas, that's another story. Shower o'tarts. They usually want to go at it so quick and fast that they'd not notice if the barn were full o'cows or summat, much less what degrees centigrade it is! Lads – wi'them you don't have to bother so much.”

“I see,” I said. “Very informative. But – hang on a moment. I say. When you waited for me at the boathouse -” - Alec melted into a fond smile at the very word - “- you had built up a fire, and bundled up blankets and cushions and that.”

“Oh well,” he said. “That were different.”

“Why were it?”

“Oh – come on.”

“Why??”

“You going to make me say it..”

“What?!”

Alec went for the door, but then turned, put a hand on my shoulder, and whispered quickly: “You're pretty like a girl!” And he whisked around and scarpered, as well he might. I suppose coming from him it could be interpreted as a compliment!

Despite this daily daftness – or perhaps encouraged by it – our guests were soon settled in the spare room and happy to be staying – eternally grateful, they said daily, until Alec told them to knock off the crawling, it was getting creepy. A row might then ensue, which he would embrace freely.
For example, early in their stay, Sally came and tried to give us money, for 'rent', and Alec acted so insulted you would think that she had called his mother every name under the sun.

“You're guests, you idiots! Friends! I never see such a pair of wallies!!” said Alec, a little confusingly.

“We aren't guests, we're lodgers – if you'll have us of course,” said Sally.

“Of course, of course,” I assured her. I felt it kinder to allow them to put a little in the mantel-cup, because it meant they could feel less indebted to us, and could treat the place as their own – I had keys cut for the pair of them, and used the money Sally scraped towards the food bill.

In the long-run, of course, Sally waxed lyrical about their own place, and I knew, determined little thing, she would make it so; she was just as eager to get Davey all to herself as I was generally with Alec. Although funny, the newcomers weren't an infringement, even in such close quarters; somehow, we were making it work, the two couples.

On more or less alternate evenings, Alec and I went out, and let Sally and Davey have the flat for some 'romance'; the following day they'd go out in order to give some 'privacy' to Alec and I.

Consequently all love-making tended to happen in the evening, and if there was less spontaneity, well, the trade-off was that one was – or maybe even four were – all the more excited and feverish waiting for and straining towards their spot in the schedule. Afterwards the grateful post-coital lovers would cook the communal dinner.

Sometimes we all went out together if we were of a mind; no arguments, just laughing joviality and camaraderie; possibly because we were all four of us in the ridiculous, infatuated throes of young love – and weren't supposed to be, socially speaking – but we just didn't listen to the Social Speaker.

Someone else did enough speaking for all of us. For as you can imagine, Alec was beside himself with joy, now that he was once again, to a degree, in the bosom of a kind of a family, with his mates about him and – well, me, I hope. Even though he teased us all mercilessly, real conflict was rare and a sense of comfortable companionship was to be found generally in the air.

Certainly, and to my perplexity, Sally and Davey accepted Alec and I as a couple as easily as we did they; one could argue that they had no choice, Alec was so obvious about it all. When I collapsed
gratefully onto the bed after work, he snuggled up beside me; when we all sat down to tea he pulled his chair close and stole pieces off my plate; laughed loudly at all my jokes, kissed me hello and good-bye, talked constantly to and about me – all of which in the guests’ bemused presence.

“Isn’t he gorgeous! Isn't he lovely!” Alec would boast.

“Yeh.. Yeh..” said Davey, slumped low in his weary chair; head turning to me: “You're lovely.” Back to Alec: “But could you pipe down for five minutes, Alec? I been listening to a buzz-saw all day at work and to be honest your voice is ten times worse.”

“Sally,” Alec might inevitably say then, “Look! For Maurice. Wouldn't you have made a play for him too, in my shoes? Done exactly as I?”

“Oh yes!” smiled Sally. “Were I you, and my life a thousand times over, I'd do it a thousand times again! Only – well, I'm reading a book just now, sweetheart..”

“I'm just so proud,” Alec wailed, “He's so lovely!!”

“Good God Almighty, Licky! Belt-up!” roared Davey. I was relieved someone around could say it!

At first I thought all of this demonstrative affection was a deliberate act of defence and defiance: perhaps he was daring the others to decry our relationship and thus, over-compensating our devotion.

But as Sally and Davey reacted so benignly, and took Us as read, I realized that Alec's behaviour wasn't an act of war but active warming: how often before had he complained bitterly that he loved me so, and was so proud of me, and he resented hugely not being able or allowed to show it – show me – to the world? Forever will the adolescent show-off live on in him, and I hope so.

For he was so jubilant at finally being able to acknowledge his lover to affable receptors – friends even, people significant to his life and past – thus were our two poor arrivals stuck with providing all of his validation. Not that they minded.

“Ah,” might Sally say, when Alec and I came up from the wash-room together, red-faced and sweaty – perhaps unable to wait for the next evening. “Canoodling.”

“Ha!” would remark Davey from behind one of his alarming foreign newspapers.
After so long with only each other, it might seem as if one – alright, I – would resent the intrusion of our visitors. By and large, however, I appreciated the homely atmosphere of more people around, loud as they were – and at any rate, the more people in the world who love Alec the better, as far as I'm concerned. The stronger and warmer the cocoon of human protection around him – the more right and balanced the universe.

One Saturday morning, I breakfasted in the casuals while Alec stood at the mirror fixed to the sitting-room wall, folding and messing with his lapels – he was back in the Burberry and looking wonderful. Saturday mornings usually meant a half-day's worth of deliveries – and I usually went with him for company, and it was more of a jolly game between us than work – Robbey notwithstanding – but on this day Alec had an important meeting – or a kind of series of them.

His manager, the redoubtable Mr Barker, had ordered Mr Scudder to meet other reps from several other catering companies in the area, and take them on a dummy-run of his delivery route, in order to show off the Nangle-Tea routine, customer base, professionalism of the workforce – and in essence, their suitability to do business with. So no pressure, Licky!

On the other side of the wall, voices rose and fell musically. Alec came and tapped my arm.

"Hay," he said. "Let's give 'em some privacy, eh? Bloody place feels like it's made of cardboard."

When I and my toast followed him out to the landing he added: "They's just saying their good-byes before Davey heads to work. Old Sal, she's a bit poorly..."

"Oh dear. Is she? Exhaustion, I should think," I said. Sally had found work as a restaurant kitchen porter, and confided that although the work was much harder and heavier than that at Penge, at the very least she could 'leave the blasted place at some stage'.

"Oh no," said Alec. "Not that. She's – you know."

"What? You always say, 'You know' – when you know I never know! I don't know anything! Assume I don't."

"Well she's – you know! Don't make us say it."

"Ah," I said in amazement, and gravely: "She's pregnant?"

"What! No – not that. Just the opposite, in fact."
“Oh no,” I said, covering my mouth. “She's lost the baby.”

“What baby? No baby. She's on the – ah – she's got the monthly misery.”

Like a deflating balloon, I ran out of inspiration, could think of absolutely nothing to say. Except: “Ah.”

“Yeh,” said Alec casually, pocketing his hands. “It fair puts her through the rigours; she'll be up and down to the loo like a squirrel in a tree.”

“You seem to know all about it,” I said drily. “And here half a minute ago you were all hedging, ‘Oh, don't make us say it!’”

“I were only dancin' around because I dunno what you know! You've sisters and that, but I hardly think your Kitty and Ada are gonna be invitin' you into their confidences there – they bein' gentlewomen and what.”

“Then I'm to suppose your sisters told you all about it?” I said good-naturedly.

“Nay – not in so many words. More like, hurlin' books at my head and roarin' at me to get out and quit buggin' them, and what'd you know, you little pest.

“Not that I'd a clue what I'd done, what were goin' on, till later, when I were goin' with a girl from school, and one day, few weeks in, I made to give her a squeeze and she near broke me arm, and said NO, and she told me exactly why no, and she weren't too demure and very descriptive, like.

“And I take it all on the chin – so to speak – I'm all, 'Judy, now, nowt wrong wi'any o' that, far as I can make out, that don't bother me none, looka me, I'm a butcher and a huntsman, I'm well used to blood.”

“I'm eating strawberry jam, Alec.”

“But she wouldn't be moved, just then, said wait, so I went round to hers after five to seven days, and her Da told me to hop it! Thinkin' on it now, mighta been her way of breakin' up wi'us.”
As he spoke, he held out his arm to me; his (or my – our) long Norfolk coat was draped over his elbow and I took it, shook it and held it up for him to slide into.

Expertly buttoning it, and smoothing the lapels, he looked up at me, smiling nervously; Davey came out of the flat door just then, pointed loutishly at Alec and said: “Ha – fuckin’ HACK!!”

“Shurrup,” growled Alec, reddening.

“Off to flog some insurance, is it?” Davey pulled the brim of Alec’s bowler hat down over his eyes. “Your cab’s outside, by the way, saw it out the window; if it’s waitin’ out here you’re doin’.”

“Oh God!” Alec looked at me fearfully. I had suggested he get a cab to the Tea Depot so as to keep his outfit clean and appear elegant and organized and well-to-do; money begets money, however you slice it. I had also insisted on him taking extra cash from our kitty, should the meeting go successfully and run over into a liquid lunch, and he would have to treat his whiskey business friends, a prospect which terrified him.

“Good luck darling,” I told him, holding his face in both hands. He took a breath and held out his own hand – I took it, and he shook it. “Wonderful!” I said. “Firm and warm. I trust you now implicitly.”

“You already do,” he grumbled, and he took the briefcase I handed him.

“What’s on ya? Sure you’ll be grand,” said Davey breezily.

“Come wi’mee.” Alec seized his arm. “In the cab – lemme give you a lift to the factory.” Davey worked now in a warehouse assembling furniture, the frames of sofas, sort of thing – hours were long and splinters were many but still, he claimed he was happy to be around timber.

“What – no, no, you're grand Alec. I can make me way.”

“Oh come on – you sure? All that public transport can be right confusin’ – you wouldn’t want to get lost,” said Alec, who had caught the wrong bus (as it were), on no less than twenty-five different occasions since we’d moved to London, once managing to traverse all the way to Windsor – he sent me a reverse-charge telegram at work pleading for rescue; I wouldn’t mind so much only he pissed and moaned for a good two wordy paragraphs!

“Go on – come wi’us. I’m nervous – come in the cab a bit along the way and say nice things about
“You're an eejit,” laughed Davey.

“Nicer than that!” said Alec, and the two clattered down the stairs, calling up their good-byes.

I went back to the kitchen and the breakfast things that needed cleaning; I glanced at the spare room door and dithered. Ought I go and see Sally or would she see it as an intrusion? Would she be sleeping? Or terribly embarrassed.

As I always did when confronting social dilemmas (which wasn't always the wisest course, but at least something happened), I did what I imagined Alec would do.

I knocked on the door and waited; a soft 'Come in' came out.

“Hallo,” I said, coming in and stopping by her bed – the room was so small that there wasn't muchwhere else to stop. “How's the patient?”

From her bed-sitting in the bundled up blankets she gave me a pained smile, through whether from my cheesy manner or actual pain I do not know.

“I'm fine, thank you. Sorry to clutter up the place like this..” She combed her hair back under her night-cap with her fingers and pulled her cardigan more to; the piles of blankets further masked the mysteries of her malady. “Really I am. I'm sure you have things to do and I'm in the way..”

“And you tucked away back here? Not at all! This is your home now, and you should be comfortable as possible, especially if you're – when you're – I – er – can I get you anything? Tea! I'll make tea.”

I stammered most of this, as you can guess, and raced off to fill the kettle, and I brought it back to Sally's room, where she had sat up more in bed with her legs crossed under the blankets and her elbows resting on her knees.

“Might as well brew it here – we'll make the Big Fire in here today, as you might be here most of the
day.” I hung the kettle on the hook and swung it over the flames, which I provoked to roaring and sparkling with the poker. I sat on the bedside chair.

“‘I am a nuisance, I really am most awfully -’” tried Sally again.

“As I say – not at all! I'm glad you're here – not that I'm glad you're – er – er – under the weather!” Looked like I was going to spend all day putting my foot in it, like dancing around a field full of rabbit holes. I added: “Really it's fine. The company rather makes me miss Alec less, when he's out.”

To this she smiled. “You worried on him?”

I sighed. “A tad. Such a capable boy, but he's anxious still.”

“Not to worry – he'll be fine. A born blagger is Alec lad!” Her eyes widened: “I – I mean, regarding – you know – wheeling and dealing, that – not when it comes to matters of the heart. No. There he's loyal as true-blue.” She crossed her fingers.

“True-blue. Well, of course I'm sure he is.”

“I do envy him though,” said Sally, drifting her gaze to the window and the blue sky. “Getting out and about like he is.. Davey too.”

“Don't worry, you'll be back to yourself in no time,” I said, which was a stupid thing for any man to say to a woman in such circumstances. But dash-it, one has to fill the gaps between conversational sleepers someway!

“And back down in the restaurant in a twinkling,” I added. This went exactly nowhere in cheering her up, judging by the forlorn expression on her pallid face, so I cast around in my memory banks for something she'd find engaging.

“So, ah – oh! How are your flowers? Your plans coming along,” I said.

At this casual inquiry, she sat straight from drooping and her eyes lit up. “Ooo! Well, I'll show you! Just a sec -” All ailments forgotten, or subsided, or battled through, she tossed aside the sheets and dove across the bed to the foot, to rummage in the trunk; she gave no warning so I was a little late in turning towards the corner!
“I were doing it up right careful in – Hay! Why are you staring at the door, you daft baggage? I've got layers and layers of clothes on. Here – look at this.”

I was obliged to swivel my chair back around. It's rather difficult with women; one cannot be too familiar and forward and yet it's rather aloof to be formal!

Yet all of the social observances and antiquated old rituals seem to have gone the way of the dodo lately; Alec saw to that. Certainly Sally gave no thought whatsoever to our one-time initial differences in rank as she crawled back up the bed, tugged the blanket back over her knees and held out to me a notebook.

I opened it up. “Oh my word. Oh, very nice.” For the pages were covered in sketches in pencil of all kinds of different flowers, but instead of the detailed, scientific, physically-correct drawings you see in books and botanical journals (I'm sure you read as many as I), these pictures were of vases of flowers, and bunches tied with ribbon and some crawling with kittens; sitting on crude window-sills or being clutched by bonneted, big-skirted women.

Girls and their little amusements! Of course my sisters used to get up to that sort of thing all the time; the evidence pinned or pasted up on the drawing-room walls or in sketch-books. No doubt I either sneered at or completely ignored their efforts. Maybe one day I shall feel a pleasant pulse of warm longing for my family without feeling the spike of guilt also – I'm working on it. Alec's working on me.

Sally clutched her knees and watched me closely, clearly vying for more of a reaction.

“Very – very artistically – erm – sound,” I said. “Pretty. You ought to pin them up. In the sitting-room, if you like.”

“Never mind that.” Impatiently she waved a hand. “What do you think to the variety, the arrangements, the types together I'm hoping to flog? See the roses here wi'the violets – good for a weddin' – maybe?”

“You make it sound more like a business plan. Wait -” I waved the notebook in the air - “Don't tell me this is your business plan? And – please don't tell me you've approached a credit manager at a bank with this!”
“Do you mind?” she grumbled, taking back the notebook and smoothing it over the counterpane. “And what would I be going near a bank for?”

“For a loan of course,” I said, “Unless you already have means towards independent capital?”

“I don’t,” she said sulkily, “As you may well guess. And I am serious. I got all these ideas.. I'm sure I could make a real go of it, proper job, if only I could make it over the.. Get started..”

“Well,” I said, tapping her book, “You have the right idea to begin with – focussing on a target audience. A variety of audiences, come to that – even better!”

I read some of her captions. “Weddings.. The Races.. Birthdays.. Débutante Balls.. Length of the Season..' You've really done your research. All of these events – why, there's to be found your customer base.”

“It is?” she wide-eyed.

“Indeed it is.” I'm surely no flower-expert, but business is a very basic matter of supply and demand. First, the brave-hearted capitalist (though the heart will usually fall by the wayside in pursuit of success) will find the demand, or so failing, create one; then he, or, as in the case, she, will establish themself as chief of the Supply and feast upon the financial harvest.

Rather like Alec ought to be doing, right now, although with his winsome bright eyes and wicked banter I wondered how much honest headway he'd be making! Perhaps it would be one of those 'business lunches' where accomplishment would be measured in windows smashed, alcohol consumption and subsequent liver damage – he'd be right at home in that case. We shall see.

Sally, on the other hand, was likely to find venturing even more difficult than Alec; being a girl she was even more dewey-eyed than he. At least Alec could play the braggart and blow smoke in he face of the Men with the Money – Sally hadn't that Old-Boys'-Club option, and so she was going to have to rely all the more on preparation and cunning.

Which I'm not really sure I have much of to offer. As I say, I'm no botanist, or even someone who has bought flowers much (or ever?) but she looked so hopeful so I hedged: “Now I'm no entrepreneur. But I have met a good many of them, more than you can shake a stick at – looking to sink their money or have it sank into. To varying degrees of success.”

“Then – concentrate on the ones who had a higher degree. A first degree. Try and remember.”

“Alright. Well, I suppose reason would dictate that one start by conducting your market research,
which you've already made some headway upon.” Again I indicated her book. “You have surmised from your own experience and interpretation of the cultural imagination – songs, stories, novels, paintings and so on – that flowers are associated with big occasions, celebratory affairs – your weddings and parties and suchlike.

“But you'll have to get out there and record some real, brass-tacks statistics – find out what flowers people buy and exactly when, what time of year is that kind popular, is it in season – are they hard to come by, expensive, imported, are they taxed, what'll be your mark-up, what suppliers will you use? Which suppliers are in competition with each other? Will you do discounts for loyal customers, big-name events, bulk orders or charity cases? Will you arrange the bunches -”

“Bouquets!!” Sally cut in.

“Bouquets, thank you – to order, or have them pre-made to a range of standardized models, so that you can tally the prices, actual labour, and delivery costs better? How will you deliver? Essentially, Sally, you'll have to take the romanticism out of the thing entirely – though they be flowers. At least, until the advertising stage, during which you will want to put on a front both efficient and alluring – the rum thing is that people think beauty can be bought and well – if they do – sell it.”

Sally was sat-up, frozen on her bed; I coughed and uncrossed my legs and crossed them opposite again.

“See,” she pointed at me - “See that's what I been lacking! I can see the end but I need to know all of that – common sense. How'd you know it all? Did you do it in school?”

“Common sense?” I said, annoyed – was she mocking me? Maybe I'm paranoid but people tend to. “We learned just about everything besides.”

“I know just exactly what you mean,” she said, in the same disconcerting toffee-voice she used sometimes.

“I was merely spouting general business acumen,” I said helplessly.

“Well it sounded jolly convincing to me. Where's a pen?” She flipped the pages of her flower-book.

“Here you are..”
“Can you repeat all that?” she said. “What you just told me?”

“No. Can't remember.” But of course I could. I've written it here for you, haven't I? Although of course these memoirs *entire* are reliant upon my bumbling recollections, and of *course* through the hue of my primary personal concerns: a hurricane might have swept across London, but if it happened on a morning when Alec gave me a particularly transcendent half-smile, then I'm more likely to wax lyrical ballads for pages on the beauty of his features as the outside world crashes insignificantly all around!

I managed to recount most of my waffling again for Sally; she scribbled away while I made the tea. Teaching was not something I felt I had a particular vocation for; I used to do the odd bit on a voluntary basis but it had never been with such an enthusiastic student, nor indeed, one I considered to be a real person, who wanted very much to learn and apply that learning to the development of real skills for a specific outcome – miles away from the ideology of my own airy-fairy hallowed halls!

“Market research..” she muttered, and took up the teacup with one hand, no saucer, to slurp. I drifted over to the window and leaned on my folded elbows, gazing at the city-scape.

“Outgoings. So, that's – buying the flowers in?” She looked up.

I lit a smoke, and stayed by the window, sitting up on the sill and tapping ash out into the atmosphere.

“Anything you'll be spending money on,” I said. “Will you be doing all the labour yourself?”

“Yes,” she said resolutely.

“No need for payroll then,” I smiled. “Very astute.”

“I'm going to start small – to begin with, at least until I know what I'm doing – what to do. Goodness! Do you know, I'm not even certain..” She shuffled through her notes. “That's to say – 'What are the selling hot-spots' – 'What suppliers' – 'Whither ought I advertise' – I see these important considerations you taught me, but – how do I go about finding out the actual answers?”

This was such an intelligent question that naturally I was stumped.

Now, hasn't *that* taken the wind out of your high-and-mighty sails, Master Maurice. I suppose if this
were a real classroom and she an inquiring student, I'd be handing out lines and detentions for disruption! As it was, she looked at me with such simple, innocuous trust that I felt a perhaps not un-parental obligation towards her, and I forced my mind to think imaginatively.

“Well now. Naturally, you'd – ah, of course, it would follow that you would ask people who are already in the business – those whose footsteps you intend to follow.”

“Like who?” said Sally. Really!!

“Like – the flower-sellers you are yourself aware of and have seen. All sorts – the ones with premises, ads in he periodicals, and out on the streets and at markets, sort of a way.”

“Yes.. yes of course, that makes perfect sense,” she said. She frowned. “But how do I do that – just go up and talk to them? What should I say? What if there's a group of them, and I bungle?”

I stared: was she serious? How could be at once so jolly and talkative, and yet so frightfully awkward?

Then I remembered: six long years in Coventry. Unthinkable.

And yet here she was, still hiking away at life, striving ever upward. Besides, look at me; it wasn't far beyond today or yesterday that I was a bag of nerves myself, and was such until Alec found me, and stopped me, and said 'Hold out your hands', and he dug into his pockets and piled onto my palms fistfuls and heaps of his own confidence, and love, and affection, and strength and hope, so much spilling over like gumdrops, like gobstoppers, suddenly I was engulfed in the stuff, laughing, all from his own store of kindness.

So much so that I was now in the amazing, privileged humanistic position of having ample altruism to give away, back out into the world. When you are given such kindness, you hug it tightly to your chest alright, but then you must offer it round eagerly, pass it on; you're summoned to spread.

Sally wanted nuts-and-bolts advice, that much was clear: some solid direction. So I leaned my elbow on my knee and chin in hand: “Indeed, just go up and talk to them – they're sellers, customer interaction is part of their line! If I were in your shoes, I should approach the flower girls at the market, compliment their stock, buy some flowers to show sincere interest – and that you have a bit of coin – and tell them you are interested in the industry and offer coffee and ask them – well, whatever questions are on that list. Maybe not all of them at once..”

“You mean – just like that?” She was aghast. “Won't that be terribly forward – and cheeky – like as
if I'm elbowing me way onto their turf?"

“Do you mean that they might get shirty at your temerity?” I laughed, not unkindly, but to try and reassure her. “Now don’t take this the wrong way, my dear, but they’ll not see you as a threat, when you’re only starting out green. Likely they’ll be flattered, and keen to talk about a common interest — after all their business is a facet of their lives and people love to talk about themselves.”

Perhaps I was very optimistically — and ridiculously — projecting my starry-eyed vision of Alec onto everyone; still and all, the longer I was with him, the more likely I was to automatically assume the best about people. He had stripped me of my cynicism.

Sally retained a measure, but was open-minded too. “Makes sense when you say it — but then everything does. And of course it is a course of action..”

“You’ll find your niche. Pass me your cup?” I poured more tea.

I moved back to the bed-chair and told her more things about overheads, book-balancing, tax credits, trade licences, capital investment, stock values — of course that was jumping the gun a fair bit — possibly into the mad realms of fantasy — but she kept asking, so I kept answering. For all it was worth to her — at least it piqued her enthusiasm!

“Yes — of course — that stands to reason — wonderful!” she said, when I explained that although flowers are a tricky industry due to the merchandise being perishable (even more so than food — would they last a week? Mind you the boxing ones hung around for ages before they began to ferment); on the other happier hand, as a commercial enterprise they are fairly low-risk because they are already such a beloved, familiar product and — for whatever reason — are always in demand.

“It's thus merely a question of establishing yourself and your brand as recognizable and reputable.” I stirred yet more tea.

“Right!” said she, and looked so pleased that I felt bad saying what I all the same felt I must do: “Now, please — I beg of you — take all of this with a pinch of salt. A dollop! And I feel as though I ought to tell you — that from my experience, what I’ve seen, success in the entrepreneurial arena is almost never immediate — takes a fair long slog of dedication and work and sinking in all your resources — and at first, you'll likely, well, not fail, exactly, because it's all a meandering learning curve, but unfortunately you ought to prepare for the possibility of not turning a profit at all for a year or two.”

Thoughtfully she nodded.
“That's not to rain on your parade,” I hoped to emphasize. “But just to prepare for that. There'll be no wage. You'll have to manage your income yourself.”

“Oh yes – I understand. It's jarring, but of course I ought to consider it if it's true. Thank you so very much, Mr Maurice! Ha! Feels like I've not learned so much or paid s'much attention since school. Though I was awful at lessons! Only I subject I made any effort in was drawing..” She flipped the pages.

“There's a secondary career for you to consider,” I posited.

“Oh dear, me, no! Gracious I'd not be nearly good enough – ha-ha-ha – ah – owwww...” Alarmingly she moaned, and leaned right forward on the bed, crossed her arms around her middle and bowed her head.

I jumped to standing and employed every iota of good will and maturity and fortitude to stay bedside and not race out the door.

“What is it?” I asked, wondering what on earth I would do with the answer if she were to reply frankly. “Shall I fetch a doctor?”

“No! No, there's no need, I'm fine, just a twinge every now and then in the -”

I was grateful she was graceful enough to pat only her general tummy area. Still I backed away a little further, banging the wardrobe.


“Oh not at all – thank you.” Slowly she crawled around in the bed, drawing the blankets up high to her chin and said in a small voice, “Would you mind terribly giving me a moment or two? Just to -”

“Oh good God – of course! Where on earth are my manners!” I leaped with great relief to the door. “Why don't I pop out and get you some medicine.” I said this without having any idea what medicine – Andrews?
“Oh no – please, don’t leave! Please, just a minute or two.”

I gave her forty-five, just to be on the safe side, during which I cleaned up the kitchen and living room and prepared lunch, which didn't take long or require much doing as it was but cold chicken and potato salad.

I was just considering checking on Sally (honest!) and thinking that maybe I ought to have called for a doctor just in case, when the guest-room door opened and she appeared, in her thick, over-long nightdress, holding the chamber-pot.

Feeling as though I couldn't possibly comment upon this – or anything relative – I chirped, “Ah – er – Hullo! All better?”

With a tight smile on her flushed face, she said, “Oh yes, just fine now, thank you. I'll just go down to the wash-room and see to this.” Holding the pot to her side, as if in feeble attempt to shield it from view, to my horror she began to hobble across the flat like an incapacitated old woman!

“Where are you going?” I cried. “Down all five flights of stairs? Stuff and absolute – here - allow me -” And I reached out, before I could stop myself to think.

“Good God, no sir,” she garbled, trying again to hide the pot behind her back. “It’s fine, really and true, and it’s not far.”

“It's ages,” I said, “to one in peak health. Here.” And I held my hands out askance again.

“Oh but – I couldn't possibly,” she gasped. “It’s – because it's -”

“I know what it is,” I said gruffly. And with a play for grace, I added, “My goodness. You are a guest in this house, and out of sorts moreover. Hop back into bed and I'll bring you thorough some lunch after.”

“Alright..” She was still sheer perplexion. “Thank you..”

And she shuffled back to the bedroom, and I, with no other choice than my promise, went down to the W.C to see to things. Again I'll spare details, if not for my (tattered) dignity then Sally's! I will say that Alec and his compassionate outlook are my constant conscience: anything he would do I feel I must also, and still I could never ever approach his Kind, and his Good. But I'll always aim.
Back up in the flat Sally was a good deal eased and relaxed; in fact I think she was sitting up to wait for me. I brought her lunch and made more tea, and she shook her head and laughed.

“What now?” said I, shaking a napkin.

“Well, it's just so very strange, you waiting on me, Maurice. I mean to say – I well remember serving you at Penge.. picking up the used matches you left everywhere..”

“Frightfully bad habit of mine,” I said, reddening.

“...dusting down your quarters, making the bed proper.. I most probably ironed your smalls! And yet now -!”

“And now I'm getting my comeuppance, isn't that right? After all I was.. Now brung low at last.”

“All's I'm saying is that it's ironic,” she said. “I wouldn't say low, or brung. After all you don't seem unhappy.”

“I'm not a bit,” I said truthfully. “Which isn't at all what I deserve, I know.. I suppose I was dreadful.” I leaned my chin again on my hand.

“You were a bit – hoity-toity, moodying about the place like Mr Darcy,” she admitted, and I covered my face. “But 'ey – you weren't the worst. No. Not by a long chalk.”

More cheerfully she added, “Alec were dead right about you! I'm astonished, he usually has terrible taste in his swains.”

“Oh yes?” I sat up in my chair a bit more amenably, thinking that she might talk about Alec for a while, he being our common interest and indeed the entire reason we two were strangely in each other's acquaintance.

But no. She wanted to know about me, my life; where in London did I used to live? Was it swank? Where did I go on hols? What did my sisters do? (What did they do?!) Did I often play cricket(?!)

“What was my school like?

“Hm,” I said. “Did you study Wordsworth at yours?”

“No, Shelley,” she said. So I rattled off a load of imagery and incidents from The Prelude; it was the typical, jolly public-school atmosphere and romantic view she wanted after all, the fun and the
outings and river-larking and high japes.

“What was your favourite subject?” she asked, chewing a leaf.

“Rugger,” I said honestly.

“That's not a subject!!”

“Well, I was hopeless at everything else.” I knew better than to ask the same sorts of questions of her in kind – it wouldn't be kind. Even though proper conversational conduct would call for it.

All the same, she offered up: “So was I, perfectly dreadful; I was always in bother. My least favourite class was French, saints alive, the wallops I got for my diction!”

“There was plenty of that all over,” I agreed.

“If you didn't like academics,” said Sally, leaving her plate on the locker, “Why'd you go to such a ritzy college?”

“Why? No why. One just went.”

“Not to learn?”

“Oh, well..” Again her question fazed me. The whole topic did, rather. But she had a way of simplifying, so I did too. “I went – because my father went, I suppose, and because we could afford it – just.”

“And did you just go ahead and do everything your father did?” All docility gone on her part; still her mild, genuine curiosity begged reply.

“Well, I mean – obviously not.” I held my two hands out, palms up, and looked theatrically around the flat, seeking to indicate all it represented and encompassed, even (especially), that aspect absent and flogging tea; Sally laughed.

“Still I bet it was a belter of a laugh, college.”
“It was very alright.” I slapped my knees and got up. “Would you like more tea? And a biscuit?”

“Oh yes – go on. You look like you could use one.”

The biscuits were welcomed all round but weren't enough to distract her.

“How long of essays did you have to write for your university classes?” she asked. “How big was the library? How many books?”

“I haven't the faintest idea! Look – I've blocked it all out.”

“Just asking,” she said genially around a digestive. “Seems like it'd be a real bed of Romance.”

“Hardly in the library,” I tutted. “You're awfully interested in college, all of a sudden. Are you thinking of applying? You could study commerce, it would help you establish your flower flagship.”

“Oh dear me, no.” She brushed crumbs directly onto the carpet. “I'd not be bothered with all that now. I had a place, once, but.. Oh, you know. Just didn't fancy it, in the end.”

“You could have gone on,” I said. “You're clearly ambitious.”

“Oh, I could've. But I – fumbled the ball at the goal-posts, you might say!” She didn't sound the least bit regretful.

“Still.” I stirred more – it was one of those absent days of endless cups, once swilled and lately filled. “You must have had ample opportunities otherwise. I mean – you went to a good school, how really did you end up – er -?”

“In service?” she prompted.

“Well yes – not that it's such a fall – I mean – but one would almost think -”

“That there must be a reason? A social disgrace? That I'd had a – blip?” Shrewd little miss!

“No, no..”

“A baby, you mean? You think I got into trouble, or almost did? God, but men are obsessed with
pregnancy!

“What!!” I heaved. “No!”

Sally rolled back against the cushioned headboard and crossed her cardiganed arms. “I tell you. Men take one look at you and see either the threat of babies or the allure of them.”

“Not at all -” I pleaded, not even sure to what end, only knowing I was so far out of the league as to be playing another sport.

“No? Well, would you credit it.” She adjusted her night-cap on her brown crown. “First fellow I know to respect women and he’s a -”

“A-?”

“An anomaly.”

I lit a fag. “Nicely skirted.”

“I suppose you prefer them nicely trousered,” she said wickedly.

I coughed and slapped my knees again, as a preface to standing up. “How about digestifs? I'm sure there's got to be something bottled around..” I gathered the plates.

“Oo! Yes please!” Mellow as the month of May, now was she – appropriately! Even just the promise of a drink revived her considerably; and she proclaimed herself able (and, she added, urgently obliged) to make her slow way down to the bathroom and back up again, one of several trips she made over the course of the day.

A little exercise, or so Sally's mother said, was beneficial and encouraged, though of course there's nothing little about our building and though Sally smiled, ostensibly refreshed, each time she re-entered the flat, she tended to crawl back to the bed rather and curl childishly round the hot-water bottle.
I made bastardized Tom Collines; amounting to basically gin and lemonade. Even I was aware and in despair over the gaucheness of serving straight gin to a lady; this was the best I could rustle up and it did go down a treat.

Thus did the Saturday while away rather hazily; it was nice to have a friend to talk to while Alec was away fawning. In some ways she was very like him; in others, not.

"‘The fountains mingle with the river’,” she said, seriously, “‘And the rivers with the ocean. The winds of heaven mix for ever – with a sweet emotion.’"

“Very nice,” I said, swirling my glass. “Although you sound somewhat as if you're preaching at a pulpit. Or giving a Geography lesson.”

She continued, ignoring my advice, booming, “NOTHING IN THE WORLD IS SINGLE -!!”

“Oh – no! That's even worse,” I said. “You're trampling all over it with histrionics! Where's the softness, the subtlety?”


“No fear,” said uncooperative I.

Elsetimes she ran melancholy. “I don't know what I'm going to do with him. Davey. He's just so wound-up and rebellious.. I mean that's why I wanted him so much, initially; it was such a nice surprise later to find out he's so sweet! Well that just cinched it! But you can't quench a votive candle.. Or you oughtn't. Every time he disappears somewhere, or says he'll be late, I'm convinced he’s gone off down to Kilburn or Cricklewood to consort and conspire and – eye-up fiery young colleens..”

“Now Sally,” I said, through the gin-haze. “You're plenty fiery. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“You think so?” She was flopped on the bed like a pet rabbit.
“Well, not just now, but you could hardly be expected to turn it on at will.”

Slowly and steadily the sun slid down towards the West End; it slipped behind a building for good, and led me to light the lamps and agitate the dancing flames of the fire. The drinks transformed gradually from digestifs into aperitifs as we had dinner, meat and potato pie and green beans.

Hard to call it a wasted day when one was feeling so very mellow! In fact I was dozing somewhat, nodding half in response to Sally's chattering and half in sleepiness, when the sound of the flat door opening rang out and bootsteps clattered all around, and a voice trilled, “Anyone home?”

It was Alec, and he came through the open door of the bedroom, red-face and steaming with Davey in his wake.

“How’s all this then? This where the party is?” Unsteadily, coat hanging open and briefcase wobbling, he crossed the carpet and threw himself obnoxiously heavily on the foot of the bed. “Sal, how are thee? Hope you've had a bloody good day!”

“Shut the f- shut up, Alec! God!!” Sally tugged at the covers ferociously, to try and tip him off the bed; he was wise to this and swayed firm, laughing.

Pleadingly she looked to Davey, who pulled off his coat and shoes, crawled over me rather, and hopped into bed beside her in his stocking feet; he put a long arm around her and she buried herself into his chest. “Well?” he inquired.

Her flushed face un-burrowed and looked up at him. “I'm alright, darling..”

“Hm, I'd fair think so.” He picked up her empty glass from the locker and examined it, and looked over at me lolling in the chair. “I can't believe I'm the only one here who's not been on the batter! No – for serious now, I must be dreamin'..”

Alec had managed to fall off the bed onto the floor all by himself, without anyone pulling quilts or jogging. As he laughed feebly, Davey took the opportunity to say lowly to Sally: “Hay – I, er – I got what you were lookin' fer. Your – er – bits and that. Not that I'd – know – but –”

He passed her a canvas bag he'd been holding and she peered inside, and startled: “Oh – oh – oh, thank you, darling! This – is – these are – I was going to get them myself from the chemist, only, I -”
“Nonsense,” he said stoutly. “You're laid up, so you are. No fit state to be away out traipsin’.”

“Where did you get it all? Did you go to Boots?”

“Oh Jesus Christ no!” Davey was horrified. “Go into that fancy place? And me a man? And a Mick? Did I fuck. Sure I wouldn't even know what to ask for. Unmentionables.”

“Then – where'd you get them?”

“Ah,” he said, shifting a bit and holding her closer. “In me break-time, I went round to the hospital, the one out 'ackney or what-is-it, I'm not familiar – but I was fair sure that if I hovered round a bit, I'd glimpse a nurse or two, and there's every chance they'd be country folk.”

He smiled. “And sure and 'nough! Round the side entrance was a couple of lassies in their starches havin' a smoke, and so I wandered over, lifted the cap, got to talkin’ – one of 'em, Noreen O'Sullivan, is from Athenry, can you believe it!”

Sally smiled faintly; Davey went on: “Well Jaysus she was that knocked too, at me, and gave me a fag, said did I know her brother Fergal – ah sure lookit – amn't I well acquainted with him! Fergal O'Sullivan – from Athenry – we met at the threshin' party about four years ago, I remember it well because he was on the fiddle while I was fer singin' and didn't the fecker sit too close to the bonfire and his elbow went up! Ah the craic of it!! Mighty altogether! How we laughed!”

And he did now, and the bed shook; Alec's hands gripped effortfully at the foot of it like a mountaineer trying to climb up a cliff.

“But, your -” said Sally.

“Oh aye. So yes, I said to the two girleens that I was in need of – after – wantin' – and they said aye, they could pilfer anything I was lookin' for, pills, or medicine - they thought I was dealin'! No, I said – and covered my mouth though the Lord still heard me – said, 'Ladies' things. Ladies'. times.’”

“Well they just about bust a gut, the pair o'them, for laughing at me, and saying what kind of a man was I, and all the rest of it – I charmed them fairly well though, and they had me wait, and then came back trumps – you see yourself, peteen.”

“Did you pay them?” said Sally. “I'll give you -”
“Hush now, don't you say a word about paying! I'd not take a thr'penny bit off you! And besides which, they didn't want money.” To my surprise Davey looked to me. “Records,” he said. “That they're requirin’.”

“Records?” I said, fuzzy; the liquor, and the warmth of the fire, and mild friendly hum of conversation had sent me quite on my way to the land.

“For the gramophone, they said,” Davey shrugged, as clearly it was all double-dutch to him.

“Well. That's do-able. I mean we can buy some. What music? Or spoken-word artist?” I said.

“They aren't too particular – anthin' at all.”

“Fine then. You could always to Oxford Street. Or – or I will, of course.”

“Cheers, guv.” Davey nodded.

“Thank you, Davey,” Sally said, highly.

“Oh, anything for you, loveen.” He kissed the top of her head.

“'Ent it lovely.” Alec had regained the bed and had in fact managed to crawl half-way up it. “You two! I'm tearin' up here.” And indeed he was wet-faced and wailing.

“You're absolutely cack-arsed!” Davey kicked at Alec's approaching form unenthusiastically.

“Indeed you are.” I squeezed Alec's knee. “So much for your teetotalling employer!”

“Oh – don't start! Honest to God – that Barker – fucking bullshit-artist! One minute you has to be on your knees prayin', practically, next thing you know the other reps and investors come along looking for a party and he's pouring whiskey down us'throat! We – we – he – he – had a bet on – who could – who could -!!” And he rolled sideways again, helpless; I guided him into my lap.
“Feck sake,” said Davey grumpily. “He's been this obnoxiously insufferable all evening since I met him after my shift! Even when we were talking to that French one – it was *cat*, so it was! Carrying on that-a-way in front of a woman – well, I was almost down pronin' from the mortification! I'll have to go to Confession twice over this weekend for the pair of us..”

“What woman?” I jogged Alec on my knees. “What chaos are you causing now?”

“Madame Rav-er – the landlady lives downstairs,” said Davey.

“Oh yes, of course.”

“You went to see her?” Sally blinked in surprise at Davey. “But you – we – we're supposed to be here sort of secret.”

“We are, aye, for now, but – don't we want our own place, the two of us, too?”

“Yes.. oh, yes.”

“So, *this* great lummox -” Davey nudged Alec with his foot, and retracted it swift as it was grabbed at - “Said, we ought to go and ask the landlady for any o'the spare flats going in the building, and of course I said, 'Are ya *well*?!' Because she'd twig I'm holed up here, smuggled in, and have the bobbies round circling like wolves! So old Alec said, 'Shoo. Let me do the talkin'.’”

“Oh-oh.” Sally looked at Alec wearily.

“What's that look for, cheeky wench!” Alec swung to his own defence. “Some gratitude, after I managed to sweet talk ye into a room of ye're own – right down the hall in fact! Five-B!”

“Oh – really?!” Sally sat up, looked at Alec, looked at Davey.

“Really and true! Look Sal – tha' won't have to be bunkin' up wi'the entire fencin' team anymore. Just this one -” Alec poked Davey, who smiled despite himself.

“T'weren't nowt,” Alec went on, before anyone could ask. “I vouched for ye, don't worry. I made out like I were so talkative that Davey couldn't get a word in. And she believed it! And I figured, well, she'll never take him for English, and can't say he's Scots or she'll assume she'll never get her
rent – so I say, he's my mate, my Welsh mate – and she swallowed that too! And he's called – er – what did I say, man?”

“Davey Jones,” sighed the unfortunate; Sally laughed.

“Ah yes! I knowed it were summat right convincing like that. So on the back of how respectable we – well, mostly you –” Alec nudged me - “Is, she said yeh, she'll take 'em on. S'long as ye're good, now.” And he looked school-marmily at the two of them huddled on the bed.

“And you set the precedent for that, I suppose?” teased Sally, though she was clearly over the moon.

“Indeed I do, now, height of decency, me, wait'll you see..” Alec leaned over the side of the chair and picked up his briefcase, removed a paper bag. “See what Daddy has brung home to the kids.” And he offered me the bag first.

From within I extracted a little hard and soft chocolatey something - “Ah, Tunnocks,” I said, with a bite. “So you did well at your business mixer-meeting.”

“Drank everyone under the table,” Alec bragged, passing the treats around.

“Well,” and I waved the crumbly cake in front of his face, “If you got gifted thus, you'll have to take back all the naughty things you've ever said about Scots people, and penny-pinching!”

“That'd take all the live-long-day,” said Davey.

“Oh really?” Alec peered into the paper bag. “For... six tea-cakes, I gave the Tunnock blighter two crates of tea!.. Me manager is gonna kill me!!”
Might I add, and of course how could I forget, another lovely fic from keyboardclicks who is a master at tone I must say. A real warm blanket of a read, thank you again :)

Summer was swaying in. I'm told – though of course I knew already, who doesn't? - that it would be all the more obvious and wondrous out in the countryside: trees bursting into leafy bloom, rocketing towards the bright blue sky, the fields thick – practically impassible – with wheat and corn and urgent grass, the birds all of a flutter and the rabbits a-frenzied – calf season, lamb season, foal season.

The farm labourers with no time to stop and think – but plenty to drink – the rivers run smaller and all the more precious, the swells of heather on the moors, summer wine behind doors, loose dresses, long tresses. So I am told.

Here in the middle of the metrop, however, the city-dweller can predict and identify the coming of summer – and he both invites and dreads it, is battered down and yet so attracted to it – by the intense heat, heat, heat.

For it is not only the countryside that leans fresh freckled arms into parlour windows and draws one out to the air; yet here one is thrust not grass-ways but into the throngs of people, hats, worn ground, shawls, long trailing skirts, worn boots, dirty breeches, walking sticks, parasols, prams, kids, dogs, shouts, high excitement, high up in the stands – high fashion, and breathing reckless risk into everyone – high stakes for Yes! We were at the races.

A sunny Saturday beckoned, and we had hopped on a train, passing and yet still window-watching those lush swaying Suffolk fields, to Newmarket – horse-country.

Every sort of a person flocked to these adventuresome events – from the prim and proper, to the rough and ready. Perhaps the only equalizer were the horses themselves, their races – for of course anyone at all could bet, had they the green in wallet, pocket or hat-brim – and yet, for some people, a last-place lagger cost them only a sigh and a laughing, ‘comme-ci, comme ca’ sip of Champagne in the perfumed private box; for others the loss of twenty shillings might mean the loss of house, wife, life.
And yet here they all were! Crowding desperately, elbowing and tearing and shouting and waving for the chance to gamble their hard-earned! All sorts – from the lowest capped-class, up to the middle-trilbied – where it stopped abruptly; there wasn't a tailor-made outfit to be seen down where Alec and I wandered.

It wasn't a day out threshin' hay or fishin', and I apologized to Alec for the lack of true greenery and landscape and wildlife in the township, the cemented surrounds; it wasn't his his usual fare, where he'd usually be rolling around at this hazy humid time of year.

“Oh, we'll have plenty of time for alla that when we're settled in us' Greenwood," said Alec, eyes on stalks at the race-course; and I had to laugh at his referring to the greenwood as an actual place, rather than a vague wish for freedom; he's a darling.

I was amused too, and cheered at his excitement; I did feel quite guilty, sometimes, for dragging Alec away not only from his homestead and family but the rolling rural hills and valleys he loved so much.

What I hadn't anticipated was that Alec would take to city-life with gusto; at first it intimidated him a little but soon he was immersed in, addicted to, and always pulling me by the hand towards concerts, markets, parades, music-halls, funfairs, pubs, restaurants, shops, huge varieties of food, and culture, and people – our fellow humans, thousands of them available daily to see on a cursory walk-about: gorgeous strangers that made the eyes widen and mouth almost open as they ambled their luscious way past us; friendly folk you would talk to on a night out or a day trip and converse with gaily, to part forever; others you would see and engage with regularly and grow to like, as a friend.

It hadn't occurred to me, the impact that busy bustling city life might have on the hitherto lovely but limited imagination: Alec was delighted almost daily by sights and sounds he certainly wouldn't have experienced back in Wiltshire.

It reminded me, for all my dependence on him, that he really is quite young, fresh-faced, unformed, naive and ready.. Well, he's my age of course: perhaps we are both much more young and wide-eyed than we boast ourselves to be; play-acting at adults to the general world, but laughing like children over secrets in our own.

With the constant comforting safety net of each other – who wouldn't have eyes starry? Perhaps all ought experience the city – once. In twos.

From a cloudless sky the sun beat down, pumping sweat out every hat-brim. It was bright and breezy
– fans flapped alongside programs, kites, flags, bunting, banners; losing tickets cursed and crumpled and derided on the ground, torn up and tossed away like confetti – quite constantly!

A feast for the senses indeed! Scents of candied treats, tobacco, alcohol, cheap perfume, the unmistakable odour of horses; loudspeaker announcements – rapid-fire recounts of the races, big infrastructure, small booths and vendors.. Kids continuously squeezing past and running off, dangling cigarettes to avoid.

Thunderous hooves of the horses, following the prancing build-up of tension and CRACK of the pistol – then the human performance: people waving fists and clamouring all over each other to see, yelling giddy-up and all kinds of endorsements, and whoops, and swears, emotional outcry –

While high above in the corporate boxes, like angels in the architecture, the esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen watched impassively through little opera-glasses, slowly expelling lazy tendrils of lipped smoke! I know where I'd rather; I'd rather my grey corduroy elbow gripped, even while sweat dripped.

Alec had a hot-tip from someone absolutely true-blue and air-tight. Who?

“Robbey,” said Alec, in a voice ridiculously confident in such a word. “And I know just which chisel to set the bet with. Come on to the tote..”

“Is he authentic?” I said as we queued to be served by a shrewd-looking, bowlered and bespectacled little man up in his booth.

“Maurice, my God! You just have to take the word of these things. It ain't official. There's no – London Review of Bookies. I tell ya – it's a sure thing.”

Maybe Alec himself is something of a shrewd little man, because despite his grand-standing, the horse’s odds were quite – astronomically – high and so Alec placed his bet each-way. “We've rent to pay next week after all, I meantersay..”

And so, this hot-tip, if it didn't sizzle, it sautéed – Alec practically screamed his voice to retirement and didn't it work! - the horse gave it some welly – or some horseshoe – came in third, and Alec got a nice return for his belief in 'Lads, You Like It.'
“Coulda been a load more if I'd put it on straight,” said Alec, who wouldn't have minded losing and so deserves to always win. Nevermind: the sun continued to shine its approval, and there were glasses of beer, sweets, toffee apples – the diet quite gone for a game as you may have already surmised! Brass band striking up, adding to the festival atmosphere, still the heat beating -

In such close quarters, the heavy, thick crowd necessitated that we must hold hands lest we lose one another in the crush; with our other hands we pressed our caps, Alec leading as we weaved and wended our way – wonderful!

Thus, two grown men, in the innocent day-time, clung and hung onto one another, felt but unseen; and he turned and smiled at me, to share in the delight that we were fingers intertwined, in the most public of places, defying Society and yet doing it absolutely no harm as we created our own path through close, calling, concentrated civilization.

Never just he, nor me: always we. I knew he'd never let me slip from his strong grasp and lose me.

On the exuberant, noisy train back to Kings Cross, we were similarly pressed together in third class; cosy of course but it was still something of a relief to be home and drifting along the London streets, in no rush.

We had broken hand-grip when we left the race-course and now walked no less intimately for it, in slow step together along the quays, sunny June afternoon melting into evening, the heat rising like a sauna from the footpath, this wonderful drowsy city.

Sweat sparkled on Alec's stubble as he leaned in, almost close enough to kiss me, and said languidly, “Thinking of this evening. What would you like to do? We could go to the park for a walk, or out on a boat, or take a cart-ride."

How beautiful these ideas, these images! It was almost intoxicating enough just to picture them – but now, in Wonderland, we could and would actually do them – all of them – together, endlessly.

Suddenly, Alec was grabbed by the elbow and yanked from me, and a loud, high voice rang out, scattering pigeons: “ALEXANDER SCUDDER!! What in the great good glory do you think you're playing at!?”

And in our immediate midst was a tall, striking woman with a grim mouth, in a prim, tight-waisted purple coat flaring to her knees, and her red hair held up under a pinned little flowered hat, a few
locks swaying loose and breezing, adding to her Medusa-like appearance.

Eyes saucered in surprise, and mouth gaping, Alec recovered quickly into a frown and “Oh, sodding hell! Here’s trouble."

I was alarmed to see two small, not un-Alec-like children swarming about her grey skirts, a girl and a boy in pinafores; the boy, who was shorter, in a straw boater and hanging ribbon and the girl in a sailor hat.

Ungentlemanly – but then he had just been shrieked at in the street – Alec shook off the woman's hand, took a step towards me, and in the face of her hugely confrontational stance, did the introductions.

“Maurice, this is Neeta – Fred’s missus. Neeta: this is Maurice.”

“How do you do?” I held out my hand for a shake, whereupon Neeta glared at it in outrage and folded her own arms tightly across her chest, looking ready to spit! Perhaps she might really have done, except it might have landed on one of the children, gambolling around like puppies.

“Well if you're going to be like that!!” said Alec, and he grabbed the hand I had extended in greeting and, yanking me, took off at a brisk, nearly a jog, I stumbling; after a yard or so he let go and pocketed his own hand but nodded at me to 'Keep up.'

This wouldn't do – clearly Neeta was a Scudder through-and-through. In our wake, we heard: “You'll not get away on me – the trouble you've caused, you young scut!”

Easily she caught up with us – she really was quite tall, and angry to boot! “Off you take, all ne'er-do-well, without so much as a by-or-leave to anyone! Have you any idea of the bother you've landed on your parents, and rest of t'family, the neighbours, the kids -" - She waved one - “- those bloody manorborns sniffin' about!”

Alec tossed his head defiantly, his turned-up nose, his fast stride. “Durham! I'm not afraid of him – bloody old woman.”

At this Neeta looked taken aback, almost amused: “Why didn't you come to the boat like you ought? What in all that's holy are you doing in London?”
Alec said cheekily: “What are you doing here, Neeta? Shouldn't you be abroad frolickin' wi'the Argies?”

“No! It's all gone tits-up, us' plans – I'm here trying to sort new pass-ports for t'young'uns – I'd to come back to England – Fred's stoppin' here to look after it all..”

Of course you'll know Alec as well as I do by now, near about; he's a teddy-bear really and his flashes of fury always flare and then merely flicker. At Neeta's story, and her flustered face, and the children's pants in keeping up with us all, his expression softened to sympathy and he veered from the footpath, across the road and towards the river-front shops.

Making for a concession stand, full of goodies on display, he pointed to this and that, and said: “Oh, Fred he loves it! Centre of attention at last. He'll just love the chance to be in charge, to ringlead..” Here he thrust crisps, cockles, sweets, jellies upon the kids, Neeta, and I. “Honest, it's a blessing,” he added.

“He's not really had the chance, Alec..” said Neeta.

A brief interjection here, if I may, for the purposes of current narrative clarity, and to further fill you in on Alec's already colourful character, I'll list Alec's siblings, all of them older than he.

Three girls: Hannah, Barbara, and Clara; and three boys: Bernie, Wally and Fred. From what I gather, some are peripheral to Wiltshire or Dorset; some are flung to the colonies.

According to Neeta, however, they were right now all one in a flutter of confusion and concern, via letters, telegrams, gossip and griping over the Alec Question.

Alec himself, though he admits freely that he was 'pure ruined beyond saving' being the beloved baby of the family, other times complained that he felt as though he had a whopping eight parents, all bearing down on him in pompous authority and telling him what to do.

I can't imagine it; I had quite enough emotional back-bearing from just one parent! Is it any wonder Alec is so complicated, how he gleefully leapt into this sweet escape with me, he the bastion of individuality and self-promise; and yet then another day you'll find him whining to be fussed over and bossed about. Really, he just ticks every box that a person ought! In my humble opinion.
Alec was more smartly dignified and supremely impassive than humble to Neeta's yanking at his heart-strings; you could tell it infuriated her rather and I suddenly wondered just when she had last seen him. As a grouchy young(er) man? A spotty teenager? A wee whipper? His passionate childishness, struck through now with a staid manliness, may well surprise her.

Still she tried. “Can't you but see the trouble you've caused!”

Alec paid for the snacks and took off again quickly, tossing over-shoulder: “Aw, it's just a great excuse for t'whole family to band together and have a grand old chinwag at my expense! There's no reunion like a Scudder'un, tha'ought know it, Neeters..”

“I well know it,” said Neeta.

As they walked and talked, the children grew tired and plopped down on the footpath; still Alec and Neeta continued on, conversing loudly – drawing stares.

I, whom after all was not really component to the conversation, had been loitering behind; when the children stopped I did too, feeling somehow responsible by dint of my adulthood, although – I wasn't exactly sure what to do.

Sniffles and snot issued from the little girl, mingling with the chocolate on her face, so I offered her my handkerchief; she eyed it with the crinkle-browed unfamiliarity of one confronting an ancient Egyptian rune and so, masking my disgust, I wiped her face myself.

Subsequently her brother put himself forward for the same tending, which was fortunate, because it meant that I myself would end up that bit less worse for wear when I hauled the pair of them up, one-per-hip, and four little arms around my neck as I followed Alec and Neeta.

Trees dotted the walk-way a good deal less opulently or plentifully than they had done in, say, St John's, my old stomping-ground; still trees are trees and the late afternoon sun shone one side of the softly waving beech leaves a brilliant light green, their other sides dark and cool in shadow.

Realizing that half his present family was playing catch-up, Alec stopped by a pillar in the river-wall and rested an elbow on it, beside the North Bank binoculars, and with one foot hooked jauntily over the other he waited, Neeta too, they both in the foreground to tall sails of ships, cargo embarking or leaving, the squawk of seagulls, and the rough, cheery calls and hauls of sailors.
Neeta arranged her body-language to suit her position just as Alec had: neat button-booted feet planted, one hand on hip and the other ready to wave a finger in his face as we drew near to hear: “Now Alec, cop-on to yourself! It were all arranged! You're *supposed* to be abroad in South America by now wi'us! You were so grateful and willing to us and thanked us so profuse..”

Alec made a face. “I never! I weren't ever all that gone on goin' – why won't a one believe us? And it appeals even lessly now that I've got – quite contented. There's only one reason a person goes off out to t'Argentine and it's right there in the name; and I ain't interested in money.”

This proved as outrageous a statement as any he had made thus far. “You *what*?” said Neeta.

Alec turned his attention to the kids, whom I had set back down on the ground again seeing as how we had all come to a relieving stand-still on the quay footpath. Alec bent down on one knee, to the children's level.

“Do you like Buenos Aires?” he asked. “Harry?”

“Boon – what?” Harry was in genuine confusion.

Less conflicted was the girl – Cammie. “No!! It's too hot! My skin gets watery and my hair goes frizzy!”

“Now there's wisdom.” Alec slapped his knee as if a great conundrum had been finally resolved. He chucked Cammie under the chin and said, “Tha'r't a right clever lass. How many years you been at school now? Ten? Twenty? Art thee a great learned professor by now.”

Cammie, indignant, delighted: “No!”

“No? True enough. You look more like a – a motor-bike!” And he took one of her pig-tails in each hand, and very gently twisted them like handlebars, going, “VRRRRMMMM!!! VRRRRRRMMMM!!”

Cammie was somehow even louder than he, emitting shrieks and laughs with abject joy. Not to be outdone, ignored, or stand idly by, Harry ran over screaming, “Me! Me!!” with all the passion of a drowning man calling for aid; he couldn't articulate his demands further than this one (ear-splitting) word, such was his desperate pestering for Alec's attention.

Alec tapped his chin, and considered Harry; “And – ah – oh – *you* – I reckon *you're* more like an
aeroplane! Ha!" And swiftly he grabbed the kid tightly by a wrist and ankle, and swung him manfully around, high up on the air, circling over the wall and thus over the docks of the salty malty Thames themselves, the boy screaming exultation and Alec making aeroplane noises – faulty engine and everything.

Cammie pulled at the shin of Alec's trousers: “Hay! Pick me up too, Uncle!”

Another 'plane bawl as she loop-de-looped, whereupon the whole performance was repeated. Such energy – on everyone's part. I felt worn out just watching!

With his hands under her armpits, Alec held Cammie at arm's length and studied her appraisingly; she was ruffled and dishevelled almost beyond all giggling recognition.

To me, Alec said: “Did you ever see the like of it, Maurice. What a dog's dinner – eh?” This wasn't taken as criticism – the girl pealed and pealed.

“Still and all – good thing they got they good looks from one side of the family..”

“Hay!!” said Neeta, who had observed the entire spectacle with wry approval, fondness and relief, caught caps in her hand – no doubt one's boisterous offspring seem all the more charming and cute when it is someone else who is running themselves ragged entertaining them.

Abruptly, Alec tossed down the child, seemingly knowing that she would land right-way up, like a cat, and he swivelled off into a restaurant we were happening by.

Not exactly haute cuisine; the building had peeling blue paint, gingham curtains, half-melted candles, smelling crisply of burnt meat – yet all the more homey for its unpretentiousness.

At first, when we had bumped into Neeta, and Alec had all but taken off running, it seemed as though he was fleeing; what was clear now was that he was not - he was in fact quite consciously leading, show-running as it were, confident that he was the Piper and we would all follow, which we did, piling after him in to the eaterie, where he waved us to a window-table (it was the sort of place where one seated oneself).

Peace talks continued. Time and again Neeta brought out her ammunition – your parents? Reputation? All the girls you've loved before?
Still Alec was unruffled, his upper-hand steady and unshaken, meeting calmly her every jibe and providing a haughty answer. Finally she had to shake her head and admit: “Alec, you've become a man since I last laid eye on thee.”

“What were I before? A lass?”

“No, a pipsqueak,” she said, and, far from insulted, Alec leaned to me and said in a stage-whisper, “She's not far wrong!”

The children laughed fully, not realizing that there was, in essence, a family argument going on; well, they wouldn't do, the atmosphere was all wrong for true animosity. More like squabbling siblings were Alec and Neeta; which was a dynamic that Cammie and Harry could almost certainly relate to. This was nothing less than a jolly outing for them!

“See, Alec? Oh, if you'd only come round, have a lick of sense to thyself, you can still stop playing silly-beggars, apologize, we'll forgive you and we'll sort everything so you can come join us in the Argentine. Now, how does that sound?”

“About as appealing as chicken gristle,” said Alec, and when the waitress arrived he didn't consult but ordered chops and the works for everyone, even the children. I tell you, no-one could get a word in over Alec that day!

He sped on: “You'll 'let' me beg you for forgiveness! I like that! Well ent that magnolaceous of you! Tell you what, you ought to go over Penge-way where I jus' left and do old Borenious out of a job. Now, tell us, Neeta, what would I be doin' on the Argentine, stayin' at yours, except providin' thee with a live-in nanny? Mindin' the childer?” All the same, even as he said this, he ruffled the nearest dark-curled head.

“Well – you'd have to earn your keep,” said Neeta. She had no idea what to do with such a very wily Alec.

“Ah but – I'm not for that no more – I'm mine own keeper now. Now – on the up-and-up: you've got you a lovely family, Anita, true and I'd defend that. Ma and Da raised a right one too, with only one or two exceptions – but what I want now is me own family. My very own. More'n anything. And I got it now -”
Only very briefly did he glance at me over the lambchops, not even a chaste tap of an arm or a smile – he was trying (at last) to be reticent but volumes had been said in few words, I knew. As did Neeta; she saw it has her chance to turn horrified, as people tend to when 'extra' do qualify the 'ordinary.'

“What's this nonsense Alec! Trust you to get it all wrong! You start yourself a family with a woman!”

“What woman?” said Alec. “There's no woman. I'm in love, as-is – staunch – certain – won't change – I'm no good to no-one else now.” Oh Alec! I felt warm all over, felt like spilling endearments, squeezing his body – but a time, and a place, what. Instead I concentrated on my peas in their thick gravy.

“The brass neck of you!” trumpeted Neeta. “How on earth is it even possible between two men?”

“How is it -? Er, you might want to send the kids away a'fore I get into descriptions..”

“WHAT!! Alec, bite your lip you little wotsit! I didn't mean – that! I meant falling in love!

“I mean – you sir!” She turned to me, and suddenly I was in the mashed-potato firing-line. “My land, your action's questionable, but even you must see this for the three-ring-circus that it is! I mean from your angle. You've kin you've up and left and abandoned too – ain't you?”

I lowered my forked onion. “Well, Mrs Scudder, that depends on what you mean – does growing up, reaching self-actualization, and forging one's own path equate 'abandonment', or does it simply reflect the inevitable trajectory of the individual – within but apart from the social family-fabric?”

“Took the words right outta me mouth,” said Alec, sloshing his glass of beer.

Moodily Neeta took a generous gulp of her own beer and re-applied the needles to me. “You trying to bull-shit your way through this, Mr Hall? But what about other people – doin' thy duty on them? Seems like you taken your father's place in the family when he died, and now you left your mother all alone – oughtn't you look after her?”

Well, well! Hadn't these Scudders done their homework on their brother's lover, digging out all sorts of intel on that mysterious menace Maurice. No doubt the Halls were painting a similarly black picture of the low, dark, seducing young game-keeper. Ha!
Oh, all of these skeletons unearthed from the closet and gossip and speculation and mud-slinging. Clive would hate this! Apparently Alec did too, because he said in a warning voice: “Neeta, now say what you will about me, but Maurice's dealings with his family is none of your business.”

Undeterred, Neeta pressed: “Because, an old lady like her, she'll need someone strong and dependable about her, buoy her up and keep her safe.”

This again! Trying to force me into a role I was no good at, character-wise, whether I were straight, crooked or celibate!

To Neeta I appealed: “You think I'd be some sort of advantage to the family, just because I'm a man? When in fact the reverse is true! I tried all of that – being Head of the Household, filling Father's shoes. But I was dreadful I tell you – worse than useless – I floated round the house like a – like a – malevolent ghoul. Girls'll be glad to be shot of me. If you think there's anything meritable about me now – that I'm strong, or senseful, or what-have-you – it's all very recent! It's all Alec, Alec, Alec!”

Neeta looked shocked, amazed – the kids did too, eyes huge and staring, impressed – likely just by my booming Shakespearean tones, not so much the message – that which was piercing their mother.

I leaned to Neeta, and she tilted her head near to hear me say, low, with urgency: “Try me, back in the days before Alec – I was miserable. I was a bastard! Even Clive – Mr Durham – would say that, and he supposably loved me!”

“I think I can do a bit better than supposable love,” said Alec.

“Much better,” said I.

Sighing, Neeta likely knew it was pointless, but she ventured her last argument, saying weakly, “Alec. You'd have an easier time of it with a woman.”

“I've never in my life met an easy woman,” said Alec. “Nor, if I'm honest, an easy man.”

Surreptitiously, but so naturally that it would hardly draw notice, he tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear, adding, “.. but what's interesting about easy?”

Silenced, Neeta sat swirling her last bit of chop in the gravy, still red-cheeked, not sagging, not beaten – won over, maybe. No other outcome; Alec was in one of those moods where he'd win simply any argument – it's a wonder the Ancient Greeks don't have a name for it.
In the lull, Alec called for the bill and paid with a note, and chivvied us, full-bellied, back into movement.

Back outside, the shadows were lengthening although it was still fully daylight, sun hanging low and squinting the eyes. As she accepted Alec's offered cigarette and lit match, Neeta coughed out smoke and said to him grudgingly, “You seem healthy enough.” She cupped his jaw: “Still good and baby-faced as ever.”

“Hay!” said Alec.

“And, you seem to be well-contented,” she allowed.

“Oh, you know what they say: happy wife, happy life.” Alec smacked my bottom. “Surely it's just the same – co-operative like – t'ween you and Freddie? Try and see it that way.”

Three abreast we began to walk slowly past the shopfronts; Neeta in the middle with Alec and I flanking, the children capering about ahead.

With a touch of regret, Neeta said, “Not really. Not lately.. Fred's been havin' a tough time of it.”

“Oh aye?” said Alec.

“Bernie is back and fair lordin' it. Took over the butchers' entire.”

“Well, good,” said Alec. “Dad's fair gettin' on..”

“Yeh but.. Bernie's all for throwing his weight about, you know that.. And it's pretty squashed in the house with everyone.”

“We've got your room, Uncle!” trilled Harry.

“Hehe. Just as well I'm moved out so!” said Alec.

“You idiot! No! Fred's gutted is what! Totally lost his place now you've gone! Oo..” She stopped walking, hand on forehead: “Why did you have to go and run out on us? I don't know if I can make
him happy on me own!” Near tears. She seized both of Alec's hands, and pleaded into his face: “Oh, why not just come to America?”

“No! Neeta!” Though he squeezed her hands back affectionately, Alec determined: “I know you means well – deep down – but I won't be bullied about and told what to do no more! Look, the line I got goin' now -” This time he did look at me, up and down, and smiled, and back to Neeta: “I'm my own man, and what's more, I gots my own man. I've pulled up my socks – at long last. I'm a much better person now than the smart tart I were.”

Tiring of walk, and talk, and serious issues, the kids automatically came to me with hands stretched upwards, so I leaned down and picked them up again easily; how quickly they learn! Alec's true kin!

“But it could've been so wonderful!” Neeta was finding it hard to let go of her vision – I could indeed relate. “The two of ye workin' together, tradin’.. Fred likes you. I know ye tease like mad, but, you make him laugh.”

At this Alec slipped a little, looked just a bit discomfited, still: “Look I know what tha'rt doin, pilin' more pressure on me. But land, I'm not a bloody court jester!”

“Oh but more'n that even – if you had behaved yourself right, ye could've gone into business together!”

“Oh Neeta.. Tha' knows full well we woulda torn strips out of each other! You got your head in the clouds, gel! Anyroad – I'm in trade already, as it so happens. Doin' alright. I mean.. Makin' us own way..” Here he ended his description of his job somewhat evasively.

Quite telling, that for all our public performance, declarations of love, and emotional honestly with Neeta, there was still rather a large barrier as to telling her where we lived, worked or were – she could likely be trusted, but could everyone she might tell?

“So I'll not convince you,” she said, as we walked on some more to the thoroughfare and came to the shadowy shelter of a tree – the sun beating down all the more strongly the later it got.

Alec stood firm, glanced at me – and gave a start and a half-smile to see that I had the children back up in my arms, he'd only realized; the sleepier they got the very heavier, somehow. I set them down carefully; they swayed.

“No,” said Alec. “This is it for me. You'll never fool me into thinkin' there's anything better than
what I got right now.” Neeta peered at me openly, and I had to blush, couldn't explain the ridiculous boy either.

With an expert hand Alec hailed down a cab, and paid the driver to take Neeta and the yawning kids to Paddington Station. He gave each of the children half-a-crown after helping them into the carriage. Neeta stood on the path, still looking wistful, but then she took Alec' shoulders and bent down to give him a sisterly kiss on the cheek; to my surprise, she leaned up on tip-toe to kiss me too, in that brisk familial way.

She said, “Alec I'll have to say I saw you. What'll I tell them? What'll I say you're up to?”

“Oh – rum, sodomy and lash – the usual,” said Alec.

“Oh, kid!!”

“Ha-ha.. Oh, tell 'em this, that, whatever you like. I would request that you say I wish everyone all the best.”

“Rightyoh.” Neeta climbed into the cab.

“And you've not heard the last of us!” called Alec.

“I hope not! Goodbye! Goodbye!” And she waved out the window, until she was edged aside and the kids replaced her, saluting madly and shouting and whooping their farewells, and the cab disappeared into the late evening rumble.

I thought Alec might be a little disconsolate, thoughtful, despondent – all of those unreachable states – having encountered and then good-byped again a real, human memory of his past, his people. But he hipped his hands and turned to me with a slow, satisfied smile.

“Thankee,” he said.

“What for? I barely opened my mouth!”

“But you stuck wi'us, didn't you? All through that strife and nonsense, you come along wi'me. You
will do, won't you? Always? Come along?"

“Of course.”

“I thought so.” He nodded.

We walked along the quays some more, before turning right at the Wharf towards the city proper, where we caught a bus that would drop us off only four streets from home.

“Blimey.” On the bus, Alec removed his cap and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his dark blue shirt. “Feel like I been put right through the mill, though! No wonder Fred leaves his balls by the door when he goes in the kitchen – for safekeepin’.”

“Oh, she wasn't as ghastly as all that. Clearly she cares.”

“Aye she does do that, to be sure.. And she's a good sort, is Neeta, to be fair, always were. I remember the first time I met her, s'matter o' fact. She come round ours for tea, I must've been about fourteen, and we was all well-behaved and personable-like – the good service brung out of the dresser an' everything – but after pudding, when tea's brewin', you could tell Neeta were gettin' a bit bored wi'Ma and Da and Freddie all talkin' shop, and local goss, and weather and that..

“So I said, d'you want to go outside, and she did, and I taught her how to play goal-keeper while I took – very gentle! - penalties. She were pretty good and all, even took a dive or two. Then Fred come to the door and said, 'Come on love, the folks are happy-out, now we must go round yours and speak to your father.' All grand like. I'd no notion what he were on about, but gracious didn't she scramble up off the grass and away on his arm!

“After that she weren't much good for football.. They was gone away to the Argentine within a year or two anyroad..” He yawned, and rolled his neck. “Flamin’ ’eck, though. All o'these old ghosts o'mine showin' up outta the woodwork. And here I am tryin' to impress you, make out like I was always this wise, wicked rover, and then this lot come along threatenin' on spillin' all of my baby secrets and embarrassments.. I s'pose you must think me a right idiot.”

I smiled at him.

“You – you can refute that, or -” said Alec.
“Oh -”

“Any time now -”

“Of course you're not an idiot – my angel! In fact you're so very capable and kind. You'd make a wonderful father, Alec.”

“Now don't start wi'all that. Haven't I got you to look after? More'n a handful. I don't need nobody else.” Sometimes I imagine and pray that Alec will say just the right thing – and he does.

He continued: “Besides, you can only be a father following a mother. It's up to a woman whether a child comes along or not – her remit. Don't depend on whether a man takes a fancy to parenthood – just lucky if he finds a woman agreeable to him.” In a perfect world, I'm sure, Alec!

Meeting Neeta hadn't rattled his nerves or fed his doubts or dulled the lustre of our lovely lazy day. Back at Rain Lane, we went up the stoop of the boarding-house and stepped into the foyer, empty but for clothes and post and clutter.

As soon as I turned from closing the front door, Alec leaned up and put both arms around my neck and kissed me, slowly, without warning; but I'm simply always ready for this, always amenable, always wanting, and I put my hands on his hips and replied in kind.

Big dark eyes and a raffish smile greeted me when we broke off.

“You know,” said he, “I reckon we've kissed on almost every floor of this building, near about, at some stage.” He looked upwards. “We really ought to rectify that. Complete the set.”

“I should think we jolly ought,” I said, as he swayed a little in delight, in my arms. “And later..”

“Mmm?”

“I think a cart-ride, in the park,” I said. “I'm dead on my feet from walking all day; my arms fairly ache too! Rustling trees, cool air, we can keep each other warm, in the moon-light.. It would be romantic.”
For a long while, Alec and I shied away somewhat from describing too often or too floridly our activities or interactions as 'romantic', or 'adorable' or other such dreamy, feminine terms; preferring to refer to things as 'fun' or 'great' or 'REET!' How the walls of Jericho crumble. Now we revelled in the fanciful; we just gave in, and were still giving.

“Yeh it would. Grand so; we'll go round to Nangles' and I'll tack up Bonnie. She won't mind wakin' up in the night to do a favour – if it's for me.”

“Who would?” said I.
Everyone in the office stood to straight-backed attention. We had all been summoned from our desks via a circulating and increasingly creased memo, and we were now attending an impromptu meeting in the Inland Revenue department. Here we were treated to a long-winded speech praising us for our diligence, while dually being warned about the dire consequences of any professional transgression...

I yawned as phones rang distantly, frustrated, unanswered; people safe at the back of the crowd whispered as the District Executive Officer droned on and on. You might read the irony in such a pointless assembly which was intended to celebrate work-ethic – or, you may well nod at the typical familiar; still I grabbed a slice of cake when the tray went past – apparently we'd passed our own internal audit.

“Of course we did,” I said to Miss Rathbone beside me. “Management are hardly going to be self-critical and interfere with their increments. Not when well over half of them are doddering towards retirement!”

“Shh!” She held a finger to her lips, though she was smiling. “We're supposed to be aiming for management ourselves, aren't we?” She sipped her coffee.

“That'll only happen if we get to mark our own exams too.”

“SSSHH!” She managed through her laughter!

“...and though the cogs of Government churn and clank loudest at Westminster, we can be ourselves quietly assured, that we at the bot – er, that is to say, on the frontline of constant, careful civic-minded bureaucracy and administration are the true implicatiors of practical legislation -” The head-boy accent continued, and he held up a tattered letter – possibly the memo - “the oil, shall we say, that lubricates and facilitates the smooth running of our esteemed great nation.”
“My brother says that us government civvies are just glorified social welfare recipients,” whispered Miss Rathbone, delightfully contradicting her own scolding, and I near choked on my mouthful of carrot-cake; people glanced over-shoulder.

To further complicate her attitude, she tutted: “God, these daft speeches and ceremonies we have to go to every other day... If we aren't working, then it's time we ought to be studying.”

“Oh, don't be such a stickler,” I yawned again openly as we drifted to the back of the crowd and snuck away down the corridor. Really, the woman was a raging workaholic. All of the cramming we were at every spare moment! Nonsense about calculations and thresholds and statutes and policy.

“Alec thinks we're quite mad to be putting in all these library hours and prepping for these exams for advancement. But it's alright for him, his nearest competitor in the workplace is a horse...”

“Alec this, Alec that. You do talk about him an awful lot,” said Miss Rathbone.

I tried to gauge her tone. It was light. But people can put on tones and appearances to hide their true feelings – that I know well!

I could say what I do often – sincerely, and mean it – that Alec is my best friend. Although does that sound a little silly, for a grown man to have a best friend, far beyond the overtly intimate (and single-sex) spheres of school and college?

By rights, by usualness, one's wife is one's companion in the grown-up world, and that's square in society. In that case, he's my wife. I wasn't about to say this to her though!

“Oh, Alec?” I said. “Why, he's simply the person I see the most of.”

“I'll bet,” said Miss Rathbone.

Damnit! She bested me! Oh, I'm just not clever enough nor brazen enough for all of this evasive wordplay, even though I have the best teacher.
“Oh, yes, she's onto you alright, cute as a kitten.” Alec tapped the wooden spoon on the edge of the saucepan. He was sweating fruit and measuring out water for to make plum-wine; I was sat on the footstool by the hearth, drying my hair at the fire after the bath.

“But let her think about it, about us, if she wants,” he continued. “Mebbes she gets a kick out of it – the idea of two lads together – the imagery – what we get up to.” And a wink.

“Oh – really!” I said, for the umpteenth.

“Oh now, women can be just as saucy as any man. On t'other hand, maybe she's a-digging round in your private life for info because she's sweet on you.”

“What! It's not like that at all between us.”

“From your side, maybe – well, definitely – but from hers? Why oughtn't she fancy you? I can surely relate. Makes sense, in a sense – you're an absolute little sexpot, oh you know it – and old Rathbone is a corker too; my word the pair of ye must turn every head when ye go about the corridors and offices at work – ye must be the most gorgeous two there!”

If you knew our work-place, you'd understand that this was hardly high praise. Though of course he meant it to be – I knew this, his flattery. Who would have taken Alec for an aesthete, a benign believer in beauty?

But here we go, he added: “I reckon you and Miss Rathbone would make a blinding couple. Whow!!”

In saying this, he wasn't getting in a snide remark – he isn't truly capable of it – nor was he being mean or jealous; in fact, it was his way of complimenting Miss Rathbone and me both. Likely he rather likes the imagery himself!

For a staunch monogamist though he be (thank God), still Alec has a fair and equable appreciation equally distributed among the sexes – keeps his mind ever so busy, I must say!
For example, out and about promenading, Alec might grab my sleeve and heave: “Sweet saints above! Look at the size of that fella's arms! And clock those tattoos – Phwoar!”

Just as likely, he could be dawdling along talking, and suddenly startle, and stop, and crane right round in amazement: “Golly – geez – willya look how tight that girl's skirt is around her arse? God she's fit! Oh lord.. Where's a bench.. It's too hot today..”

And so forth – so endless forth.

Despite all the trouble and chaos I had encountered with Clive, I didn't mind Alec's wide scope of interest – in fact, it only made me all the more pleased and grateful that, out of every man and every woman, Alec had chosen me! Dear goodness, the odds must be astronomical!

All the same, I do like a little reassurance every now and then – and Alec can always tell when.

“Now, in spite of what I say, don't you and Miss R go getting any ideas, eloping to your house on the hill! You know what you told me, Maurice – you're mine for keeps.”

“And I meant it,” I said. “No matter the difficulties – I'm for you.”

“And I for you.”

This small smiling re-affirmation, and the experimental sip of wine set off his natural cheeriness and practical optimism.

“Difficulties, you say? Oh, us'll weather any storm – that's for true, alright. Anyroad, every couple has their winds int'road – there's no perfect format – it's not always plain sailing betwixt a man and a woman – no sir! Oh, the rows Ma and Da used to have, though they got on fairly well otherwhence! My land, the mud slung and crockery flung – I knew it, though usually I'd be a-hiding behind one o' me sisters' skirts.

“I ’member one day – I'd'a been about eight – they musta had another barney in the morning – well, who likes mornings, tempers'd be fraught anyway – anyway, Ma landed into the school-house where I were, and she grabbed me outta lessons, dragged us out walkin', and out to tea, bought us toys...
“Come 'ome and I sat on the drainin'-board while she made queen cakes, helpin' her wi'crackin' eggs and wipin' the bowl. Whole time it were all, 'You're me best boy – ain't you Licky? You and Ma. You love your Ma – don't you?'

“And of course I'm made up, and playin' up, all, 'Sure and I am, Ma!' Dad conspicuously absent – until he weren't, until he come come back, I saw him out the kitchen window in the yard, with this giant side o'beef, seen him strugglin' it off the back o' the cart.

“Ma watched too, all obstinate, till she go, 'Oh, heckfire!! and wipin' her hands on the tea-towel she rushed out to help him, disappearin' round the corner. Well, I dunno what's what, they're gone a good while so I takes off the buns and put them on the cooling-rack. Only ate nine or ten of ’em..

“Next think you know, the pair of ’em land back into the kitchen, all jollies, all, 'We're going out, mind the shop will you Alec, there's a lad!' Swear, your head'd be spun!

“So what else could I do? Only go through to the butchers', and set the displays out, throw down the sawdust, and sit myself behind the counter: and who lands in wi'the shop door-bell only the Truant Officer. He come in and stop, and stare – me on the stool in me bloody apron, with me feet up on the counter and the comic-paper open in me lap – we just look at each other, silent. You'd think, well: there's old Alec for the mincer himself, ain't it?

“So quick I slip off the chair and wrap up his usual chops and links, along with an extra bag o' kiddleys, and he takes 'em, tips his hat, and without a word nor a coin exchanged between we – turns and leaves. And I breathes, again like I thought I'd never!

“Ma and Da were gone ages – seriously thought I'd been abandoned again – even I were finished the comic in a few hours – and there were such a rush o'customers in the avvy. When me folks finally returned, they had all the others wi'them: all me brothers and sisters, they'd picked them up on their excursion – after lessons, or work-time, unlike yours truly – and wi'them gambolling and shouting about the place, and Ma and Da back in good spirits – that's old Alec back on the scrapheap. I weren't going to get no more attention.

“So after tea, I went out wanderin’ – even in the dark – it were winter, I remember – and I went down the village in the street-lights – well, the one we had – and I coulda rustled up some o' the boys for to go night-fishing, or lamping, but I'd brung none o' me gear with me, so I went round to Dorry's – she were me girl-friend at the time, for all intents, though pure innocence – and she sympathized.

“She were a nice girl, lovely family all-in, in fact; her Ma made us hot cocoa and me and Dorry sat on the kitchen floor and played marbles, and she absolutely thrashed me, won 'em all off me, and I
cried in front of everyone. I were never more humiliated before or since!

“On seein’ this, me heart-break, Dorry were so panicked-sorry, that she tried to give ‘em all to me back, but I weren’t havin’ it – I went a bit haughty, if you can believe it, said, ‘No, no, it’s quite alright Dorothy.. tha’ won fair and square-like, please – just leave me my dignity.’ And I went out sobbin’ and snifflin’ into the dark, for to walk back home, where the house were all shut up and they hadn’t noticed my absence, and I had to kip in the stone barn wi’the dog – at least she were glad to see us!

“Next day, I were a bit dishevelled, and still snootin’ me family – though think they noticed? - I went to school, and at break Dorry come over and gave us this model-airplane kit her brother had sent back from America. Well I were that loony wi’happy that I didn’t notice for weeks that that were actually the last time she spoke to me! ‘Spose it were just her way of splittin’ up wi’us."

I like listening to Alec’s tall tales and childhood stories.. I’m sure he embellishes them.. Beautiful nonsense. Though of course, the last laugh is always directed at himself – for comic effect! Can’t have been always the actual case, surely!

From my vantage, each and every person who ever encountered Alec will have fallen at his feet in rapture, in love – or ought to have. How could it be possible that I’m the only one who isn’t blind?!

Alec carefully covered the simmering pot of plums with a damp muslin, dried his hands on a tea-towel, before propping them on his hips and said, facing me: “Well! How about a little practice?”

This was how he referred to it now, and if I simply say ‘it’ you may guess what I mean. For a while now, I had been keen to try out full-on lovemaking while playing the part of the receptive partner; party to Alec’s control and leadership. I’m doing my best to describe it in the least embarrassing way possible! All the usual words and phrases sound so coarse and unwieldy in a kissable mouth!

Of course I wanted him to make love to me. In me. All the way. In. It’s all about in!

Which is why I was a little nervous. We’d been together so long now, simply aeons, and yet we pleased each other so (very) often with hands and mouths, slicked fingers and tongues and teeth and thighs and arms gripped vice-like around writhing bodies. All jolly good. Jolly incredible.

But there’s always that – the joining – the last connexion – the communion – and it fascinates. I did it to Alec sometimes, at his behest – well I – shagged him, bless you, and it was so life-altering, seeing him come apart so, and him needing me so much, pleading with his eyes and mouth and body, so
vulnerable and trusting, so open to the possibility of pain in the search for pleasure, that it was my grave, *sacred* responsibility to be so very careful with him, like an artist with a fine paint-brush, to be gentle of him as much as feed his desire.

Afterwards he was always particularly affectionate and clingy and I have to say I rather enjoyed that too – but also I got a hunger to try it for myself – the risk and heart-thumping excitement of exposing oneself completely to another and for them to take ever such care – I had a feeling Alec would be a very good Lover.

“Oh, I'm not half bad. Never had any complaints in that department, anyroad! Now, as regards endless yapping and bothering the head off a person..”

“I think it would be amazing,” I said. “I'd love to give it a go.”

“We don't have to.. You don't have to,” he said.

“I *know* that Alec – my land! You keep on saying and saying that.” I went to where he stood in the kitchen, draped my arms around his shoulders, and looked down at him, our foreheads touching, and I said, “Don't you want to make love to me?”

“Only more than anyone has ever wanted anything.”

“Wonderful!” said I.

“Only – oh, only! Oh, I've said it time and again. Tongues and fingers is one thing, but down-there – all the way – a different kettle of fish – a dick is tricky.. I'd hate for you.. I just couldn't bear to hurt you. Not you, above anyone.. My lovely lad.”

“Oh Alec.. You won't. And if you do – it'll only be a little. *You* like it – surrendering over to me – don't you?”

“Oh yes. Oh, I do, alright.”

“And I want to be just like you.” I grabbed both his hands. “You're my role model. Don't laugh! You know I utterly idolize you, Alec, like a blinkered schoolboy! Let me..” Here I took his face in my hands, and stroked gently; he closed his eyes as I whispered, “Alec, take me over.” I brought his finger to my mouth and kissed it: “Please, at least – try. I'm asking.”
“Oh my own darling.” He opened his eyes and they shone. “Well.. Alright. Let's. There's no harm in 'try'..”

And so try we did, dedicated, on the regular, like sportsmen training and honing their craft for an upcoming match, ha ha – except we weren't competitors, we were team-mates, with a common goal – although I suppose Alec was the striker and I the keeper in this regard! And I wanted him to score, traitorous me, him to win, champion of me!

Of course I was apprehensive about being driven into; whereas Alec, for all his experience, was rather crazily flustered about being the fully-responsible driver.

Once or twice he got so agitated that he went a little soft, his preparatory, although he was pretty philosophical about it, explaining to me with an embarrassed half-smile, “See, this is what I get for climbin' the walls and gettin' so vexed over it all! It's just that – when I do manage to slide meself into you, I'm afeared it'll be so – it'll mean so much, be so wonderful that I'll cry – or – blow me load immediate or summat – No, Morrie, don't laugh, I'm bein' serious.. I'm not much used to bein' the grown-up.”

Othertimes – during bedroom practice-sessions – we would try for the physical implementation, and I would be waiting, on my back, legs open, Alec lying by me and prepping me with his fingers, reappearing the tin of balm, and then he would take my hand and together we would guide his prick to my entrance, where he'd press, and press, and it would be lovely, but then he might just begin to breach, and instantly I'd squeeze my eyes shut, suck air in through my gritted teeth – grip my fingernails into his arms, steel my thighs around him – and Alec would panic, and stop, and draw back.

“Oh Alec! Don't stop – keep going! Alright I froze a little, but it's – just a discomfort, momentary, that has to be endured through.”

“Has it? I'm sorry, it's just that: I can't see the point in something if it causes you pain. T'ain't worth that. You know I love you already and that's immoveable, right? Takin' it up the chuffer ain't no rite of passage. So to speak.”

“You speak too much,” I said, rolling away. “I wish you'd just do it.” Huffy of me, but I was embarrassed and frustrated too, at what I saw as my failure, for resisting him, for showing my upset at the hard intrusion.

“Don't you dare block me out, Maurice Hall!!”
And I turned back to face him, and took his hand. That was better. He continued: “I ain't gonna just shove it into you. I never done it rough that-a-way with anyone, especially not their first time, and I'm certainly not going to start with you.”

A kiss on my hand confirmed this doubly. Softly, he: “We got forever ahead of us. And..”

And the answer was this: to practice – no pressure, just keep gradually getting better, getting closer, getting more used to the full body sensations and positioning, and the tempo, and the emotional ascending..

Practice. Alec took to this, concentrating on every aspect, always with me lying compliant on my back naked, and he moving about on top and over and beside me, as he kissed me all over, and ran his tongue, and brushed his fingertips, and teased them, along, more, in, and out and back in.. I thrashed and gasped appreciation.

Again, another night, he lay on top of me, and kissed me, and then drew back – he's so short, he can't reach his intimate parts to mine whilst kissing me -! Slowly he ran his prick up all the way between my parted legs, and lay down on me again, the head of his hardness pressing against me in simply the most intimate place, and we both held our breath, and yet Alec continued on, sliding himself onwards, along the seam towards my balls – his own warm and squashed against me, right on the inner thigh – all of which, in itself, though only strictly a rehearsal, felt so amazing that I fairly howled out my finishing.

So gradually, gradually, gradually, it was always about to happen, just around the corner – him taking me, giving me.. And yet still there was no obligation – Alec made it clear that this coupling wasn't a necessity nor an inevitability – only a sweet possibility. Which only made me want him all the more!

On this particular plum-wine evening, Alec was his wonderfully assured, earthy and casual self about it all. At his suggestion, I perked up from my comfortable slump by the fire and said, “You mean – a practical lesson? Yes, please!” With an enthusiasm I rarely showed for my erstwhile boxing training!

“Right. Well. Have you been to the loo? I mean – do you have to..” Matter of fact as always, Alec.

“Why on earth would you bring that up?!” Aghast as ever – me!
“What?” said Alec, defensive, though his cheeks were a little red too. “Someone has to be pragmatic and bring up these brass tacks – and I've noticed it's always me.”

“But,” I said, “it's so – basic. Not romantic. Would you ask a girl the same question in these circumstances too?”

“If she'd not done it before and was a little nervous – yes.”

Of course he would. So predictably kind.

“Well, I'm all ship-shape in that regard – that is to say, I visited the W.C earlier. I'm grand.” If Alec was willing to give upfront frankness then he deserved it in return.

“Good.” Alec hunkered down in front of me and put a hand on my face, brushing my jaw with a thumb: “Now we can get romantic.”

Which he set to immediately, gliding his fingers down to my neck and chest. I was wearing a loose shirt and a pair of Alec's long-johns; hardly the most seductive gear but his eyes couldn't have smouldered more hungrily!

“Mm.. You're all lovely and clean and warm from washing. Can't wait to feel all of that lovely soft skin..”

“What had you in mind?” I was already half-gone from his traversing touches.

“Why don't I get you out of your britches and we'll see where the night takes us.” He stood and offered both hands out to me; I took them and he hoisted me up off the worn footstool, and deposited me onto the bed, pushing my shirt up and off, the better to kiss at my neck and chest and nipples and bite and rub his stubble there.. Heaven already.

When I was quite helpless, he sat back between my legs, raking his eyes over his handiwork approvingly. I could have laughed at how cute and funny he looked, turning on the sex-appeal and yet with his curls in disarray, fuzzy black and red diamonded golfing jumper-vest, grey shirt with tattered flapping sleeves, worn navy corduroys. To me, like a figure stepped out of a painting.

Mmm.. With both hands he massaged my chest. “I love all this hair..” he said. All of it, he touched
and combed, down to my belly and back up to my arm-pits. Wriggling back down even further, he
pulled off my pants until I was entirely unclothed, revealing everything – and he gave a – almost a
groan of excitement and dove down, nuzzling his face into my personal hair and taking in and
sucking on my surprised but desperate cock – up and down, circling round – lovingly –

Before he bounced back on the bed again and drew my legs open – not just open but up, he held my
legs in the air, lowered his face again and lavished wild abandon with his tongue, first all over and
then concentrated crucially, flicking those long, lavacious strokes, over and over – right there – the
most sensitive part, rhythmically, then erratically –

Felt so weird and wet and yet my toes in the air were curling, my body shaking, I had the corners of
the fitted sheet pulled off the mattress already, and it took all of my will not to cry out. I wanted to
save it – keep it – I knew he had so much more torturing to do yet – and I groaned and writhed and
pulled at his hair, no words but he knew well that I was pledging myself over and over to him, no
resistance.

I loved it, and I loved him, and I didn't feel any less a man – or indeed, any less of a gentleman – it
wasn't depraved or filthy; quite the opposite, I felt like I was beyond earth, tapping into the sacred
troves of pleasure in the universe, and I sent a silent, sweating prayer of thanks to every partner Alec
had ever lain with – male or female – for their part in his honing of his craft.

For he was masterful.

Fast and then slow, one long lick and then lots of little ones.. Travelling with his nose, and mouth,
up, up slow all the way to the tip of my prick – but it was clear where his preoccupation lay tonight,
lay exposed and softening and weakening and opening – I looked down in disbelief at all this – but
mostly, I remember the feeling, oh, feeling him ease my bottom cheeks apart just that bit more, and
with the concentration of a chess player and the appreciation of an art critic –

Frowning and tapping his chin, tapping until he put his finger in his mouth, sucked it – I convulsed –
where did the energy come from? - He flashed a reassuring smile to me, waited for me to relax again,
then fingertip circled my amenable entrance slowly, slowly, round and round – pressing in – he
stared at his own actions – I couldn't see, my own erection was in the way but I saw his bowed
head..

Satisfied with this stage – well, he was, I couldn't have told you what day of the week it was – he
bobbed up, rolled over to the side of the bed, and fetched from the drawer the little container.

“Vaseline,” he said. “Gives you a sheen for a price that's keen.”
“You don’t have to come the salesman’s patter,” I said.

“Oh, no?”

“I’m already sold! Fully furnished, red ink-stamped, signed and sealed -!”

“Fully? We’ll see about that.”

And he crawled over me, and flopped down by my side to kiss me as he applied his touches between my legs – one dexterous finger – slid in further – then another – I bucked on them, we created a rhythm, my legs wide as they would go, knees bent, bottom in the air – Alec’s prick pressed against my hip, patient, and he could have pulled off his clothes quickly, but instead, he got up off the bed, stood in the glow of the hearth and undressed slowly for my visual delight.

It also gave me a little break from the intensity, although I missed his pressing desperately already. With his cock straight out, bright red and ready, Alec made as if to come back to me, when suddenly he stopped, clearly realizing something, and he turned to the fire and gave the plums a quick stir. I had to laugh at that!

And at the heady steam in the room from the wine-in-the-making!

“Doin’ alright,” muttered Alec, replacing the wooden spoon to the sink. “Oughtn’t be long now..”

“To what are you referring?” I said, and in answer he climbed back onto the bed, over me, looking down at my face as I looked up adoringly at him, and he lowered his lower body onto mine. For the first undulation of his hips, both of our lengths brushed together and I struggled for air – Alec’s body, his face and his hair all I could see and his heat below all I could feel -!

That was mere harbinger however. Next, he pulled back and began to rub himself again against my bottom – already so played-with and receptive – he slid his low length from practically my tail-bone to my balls. Heaven. Over and over – like a play-act of lovemaking. Like – practice.

“Might actually git it in this time,” he said lowly, and, given this, he scooped and applied more of the jelly to himself and me, half the tin entire, looked like.. And now, each time he slid, he slowed as he approached my entrance, rubbing, pressing, getting it accustomed – I shuddered and shivered and clung to him – it really was emotionally overwhelming; he had warned me of this, and he was right, as always!
“You want to – with your hand?” he said.

“No – please, Alec, you do it. I want it done to me.”

“Alright,” and he lined himself up, readied. I felt him more than I've ever, his poor flushed face wet with concentration as he peered down between our bodies, searching with his hand to ensure he had the correct position; mostly done by feeling.

My hands rested loosely on his biceps; despite what was happening below, I found I absolutely could not take my eyes off his face. Alec.

“Ah – here we go!” In just the same tone of voice he would use when putting down a cup of tea in the morning when it was time to leave for work, or upon unearthing after searching a lost letter or scarf.

There it was, so hard and blunt and evident, against me – no, not against me – for me, with me, becoming one with me, I felt him breaching in gently and I let out the world's longest, the life-longest sigh.

Alec, sweaty-haired boy, still had a careful hold of his prick with his hand as he eased it in, lest, I should think, he jerk it forward accidentally. I didn't think he would, so wary was he, although I could feel the wild tension tempered in his trembling hips and thighs – still it was reassuring, just his absolute care for me and close attention to the preferences of my body.

Reading it like a book now, he was. Discovering and reciting out chapters I'd never even known about myself.

So, so tender, so otherworldly, like an angel and I was almost afraid of losing myself to pleasure and forgetting even Alec, that he existed, that I myself did, and all of the corporeal world..

My arms I wound round his shoulders and I slowly – simply everything was slowly, there was no before and after, yesterday or tomorrow – only now – I took his head in my hands and brought it to mine as he still laboured gradually down below – him nudging ever inward and me – allowing it! I could feel him more and more, parting me, pressing me, making room - !

“Talk to me,” I whispered.
“You mean.. Tell you all the things I want to do to you?”

“No, I mean.. Talk. Tell me things.. Your things. Tell me about night-fishing.”

If Alec was surprised by this detour – well, of course he showed it. When doesn't he? But maybe he knew – I wanted comforting. Not just before and after – during, and always.

“Night -? Oh, well – have you never? We must do it sometime. Aye, that we will. Well, what you do is, you git yourself a grand, clear, moonlighted night – a little rain's alright, only you'd rather cloudless 'cause you can see better. It'll be summer – but at night – can be bitter cold in this here country, still, tha' well knows!

“So.. tug on your woollies, your brother's boots and your mother's cardigan, and your dad's hat – the one with alla the lures on – grab your tackle – ahem – grab she and bag it up and bang out the back door, no need to be quiet, 'cause it's June and alla your folks are still up eatin' peaches, drinkin' wine, stargazin'..."

All the while he was gaining me more and more, slipping in, soon he'd have to let go his guiding fingers as he approached.. His voice soothed and beguiled like a lullaby, though.. It made what we were doing so mixed, contradictory, conflicting.. Could we possibly be engaging in something so base, and breathtaking and exciting, and yet also, and just as much – gentle, and sweet and youthful.

He could do it, Alec.. He could do anything.

“...away you go round the village then, rousting out the lads, either drag 'em out or git 'em to sneak out and meet us in the clearing by the edge of the woods. Then you-all troop through the forest, keep to the thinner tree-edge 'cause ye need all the light. If it were day-bright ye'd be whoopin' and yellin'.. Pushin' and singin' and tellin' filthy jokes..

“But somehow, night's that quiet that you are too, and maybe just the odd nervous laugh, but ye stick close together for – well. Silly safety..

“At the water, ye fiddle out the boat – ye could cast off from the bank, only.. There's summat about haulin' she out to the middle o' the lake, in the middle o' the night, up to your waist in it, and then chest, and then climbin' in and rockin' and splashin', and the stars above still and the wind a-tenderin' the reeds, the crickets and the moths about you, slap 'em, give out, wobblin' the boat, but eventually
you manage to get far enough out on the lake to throw out all your lines and turn a little holy again..

“One lad might have to lean on another to get right comfortable, and ye wait..

“Only, it’s not really waitin’, ’cause it don’t matter none if nowt bites, so really you are just.. Bein’ where you want to, boat moves only a little, the lake bright wi’ the moon but the woods in the distance dark and unreal, only a deer flash by every so sudden..”

By this time, we had joined up, he inside me completely, I could feel him, of course, pressing on all sides, my face throbbing red from it, thighs trembling -

Alec bowed his head to my shoulder to wheeze in a breath, and, bodies paused, I crept a cautious and curious hand southward between us – amazing, just..

Utterly beautiful. I ran a finger around the circumference of his cock where it was buried into me, my hair there tangling with his, soaked in sweat, his balls warm and tickling me where they rested, pressed, my own prep – not-so, only half so, content to be so on my stomach. I was full up, topped-up, brimming with joy, with Alec.

“Oh Alec. Your midnight adventures.” Embracing him, my lips at his ear. “Sounds so heavenly.”

“It were fun. Though not as fun as this..” And he raised his head and his eyes sparkled. “Nothing has ever been as much fun as this.”

And he pulled out slightly – I felt it viscerally – and he pushed back in and I heaved in surprise, but – please – again – out, half-an-inch – glide back in..

Alec propped himself up on strong arms as he worked. I slid my fingers along them, the jumping sweaty muscles; I was more aroused – despite my own softness – than I had ever been in my life.

Gazing up at him.. His boyish face suddenly so strong and mature and masculine in his concentration and effort and control.. Drag out.. Slow back till he fit in snugly.. And again..

I was taken over completely, like I’d begged to be, his utterly, and all I could do was shiver in shock, my legs wide open and arms clinging to him, being shifted into and into and into by Alec.
Whose eyes were closed as he steadied his breathing coolly – what a master he is – when he opened his eyes again to look down at me, he winked!

Why the cheek of him! Could scarcely believe he’d – couldn't believe anything really, this had to be too good to be true. But it was. I gasped into a smile – bit my lip; one hand on Alec's shoulder, I brought the other to my mouth to bite a finger-knuckle – perhaps this proved, in hindsight, too coquettish for Alec, for he trembled and breathed out his own deep sigh, his poor arms struggling with his weight – he lay down flush on me, of course being obliged to rest his head on my chest because he's so little.

I knew that he had worked so very hard to play the part of the confident, bridling Lover, bestowing his love expertly: but the scales were falling now, and Alec – my Alec, the usual unusual fellow, the romping-night-fisherman – he brought his hand to my cheek and his lips to mine – I tilted my head forward for him to reach and he whimpered: “Oh God.. Oh, Maurice.. Darling.. Precious angel.. My little runaway prince..”

“Ha – hahahahaha!!” I'm quite afraid I said then, half from amusement and half delirious ecstasy, joy of the Beloved.


Oh – whoops – oh my... dear – my body must have squeezed when I rocked with laughter, stomach muscles twitching and convulsing – and other ones too – for Alec arched his back, and clung to me – every cell in his body vibrating, straining towards the goal, everything clenching for one stunning second – I felt a thickening, and he froze, pumping sweat, glistening like a live, tangible – touchable, fuckable – work of art.

“Oh my God.. Oh God.. Jesus.. God.. Fucking..” Alec panted for breath in huge gulping lungfuls. I felt a warmth, an awareness down below.

“Did you come off?” I said. I lifted poor, floppy, weak Alec off me gently by the shoulders, his head drooping; I peered around his dripping hair, down between us, to see his prick easing out a little - Yes!

“You did! Oh, darling!!” What victory! I hugged and clung his puffy body to mine again and wrapped my legs around his hips, vicing him twice, thusly. Rubbed my face against his, pecked
kisses.

“Oh Alec! My own beautiful boy – not that I wasn't all yours already – but I'm yours all over again now, completely, always and forever! Oh Alec! My body is yours, yours to do with as you please! I'll follow you anywhere! Oh Alec how you have renewed me!”

I was able to ramble thus for a while; Alec was incapable of speech for the time being.

A little convalescence, a well-earned rest, lying on top of me.

After a few minutes of heavy breathing, and allowing our hearts to settle and resume their usual pace – Alec and I do work ours overtime – his voice was the first thing to recover – naturally.

“I can't believe you drawed it outta me, made me come off from your laughin'! I'm mortified!”

“It's quite a million miles more than alright, darling,” said I.

“It's just – you went so tight sudden – again and again – all in a row – wi' your barkin’.”

“Alec, it was.. More than I ever could have dreamed. You were – are – wonderful! I didn't think you could express your love to me more fully than you already had done, but.. I don't know.. I'm just so excited for our future!!”

“I can't think o' the future,” said Alec. “Want to stay here in this 'now' as long as possible.” He ran his hands from my sides to my face; moved his hips a little to slide off me, slippery, his sweat and the mess.. Wonderful mess. Essence.

“You most probably would like another bath,” he remarked.

“I feel pretty cleansed, come to it,” I said. Washed away of my iniquity – if I still may make holy reference!

All the same, Alec got up off the bed. I released him unwillingly, but suddenly realized I was exhausted, and watched him bring a pan of water from the fire to the side, and get cloths, and towels,
and come back to wipe warm water slowly all over me, starting with my face.

“My word the sweat on you, man! A little labourer at heart.” He tapped my nose.

“Me? It was you doing all the work!” I protested.

Alec gave me his sympathetic look, which, I'll hazard, was meant to say, 'You'll learn.'

He rolled me off the dirty sheets, removed them to the washing basket in the corner, and replaced them with clean ones he'd sneaked from the landing linen cupboard; they were covered in a pattern of trees and could've belonged to anyone in the building.

Heady, appealing smells emanated from the soft blanket material as he slid them round my skin; I burrowed my nose in the folds and felt I could sleep for two centuries.

But can't sleep! Don't want to miss out on this closeness, bask in what I've managed to do at last! Alec lay down beside me after putting the kettle on, and fixing bread on the toasting-tongs; wrapped his arms around me, my head under his chin and his hand stroking my damp hair.

My knees bent, I curled up in a ball on my side facing him and pressed to him, suddenly acutely wanting to feel small and vulnerable. He drew me to him, combed my hair more and said: “Now I has to dote over you and mind you.. Mop you up like I done.. Tidy your locks.. Wrap you up warm and feed you.. All part of the process.”

“Is that so?”

“Aye.”

Again I thought: Alec has had many encounters in the past, but – maybe he's had few enough as good as this one, with such a grateful and devoted and lifelong partner.

Well, if he wanted to mind me and fuss, then I was happy to accommodate – who am I to buck tradition? If this is what always rightly happens when a person's made love to for the first time, then – so be it. How nice it is! His warm, soft body and slow stroking fingers on my brow! His silly satisfied smile and occasional 'mmmm's' of contentment!
“Alec..” I pulled gently at tufts of hair on his belly. “What we did just now was buggery..”

“Mmm..”

“A crime. And yet it was also making love. How could it be both?”

“Move your head a little – you'se leanin' a little heavy on my arm – come onto my chest – that's a good boy. What were you sayin’?”

I took his hand idly and examined his fingertips. “Mm.. Can't remember. Ho.. Quite lost my train of thought.”

“Well it's down on me that you have any thoughts left at all in that beautiful head o' yours!”

“But there aren't generally,” I said. “Except..”

“..Mm?”

“I love you.”

Alec looked mightily pleased, somehow even more so than he had been all evening!

Next day I was in the kitchen stripping a chicken. I had boiled it tender and was now removing the meat to put aside for sandwiches for lunch, or pie for dinner. The gristle and skin and bones would go to the alley-cats.

Up the stairs and in the flat-door bounded Alec, flushed with exertion and holding a brown-papered box tied with string.

“Hullo,” I said. “Looka me – this was supposed to be for economic purposes but I fear I'm eating as
much chicken as I'm saving!” As I unguiltily popped another piece in my mouth.

Alec held out the box to me with both hands.

“What's this?” said I, munching.

“It's for you.” Mysterious.

I rinsed my hands and dried them on my apron, then untied the string, pulled back the paper and opened the box to reveal – a cake, covered in soft chocolate icing and pink sugar roses.

“What's this?” I said again, laughing.

“Like I say, it's for you. For – last night. To celebrate!”

I looked up in surprise at his bright keen eyes, shy smile, blush.

“This is all part of the process too?” I took a sugar rose.

“It is now.”

“I declare Alec. You're just a sentimentalist.” But it was so delicious, sweet and powdery all over my tongue, heartening me down to my very toes.
Heat pumped and throbbed the city air, the clinging closeness perspiring the skin and underarms and wobbling the high trees hazy; the steam of July puffing in spurts up out of footpath-grilles. Summer was sweltering – we all were.

At the hothouse, which was once the office, the ceiling fans chopped around all day to no avail: all of those people crammed in one room, about fifty of us, wandering around, only half-paying attention to each other's news and copying down batch numbers incorrectly with frightful frequency.

At the flat, the windows lived open but the curtains barely fluttered – one had to stick the head all the way outside the sill to get the fresh stuff and even then, you were exposed to the sun beating relentlessly down..

Fans ran constantly at the library too, but one still tended to wake up groggily, confused, with the face stuck to pages; though it may have been the result of the heat combined with fact after fact about Imperial Corporate Taxation Policy, centuries of dates of statutes, and endless calculations. They're sweaters.

Time was ripe for rooftop star-gazing, going on the river, sunbathing in the park after work, dining *al fresco*, drinking in the streets, under parasol, wandering the night-time clubs and cafés. Pleasure became an urgency – and all of London understood.

People, peoplefolk everywhere. Swarming the streets – in polite day-time post office queues, later jostling for drinks at the bar. Thousands upon of them, each with their own story: all connected with each other through various degrees of intimacy – even just one fleeting meeting or a tipped-hat passing on the street. Thank the grace of God that we can – sometimes – develop these chance encounters into more!
Degrees of intimacy – what I wrote just now and you read it – it makes me think about friends, and what merits one to be one. As Alec and I went on and on, through time and life together, it was clear that our friendship – a most intimate one – was strong as a fortress. I think to the delight and secret surprise of both of us really!

To me, Alec is at once the most strange and exciting and wonderfully familiar boy imaginable. And he seems genuinely fond of me. Once one is safe and squared in that regard – coupled up – settled – one may gradually wander outward to notice again the rest of humanity, what's been going on, from the safe love-haven, now with fresh and generous eyes.

Of course you couldn't be completely open and frank with everyone; for Alec and I, there was an obvious litmus test as to whether a person could be considered a true friend.

Take Brian Dawson, for example. No hard feelings since the fight; in fact we met up afterwards to shake hands and compare bruises. Since then we occasionally met for a drink or to go to a prize-fight as spectators only; I confess that I hadn't told him that I was living – sinfully – with another man – well, he never asked!!

“Why not take Brian into your bosom?” said Sally on the subject.

“Aye, maybe he's 'odd' himself – like us,” said Alec – rather hopefully! “What do you think Davey, might he be persuadable?” Davey often came to watch the fights as well, and as such might have some insight – if you could call it that.

“Well, he spends half his time down at the gym with other fellows, half nude,” said Davey, “I'd say there's a good sporting chance.”

“Check and see subtly if he's open-minded,” said Sally. “Show him some Aubrey Beardsley.”

“Some what?” said Davey.

“An artist.. Does like, mucky drawings and that,” said Sally.
“Well the Lord preserve you!” flustered Davey.

“Does she do commissions?” said Alec.

This was surely a joke; one simply had to be circumspect, it was that grave a matter. Alec and I encountered little trouble as regards our criminal lifestyle, because we were oh-so-careful; evasive in answer and reserved in public affection, and candid in front of only a cherished select few.

Simply put: was it worth risking our security for the sake of popularity, for pomp and display? Other people.. There was no way of telling the reaction one would get upon tentatively pushing the boundaries of acquaintance into friendship by means of full – or even fractional – disclosure.

Let's consider Robbey – Alec's workmate, you'll have heard – or read – his name dropped here and there along the way, and whatever impression you got of him thus far, I'll further furnish: a great, hulking, straw-haired, affable sort of a lad, with a terrible sense of direction which was unfortunate because he was supposed to be navigator. Alec was forever giving out to him but there was no venom and consequently Robbey was very fond of Alec.

They spent a lot of each day together, and would naturally run to talking. But still. Was understanding his strong point? (Had he any at all??) One must be receptive to the hints.

As I mentioned, I sometimes joined the pair of them on Saturday-morning deliveries; minding the tea and discouraging children from jumping on the back of the cart and messing. (Alec said to give them a hob-nail to the head but I'm sure he was joking.)

On occasion, when it rained, I crawled under the tarp, wrapped about me like a cloak, and Robbey held an umbrella over Alec the driver – which obliged Robbey to huddle close and put his arm around Alec so as to hold it aloft covering them both.

“'Ere, nuffin' funny, mate! I ain't bent!” said Robbey.

“Good!” said Alec. “Then you'll keep your grubby meathooks to yourself!”

“What a prize idiot,” was Davey's later take on this exchange.
“Isn’t he?” said Alec.

“I meant you,” said Davey. And ribbing.

With Sally and Davey, with whom we spent most of our time if we weren't deliberately doing something alone together, it was different again. So familiar were they, that they were more to us than friends and more like family – if family are people you see daily, tell all your news, accept fully, and run along with comfortably knowing we were chums – it needn't be acknowledged, only deepened the longer we knew one another.

Supposedly, we were all partnered up awry, and subsequently on the lam, and it was at kindness' behest that we looked after one another! If Alec or I happened to return home to the flat and the other wasn't there, we would generally go straight round to Sally and Davey's for the company, and they felt liberal enough to accept our same courtesy. Rather like the dorms in college, although nowadays there was absolutely no need to dress up to see or be seen – a listless worn shirt was much more likely!

One day, you might find us all at Sally and Davey's small, tightly-packed yet quite nicely decorated flat – plants on every surface – doing such typical lounging around.

Sally, cross-legged on an ottoman, frowned at a fashion-magazine in the way a student might examine undeclined Latin nouns. Davey's long form was stretched out on the armchair, legs thrown, his hands joined over his front and a wet cloth over his face – he tended to come home from work at the mill with sawdust in his red eyes and his fingers full of splinters. Of an evening, Sally would take one of Davey's hands, Alec the other, and they would both pick out all the splinters with a needle.

I thought this suffering needless and bought Davey a sturdy pair of work-gloves; he smiled, a little embarrassed, when I gave them to him, with his: “Oh – er – Well... Thanks, guv.” Next day he came home from work both bloody- and empty-handed; they'd been stolen, of course.

On this evening of ottoman and armchair, I myself was lying stretched out on the big cumbersome sofa in the Davey-Manders sitting-room, my feet flung nonchalantly on the arm-rest. Alec had come straight from football training and pulled the two big pots of water over the fire to slowly heat for a wash, then he lay down beside me with his head on my chest and his arms around me, still in his stripy jersey, shorts and long gartered socks. And his cap – he was at the moment playing keeper, appropriately enough. At the very present, he was asleep, and heavy, and heavenly.

Sally issued disgruntled noises from her reading-seat; not unlike Alec, she could rarely – when awake – sit still. Any wonder, though; she was always excited, those days. Having gone down,
bravery mustered, to the Market Square and approached the flower-sellers, Sally had struck up friendship with the fluttering flower-girls and managed to obtain a position from one of the more genteel flower-ladies.

It was, for the moment, deliveries – providing produce and occasional relief to the front-line Precinct Girls; still she was delighted to have a toe in the industry and every day was a learning curve – for example, when one bicycles like lightening through the city-streets, with flowers in the back-basket, the petals will tend to fly off and leave a dancing trail behind, like confetti. Thus un-sellable. A lesson once learned, long remembered!

Consequently, as Sally was spending so much time with 'spiff' city-girls, she wanted to brush up on the latest lady-culture. Hence the stack of Women's Periodicals she had piled on the desk beside here, and her nightly swotting-up.

“UGH. I just can't seem to understand the difference between a blancmange and a syllabub. This seems to just come naturally to other women! Maybe I should get hypnotized.”

“I know a good doctor for that,” I said from my prone on the sofa. “Oh wait. I don't.”

“What?” said Sally.

“A while ago, I went to a head-doctor to cure me of my – er – peculiarity,” I said. Alec's soft snores on my chest compelled us all to speak a little lower than usual.

“Well I hope you kept the receipt,” said Davey from underneath his face-cloth.

“Well, he did say that there was a.. fifty percent of seventy-five percent chance of a failure rate,” I said.

“Sounds like my marks at school,” remarked Sally.

History was worn lightly.

Another day, and in the bright evening, I was in our flat with Davey, us both in our rolled-up shirt-sleeves cleaning lengths of pipe that the landlady Mme Raverat had bought at a knock-down price at a demolishing, and now wanted to see replace some of the ancient plumbing in the boarding-house.
Each storey had been given a share to tend to, or so we were told; we on the fifth floor had some ten or so boxes to contend with.

In burst Sally, along with her little fair-haired flower-friend Tossie – a girl sweet but painfully shy, and who was only too happy to be dragged around everywhere by gregarious Sally. Yes I could relate!

“You'll never guess!” said Sally. “Gosh! You'll just never-ever guess!” And bouncing, and tugging at grimy arms.

“We won't, and what's more we won't even try. What's on ya, lass?” said Davey.

“Well,” said Sally, “I was just down at the General Post Office, you know, in the centre of town, at the Department of Man-power renewing Alec's trading licence for him. The clerk went away for the forms a-muttering, 'Scudder, Scudder.. Unusual name, that, where would it be now..', when another official there overheard him, and said, 'Scudder, did you say? Do you know there's been a something here, return-to-sender, in the post office lost-bay for ages, they wouldn't be the same person now, would they?' - and of course I had all of Alec's particulars with me, and could prove it - and – look!!”

Obediently we looked as Sally ran to the half-open flat door and proudly pulled it open fully to allow in two men in overalls and boots, caps and kerchiefs, stepping carefully under the weight of a large, dirty, wooden crate, 'ROYAL MAIL INTERNATIONAL' stamped all over. 'Return – Great Britain – Paid in Full' – proclaimed a notice on top.

“It's Alec's kit!” said Sally. “His Argentine do!” She was red-faced with excitement, and Tossie too; they moved aside the table to make room for the men to set the box down heavily.

“Well upon my word,” tutted Davey. “Well, I'm telling you!”

“What's that? Who are you telling?” Alec came in, filthy; he was spending the evening chasing rats up and down the building in preparation for the repairs. The rodents hid adeptly in the walls, while Alec less skilfully pulled skirting-boards and cracked plaster in their wake.

He looked about the crowded room - “What's going on?” - before lighting upon the big wooden box and startling visibly, open-mouthed.

Sally grabbed his arm. “Your kit! It's come back, return-to-sender! Or return to retriever, anyway -”
She smiled at me.

“WHAT?!” Alec jumped upon me, threw his arms around my neck and kissed me all over my face. “Oh – Maurice – you never – you didn’t – but you did – oh, kid!!” And he dropped down onto the carpet to throw himself onto the crate and cuddle it too.

“Never mind that,” said Sally to the delivery-fellows, who looked a bit shocked by Alec's demonstrativeness. “It's normal around here. We're all libertines, drunks, socialists, whores, artists...”

Alec tugged at the rivets on the box-corner: “How'd you...”

“Which one of you'se a whore? I've got a mighty hunger..” said one of the delivery-men.

He looked at Sally, sitting on the kitchen table swinging her legs; she shook her head and nodded towards Davey, lounging on the window-sill. Davey looked the man up-and-down with apparent appraisal, and said, “Two an' six.”

“You what! Do I look like I've me pockets lined,” cried the hauler in indignation. “Rent to make..”

Which reminded me of the rightfulness, and as I pulled out my wallet to pay the men for the delivery, Davey hissed to me in terror: “Don't tip 'em more than a shilling!” Clearly he ought to have valued himself higher!

Alec swung out his crowbar, that he'd been applying, perhaps, to rats all day. Everyone came forward to watch him lever, even the delivery-fellows who'd mellowed with money and apparently were curious also. Alec opened up his old life – and his one-time, hypothetical new one. Reverently he reached inside.

“Well I'll be... Bless my soul... Well saints be praised...” and lots of other little phrases like that he muttered as he rediscovered; we watched as if he were a starstruck Egyptian archaeologist – certainly, the contents of the kit were removed, and held, and examined with sacred care!

Items brought out of the case and passed around included food, such as sugar, tea, biscuits, chocolate, dried beef, pickled onions, sweets, raisins; Alec's clothes ranging from 'good' to 'rangy'; toiletries, magazines, a photo-album – and an envelope, stuck neatly to the inside of the lid.
The others all gathered round to hold Alec's clothes aloft and laugh, and eat the goodies, and read the comics; Alec took the envelope and examined it - "Oh! It's from my mother!"

Immediately, he grabbed my hand and pulled me out to the landing, for to sit beside each other on the top step of the stairs. Unfolding the enclosed letter, he held it up between us, in clear invitation for us both to read it together, in the dim shaded light, his knee pressed to mine.

"Dearest Darling Alec,

My own boy. It's happened through at last. You have gone on now away from your loving home and parents and shop and school and the rest, and are now, all likely, comfortable and happy as all get-out on the beaches of the Argentine.

I'm sure we had our good-byes, my love, on the docks as you boarded that *Normannia*, and you looking fair right and strong and proud as your dad done at that age. Though I'll allow there ain't much family resemblance, still every time your Da will come out with something funny like he does, I'm sure to think, how our Alec would laugh at that! How I'd love to hear him do so!

As I say – which, I meant to say, I wrote – I'll have said fare-well to thee, but I'm equal-sure that I won't have said *everything* important, so I will here:

Keep to Freddy. Don't go out too late at night, please, there's a lad, ease your mother's heart. Eat Right – plenty of English beef if you can find it, tatties and gravy. Wear the mosquito netting – will you? I've heard-tell fair nasty stuff about the little prickers, that you should do well to avoid them – I've packed in your kit extra netting, I'm not sure how you'll be able to see with it wrapped around your face but I'm sure they have their ways out there.

Now I know it's tempting, my lad, but you just steer clear of those Daughters of Joy out there – won't you? Oh, unless you happen to come across little Jeannie Arbuckle – you know Mrs Finchley from the drapers, her niece – it were always heard that it were the Argentine that she ended up in and if you see her, you might tell her to drop the family a line, they're still fair wondering.

Now, I know well, Licky, that you are a fine strong lad and that it's only natural for a man to outgrow his home and strike out into the world; all the same it's a little hard – you've always been - my Alec, and I hate to think of you lonely and so my dearest wish is to imagine you settled with your own young one, that you love and who loves you – I include some of my bottom drawer for to help you – it would be a comfort to me and especially to you.
I know fair well that you'll enjoy yourself mighty out there foreign, as Fred done, and it's no place at the beginning of your voyage for a mother to say she's heartbroken, so I won't.

Perhaps you will allow me, though, to tell you I love you so, and will do, daily, forever, and I remain, and have no higher calling than to be,

Your loving Ma.”

Blood fairly fled from my face; I don't know where it went but I was, I'm sure, white as a sheet. Somewhat incongruously, I was all aghast and awfulled – the letter was so affectionate, so impossibly warm and generous, like a loving embrace! He'd willingly left this?!

Alec took his time in finishing the letter, even allowing for the fact that he's a slow reader generally. After about half a nervous minute, however, his lips stopped moving and curved into his half-smile; he even gave a small laugh, and turned to me, eyes shining, full.

“I told you – I told you – she's pure solid gold – didn't I? Dear Ma...” Alec's tone was wistful, but his words strong, controlled. Proud.

A little choked, I said: “You must miss her.”

“Ah, I do, yeh, 'course.. But.. Not so much with you around. I mean, yeh, bein' away from her and all is wrenchin', but..” Measured tones, he continued, “This is best. I mean – I were leavin' her anyway.” Here he gestured to what he figured was South America, although he was actually indicating East, but I let that pass of course, as he worked toward his point.

“It gives me chills, almost, to think 'what-if' – what if I had gone on to the Argentine, like I were supposed to, and I got to Buenos Aires, and were holed up in Fred's, swelterin' and alone in me room – or me corner of a one – and I opened up me kit, and found this letter? Read it through? Without you to bolster me? I'd fall all to pieces. I'd be so homesick I'd die – fact. I couldn't've gone on – without her. So far from her. Ma.

“But.. the way things are now, the way things turned out, Thank God – I can cope, with anything, as long as you keep on – mindin' me, every day, and see me through the night.”
He sighed. “I know, I'm that soft – but, well.. If I were gonna leave her love, then I had to step directly into yours. It were either that or go without entirely and I don't like the cold.. S'pose that's why I were so insistent upon you, trailing you round and round the estate.”

“Alec,” I said, heart thumping, “Are you telling me that you love me as much as you do your mother?”

Softly he nodded, and it was my turn to wobble near to weepy.

Alec plucked out a few notes of money from the envelope, meagre and yet mighty in its gesture. Motherhood.

“And look!” he said brightly. “For us' cottage! Ain't that summat? It's what she intended. For me to set up home.”

“She surely meant with a wife,” I said.

“Oh? Says right here in the letter – 'your own young one' – you're one, and you're young, and you're mine. So this is my dowry, like – he-he! Now, ain't we legitimate?”

One simply had to laugh, at his face, his joy, his nonsense. Little did I realize at this point in the evening that it would be an absolute night of it!

Sally appeared in the flat door-way, draped in a large brown corduroy coat and flapping trouser-cuffs.

“Hay! Do look!” said she. “We're going to put on alla Alec's fancy gear and go out dandying – eh!”

Alec leaped up and raced towards her. “Oh! Don't you stretch out them britches wi' those wide hips o'yours, Sal!”

“I won't either – there's plenty of room for me – see? You and I are about the same build, looks like..”
“Oh – do one!!”

And so, all dandied – although that's probably too strong a (ridiculous) word – we trooped out to take on the town, as it were, Alec leading the way and promising us he knew an 'absolute banger' of a place, though this was grapevine-knowledge only; he'd never actually been there.

Trusting Alec all of we, we followed him easily, willingly, the hum of noise and expectation of the street-lamped night enough of a gilded invite to fun. You really never know where you'll end up in London, when you needn't really be anywhere particular – and your party leader is so boisterous, rallying.

Earlier in the evening, Alec had groused and complained and howled in protest when we went through his trunk and examined, discarded and decided on items of his clothes; when really, he was delighted and amused and flattered at the idea of his friends sporting his garb and marching about in public, mimicking his usual showing-off, his confident gait.

My punishment was a green jumper and over-large black donkey jacket with tattered sleeves that we folded back – Alec said it was his best for first impressions, interviews and the like.

“Or funerals,” said Davey, who wore a grey cotton shirt and frightful rust-coloured coat that turned out to be the original property of Fred Scudder – complete with purple hankie in the pocket - and to top off the ensemble, like me, too-short pants. Alec is a pixie. You forget and yet are always reminded.

Sally had come up trumps also – well, in her opinion. In donning drag enthusiastic, she pulled on a grey woolly waistcoat of Alec's over a black shirt, lose grey pants tucked into long knee-high socks, and a mauve cardigan and scarf, topped off by a dark blue cap at a cocky angle. Her hair she tuck under as much as she could manage, loose locks fallen from her forehead and over her ears.
As we walked the street-lit footpath, Alec said: “Are you wearing my underwear too, Sally?”

“Aye, yeh,” said Sally. “In for a penny!” As she swaggered alongside. That fairly silenced Alec. Oh well, at least if he was aroused, I'd be the one to benefit later!

Once upon a time I would have called it vulgar, tawdry, barbarian; the surging swell of city people, night-time cheap pleasure-seekers, thickening as we drew nearer the docks – the drinking-areas.

Now, I could call it rambunctious, spirited, jolly – all the same, there was much crude swearing, jostling, elbowing as we passed through the crowd; I noticed Davey hovering very close to Sally, a hand floating always at her back, anxious glances down at her, and an impression that he wished he could be all around her, a protective shield. Though she was in her male-guise, still this didn't alter the fact of her short stature, cheerful trot, her startled expression when she tripped over a stray boot.

It was one of the major differences between us as couples, in fact, and probably a sad reflection on the status of women generally: for example, whenever Alec went out at night, for an extra shift of work, or to meet friends, football training, an errand, a mere walk – I would say good-bye and of course wish for his safe return – all the while confident he would do so.

Whereas, when Sally prepared to go out by herself of an evening, to the flower-shop, the allotment, or the Garden on her night-deliveries, Davey always jumped to worried, offering to go with her, pleading her to take no short-cuts, just climbing the walls until she came back, scruffy and tired, to his grateful embrace.

In fact more often than not he did go with her, even though, as she pointed out, his own work-hours were long and he ought to have been sleeping. But that's love for you!

On this tumultuous night she had to keep stopping herself from grabbing his hand and touching his arm and gazing at him loving; they hadn't learned to temper their outward affections as Alec and I had – they hadn't before needed to – and Alec said: “None o’that, if you please – that’s if I'm to get ye in at all!”

As deftly and as confidently as if he were scouting us through the pine-trails of a forest, Alec led us down the narrow streets and enclosed alleyways, past open wooden doors, swinging bar-signs, stacked barrels of ale, glaring lanterns, blaring music. What an adapter he is! How able for change like a boat bobbing on a wave! Keeping us safe.

At a large, grey, rough-bricked building – one in a row of bars – he stopped and cocked his head.
Some windows were broken; through the empty frames the music and noise and shouting poured out of this establishment called, according to the wonky sign, 'The Silver Dagger.' Ominous, what. People thronged and roared.

“Why – it's a working-class dive, so it is!” said Davey in shocked tones. Tickled as I was to hear Davey of all people express such class-horror, I was grateful he'd said it as well – I wasn't about to, though it need saying!

“I thought you said it was a decent place,” said Davey to Alec, “Where your commercial comrades go. Not this.. rowdy..” A nervous look at Sally, who'd innocently hooked his arm.

“It is, aye, but specific, it's for country lads who come to London and get into tradin'. Like, 'local boy done good', sort of a way,” said Alec.

“And here's where they celebrate by being bad!” said Sally as a glass smashed out through a nearby window and Davey all but threw his arms around her.

A crowd of night-timers, all men and all clamouring were waiting to get into the bar and so we joined the queue behind them. Alec stood a little aside to appraise the rest of us all in a row. One hand on hip, the other tapping his chin, he considered the passing of our muster slowly.

“Now then!” said he. “Alright, gang, now usually ye wouldn't get much in the way of a welcome in a place like this if you're a toff, a girl or an Irish; but don't you worry – I’ll smooth us in.”

“Jesus Christ.. He's milking it so much it's mooing,” said Davey.

Alec did indeed successfully smile us in past the door-men – likely due to our ridiculous clothes, the trappings of our so-called belonging. What other place would have us!!

“Gear! We're in!” said Alec. “Let's go fellows. All for one and one for all!”

A pretty sentiment indeed, except when it came to paying the cover charge, which was left to me as the others loped into the club, which revealed itself to be a large stone-floored hall with wooden walls, coloured windows, a large bar in the centre flanked with barrels, and a curtained stage behind it, upon which brightly clad women were dancing and playing musical instruments.
On the walls were banners, flags, bunting, scarves and posters; on the many small scattered tables were glasses, bottles and worn-down candles.

“Table for four please,” said Alec to the tall, curvy, curly-blonde haired waitress, who complied with a wink, even tucking in our chairs for us.

All around us was a sea of caps, coats, rolled-up sweaty sleeves, hairy forearms, stubbled chins, crooked teeth, laughs, threats, songs. Apart from the women working there – the waitresses, the bar ladies, the entertainers – it was a principally male crowd. There were very few women customers, actually socializing, patronizing; a few of them dressed in gaudy dresses and lacy gloves and high-heeled ankle boots teased men at the bar and in door-ways.

Not really enough women to go round, if the men's rapt attention and fights for dancing-rights were anything to go by. Suffice to say Sally was likely feeling pretty safe in her armour; had she been in her usual gear of skirts, blouses, pinafores and stockings, she might have been swamped with male enthusiasm and Davey would have spent the evening snapping necks.

There were no menus. “What shall we have to eat?” I said.

“Whatever's on,” said Alec and that explained it.

“Right, well, how about a drink while we wait for the waitress?” I said. “What'll everyone have – Sally? Pimm's?”

“BEER.” Sally smacked the table; getting into character, aplomb and everything.

After the lingering waitress took our order, which amounted to simply, 'food and beer', Alec gave a satisfied stretch, then folded his arms with his hands tucked into his armpits, leaned back in his chair and said proudly: “Now, how's about this for a reward for our damn-old working week! Hain't it been a hard' un!” Chimes of assent, even though it was only cautious Thursday yet.

“Hard enough. Still, it beats Penge any day,” said Davey.

“Penge! Stone me. I wonder how the old place is getting on without all of us to brighten it up!” said
Alec.

“Oh, it's just as much of a mad jumble as ever – I've had a letter from Milly telling me the news,” said Sally. “She asked to be remembered specifically to you, Alec.”

“Ha! Did she now,” said Alec.

“Awe.. Go easy. She liked you,” said Sally.

“Really!! Then why, in a moment of crucial intimacy, did she once call me 'Eric’?!! Put me right off me game, it did! So I got up, dusted off the grass-seeds, and stormed away w’me nose in the air – 'That'll learn her', I thought. And she followed me, callin', 'Hay! Where you goin'? Aw, don't get all pissed-off – cripes, love..'”

“You're such a flouncer, Alec,” said Davey.

“I just has a little self-respect, that's all! I like a person to know me name! Mind you, I sulked with Milly for about a week or so, and then she tipped a bucket of water over me from an upstairs window. We was alright after that.”

Alec certainly has strange notions about expressions of remorse. Often, after we have had a tiff, I'll come back home to find chocolate at my plate at the kitchen table and a hopeful Alec hovering, throwing looks over his shoulder. Other times he can't be bothered with all that and he'll come at me wailing SORRY! and the tight arms all around!

Methods of communication – they change and adapt and everything means something. A dropped bucket even! In this instance, because the conversation centred around an ex-paramour of his, Alec reflexively reached out and squeezed my arm once for assurance. Told me silent volumes.

“That's Milly for you – mad as a Hatter. Well, she's taken over as game-keeper now,” said Sally.

(“She's well qualified so!” said Davey.)

“She never!” said Alec, laughing.
“She has too. There's no-one else got, and old Ayres is stiff as a board, you know that,” said Sally. “She likes it well enough, although it's murder trying to control the rabbit population.”

(“At least someone is having it away up there,” reflected Davey.)

“It's murder alright – that's how you check'em. BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!” went Alec, with gestures. So feverish was he with being here, with his friends and beer in full flow. Quite delighted.

“Ha-ha.. But really, no better woman. Old Mill. She'd have the brains for it!” And Alec knocked the side of his own head playfully.

“Actually, she asked, seeing as I'm near you now, Alec,” said Sal, “She wants me to ask you, you know that bone-crunching machine you used for the carcasses.”

“The Mincer, yeh.”

“Mill she asks, how'd ye fix the gears of it? Some of the wheels and cogs and that have gone loose.”

“Oh yeh, that happens – she'll want to clean it out good and proper first, pick out all the guts, then tighten the screws with the Allen key.”

“Where's the Allen key?” said Sally.

“In the jam-jar on the shelf in the tool-shed,” said Alec promptly.

“That won't do – half the sheds is knocked, now,” said Davey.

“What?” said Alec.

“Aye, they're trying to rid them to make way for more tillage and sheep. Levelling the nonsense buildings too, the old hermitage and walled garden entranceway and archways. Converting those huge idle gardens into proper land. The Durhams are hoping on doing some extending to the farm, doing something useful with it at all at all; they're fairly in the red I tell you.” Davey didn't quite lack
sympathy in his tone, but sounded satisfied to state the facts that were facts.

He went on, “Who’ll do the farming, may I ask, now that near about every practical, able-bodied servant has cut and run?”

Another theme was clearly being ventured into with vigour, as Davey continued loudly, passionately: “I’m telling ye, boys, Penge is just like the Titanic – sinking in sad splendour. Except this time, it’s the working-classes who have the cop-on, the fore-sight, jumping ship and swimming to safety first and leaving all the swells to gargle water with their string quartet.”

“Here, here!” Sally clinked her glass to Davey’s; her eyes shone with conviction at his ideas – or dotty love for him – or both!

“Yes indeed,” said he. “Old money is old news.. for the knacker’s yard.”

Maybe I looked just that little bit uncomfortable, given my own history, for Sally tried to ease any personal toff-related concerns. “Oh but.. Penge might have a few years in it yet. Oh yes, the Master and his will have a family and pass down the house and the Seat and the whole merry-go-round will go on and on.. Inevitable. Shoo, already all the servants are taking bets on whether the first sprog’ll be a boy or a girl.”

“Mrs Durham the Younger is up the pole, is she?” said Davey. “Lovely. And who's the father?”

“Oh, now..”

“Hardly himself.. Sure the squire wouldn't know his way around a woman with a map.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” said Sally. Such bawdiness – crude but it matched the setting perfectly – if you could call it that – could have been happening at any table at this club. Perhaps it was! Laughter rang ricochet in the rafters!

Davey wasn't done. “And the missus! Old Anne.. Sure she’s too pious to even open her eyes when she changes her knickers. How could they even have a kid?! How could it happen?”

“They could've done it through a hole in the bedsheet,” said Sally.
“Jays, it wouldn't have to be a big hole,” said Davey, and then collapsing convulsions, guffawing, about splitting their sides.

“Alright, that’s enough, you two,” said Alec. “Flaming heckfire – I never hear such catty! By God, to be tearin' strips off of a fellow who isn't even here to defend himself”

Quieting their laughing, Sally and Davey exchanged looks of significance, as well they might; Alec was perhaps the biggest behind-the-back giver-outer on earth at times, he never tired of it.

And yet maybe he did.. A curious thing: of late, Alec had taken on some sort of a crusade when it came to the welfare and good name of Clive Durham, who had no idea of – and likely, no interest in – the fact that he had a little working-class hero out there in the world defending his honour.

Truly, what a thoroughly funny fellow is Alec. Perhaps he thought his own one-man teasing of Clive to be alright, but in a fit of interest in fair-play and justice, he didn't like to see a whole gang of mockers; maybe he felt a personal solidarity with Clive in being – albeit differently – a lover of mine; or it could have been he felt protective of anyone who felt an attraction to the same sex, as he did, no matter how they expressed it.

Or.. Maybe, it was me. Might just be that Alec thought Clive and I to be so similar in seemingly significant ways: background, upbringing, education, social class – and therefore a slight against Clive was a slight against me.

Could well be that – he shot a worried glance in my direction. And Davey is not the sort to let it be!

“Oooo! Well now! Isn't he fairly righteous all of a sudden? Saint Alec. Found goodness, have ye, at last? Turned the prig? You'll be chasing him round the bedroom yet, Maurice, trying to persuade him out of his pantaloons.”

“Speaking of bedrooms -” said Sally.

“Uh-oh,” said Davey.

“And chasing -”
“Yikes!” said Alec.

“I've been wondering wholesale. And I've just got to ask.” Sally looked from Alec to me. “Just how did the two of ye get together at Penge? I mean.. There's got to be more to it than ye just bumped into each other when wandering about the estate. What was the catalyst, the push?”

“Now that'll be a story, I'm telling you,” said Davey. Just then the dinner arrived: a big platter with a full roast chicken, for us all to hack at, bowls of greens and potatoes and Yorkshires, onion gravy, stuffing, bread and more tankards of beer, all arranged deftly on the table by the cheerful waitresses.

“Well?” said Sally, through munching her gravyed chicken-leg.

Alec and I looked at each other, as if surprised at the idea that we'd ever had a beginning, an origin, when 'forever' for us seemed to stretch out far into the past as much as the future.

Hot, rich, nourishing food, washed down with with beer, only served to encourage and feed the down-home earthy honesty and conversational sharing!

“Come on,” prodded Sally, “Tell us. How did ye two get close enough to fall in love? Break down the barriers? Bet it was Alec. Bet it was all his rascally actions.”

“Aye, to be sure, always on the prowl, that wee scut,” said Davey, “It's no surprise really.. Scudder the Scrubber strikes again!”

I howled as Alec said, “No, no, ye forget – that's me sister, Babs.”

“Oh yeh – so it is,” said Davey.

“Did you and she ever – y'know?” said Alec to him; Sally looked curiously over her beer.

“No, no.. I tried, alright, so I did. I bought her a few ales down the pub one evening, but turns out she was already stepping out with a fellow – you remember that travelling salesman who came round the village, big lad, he was flogging those woolly jumpers in the middle of summer.”

“Appleby – yeh, I 'member him – smooth operator! To be fair now, though, that gansey's lasted us a fair long time..”
“Aye, well, to be sure was it any wonder that Babs was spun on him? Anyways, she always had a fellow on the go. I couldn't ever get a foot in,” said Davey.

“Mm, yeh, well, men are her hobby,” said Alec.

“She sounds wonderful!” said Sally, wide-eyed.

“Well, you'll get to meet her one day – 'specially if you go about dressed this way!” And Alec leaned over and tweaked Sally's cap-peak.

“Gerroff!!” said Sally.

“I'm serious though – she ain't too particular,” affirmed Alec.

“Well, neither are you!” I said, as a tease to both him and I – but Alec will hardly ever let me even mildly rag myself.

“Yes I am! I'm very fussy when it comes to an associate – reet picky, tha' knows. Sal – you're right, it were all me. I zeroed in on you, Maurice, right from the start when I first see'd you – right? That's how it went down. You were the little fly – and I the spider.” Here he wriggled his fingers up my arm and into my face – the others chuckled.

“There's me spinnin' my web and layin' it down threaded, twistin' and waitin' aaaallll over the estate, for you to walk unthinking into, and then when the time were right I'd – POUNCE!!”

As if this preposterous description weren't enough, Alec launched himself upon me, knocking us both to the flagstone floor in a flailing confusion; in fact he managed to steal a kiss on the cheek before we were hauled back upright by the others.

All back seated, Sally said, “Really? That's how it happened? Well, you know what I think? I think you followed Maurice around Penge from afar like a love-sick puppy, Alec, and then panicked when you thought he might slip through your fingers forever, and so you was given the impetus to go for it, thinking, well, 'It's now or never!'”
“That's right, too,” said Alec agreeably.

Davey gnawed over the other chicken-leg. “So when'd you make your famous move?”

“Night before the cricket-match,” said Alec. “Out in the gardens, I were.”

“Oh, aye, you'd taken to stopping at work, hadn't you,” remembered Davey.

“Atmosphere were too heavy at home, what with me so near leavin'. so..” Alec's would-be casual laugh and shrug. “Figured I'd rack up some over-time.”

He looked a little sad and Sally said quickly: “Well, Alec, what were you doing wandering around the gardens alone at night? Not like you to have to sing for your supper.”

Alec smiled at me, but addressed Sally: “Well, it's, I didn't want to leave – him, even if he didn't know or care at all that I were nearby, I just.. Wanted to be in the same general area as him.” My chewing I slowed so I could hear better – my heart thumped all the louder with interest.

Alec went on: “I'd seen Mr Hall -” (That felt so strange! That Alec had ever addressed me so!) - “I'd seen him so many times around the place, a bit restless like me, and so I liked the look of him, and thought him right fine. Friendly, gentle, but also dashing, mysterious.. Like he had it all. The complete package.”

“Everything but the boy,” remarked Davey.

“Well, but we hadn't had much in the way of opportunity to talk – well, we wouldn't do, would we? And that doof always around, whassname – Pippa's fella – Archie.

“But at night, it were different. I thought – suspected – hoped! That Maurice would be alone. So I took to – well – hanging about under his window.”

This image was at once so silly and so romantic that I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Alec didn't either, before deciding to smile sheepish!

“So you were on a stake-out to see if you could catch a glimpse of your fancy-man,” said Davey. “A
bit of a twist on the usual night-time tricks for you, boy – we knew all about your habits at Penge. 'Ah, there goes old Alec, off down to the boat-house for another lovely night in with his hand.'

“HAY!! Fuck-you!!” said Alec as Sally and I brayed laughter.

“Am I wrong?” said Davey.

“Keep your filthy fantasies to yourself!” said Alec.

“Just like you did!” laughed Davey.

“Well, what other option had I?” said Alec to Davey. “You weren’t going to come join me in the boat-house – I asked you often enough.”

That put the quieteners on Davey, who went red, and Sal cackled, however she stopped abruptly when Alec turned to her and said, “And you! Always had ‘mending’ to be doing when I invited you down! At ten o’ clock in the PM by candle-light? Do me a pack o’ porkies..”

“So why’d you keep asking me?!” she said. “Couldn’t you take a hint?”

“A hint!” said Davey. “I stone told him to fuck off – to no avail.”

“Ah well,” said Alec reasonably, “Sure where would we all be if people took hints?”

“Argentina,” said Sally.

“Best place for him.” Davey crossed his arms over his chest.

“Mm-hm,” said Sally. “Give the poor old boat-house a chance to do what she was built for – house boats.”

“Well there weren’t a lot of choices available for a hiding-place, like most bloody squinting-window country-houses! Can’t just be me who has a physical needing – where’d ye go when ye needed some personal time alone, for some tossing-off?” said Alec.
“Stables,” said Davey.

“Scullery,” said Sally.

Alec turned to me and my fork: “And you up in your Russet Room all alone! Aren't we some gang of shy idiots!”

He went on: “I don't know about you fellows but I can't go all that long without someone to have fun with – it just kept happening, I couldn't help it – I'd fall in love, it'd be a bit of a laugh, somehow it'd all go haywire, I'd get glum – but then there’d be someone else and I'd be head over heels again post. And rinse and repeat – until – well, until the last time, I finally got it right.”

Beamed at me, he did, as if my presence – my existence – explained everything.

But the table waited for more, so Alec continued, explaining as if it were obvious: “Well, when you fancy someone, they're always on your mind. If they call out from a window – of course you'll go investigate.”

“Call out of a window?” Sally turned to me. “What'd you say – 'Romeo, Romeo, Wherefore art thou' - HA! HA! HA! HA!!”

“That's a right nice laugh,” said a voice huskily; the fair-haired waitress was back, one long bare arm on the table, the other propped on an aproned hip, her ample chest about level with Sally's startled face.

“Um.. Er.. What?” said Sally.

“Awe! You're a shy one, aren't you! Bless.” The waitress pinched Sally's already violently red cheek. “Don't want to share the joke, eh? Cor, must've been a dirty one, then!” And her soft, painted face all knowing.

“Uh..” Sally glanced around at us, all too surprised to help. Recovering, Sal said brusquely: “That's right.” And deepening her voice: “It were. So couldn't tell yer – you're a lady.”
“Well then! That makes you a gentleman. How about a drink?”

“Oh? Um.. Alright. What would you like?” said Sal.

“Ha! Ha! Oh my sainted.. I meant, can I buy you one, sweetheart. If you went to the bar, dunno if you'd get served!”

“I'm of age!” said Sally hotly.

“Oh I know that, ducky, I'm your pal.. Name's Violet, by the way.”

“How do you do,” sighed Sally; Violet laughed so much that it was clear she did very well!

“Ere, wot a little ruffian. Does your mother know you're out, then?”

“No. I mean – yes! Yes, and she'll be expecting me back straight after. Prompt.”

“Lucky Mummy!” Another wink, and away sauntered the inaptly-named Violet.

“Wh.. Wha’??” said Sally, verbalizing the collected sentiment of the table entire.

“Well fuck me runnin’!” Alec was amazed. “Sal, the game of you!”

“I tell you – she'd draw anyone,” said Davey admiringly.

“Huh?” said poor Sally, and I felt a kinship of confusion with her, knew she was embarrassed, and so I patted her arm and took up the thread: “I just called out the window that night for someone to come.. Anyone really.. And for what purpose, I didn't know..”

“But I did – or at least, I had a fair idea,” said Alec. “I mean – there was you! And that ladder! And the moonlit night and my lonely heart and yours! How could things have gone any different when the path were all laid out?
“The way we done it: I climbed up into that room to him, like the tide bein’ pulled to the moon. We
was both only mildly surprised at each other. And we knew exactly what to do, how to feel, what we
were to one another once we – once we were in bed, and lovin' together."

Trailing off somewhat, it might have occurred to Alec that the others might be shocked or alarmed at
even this vague, tentative picture of our physical intimacy. Yes, they knew we were in love, but
perhaps they'd rather think of it chastely, and they didn't like to imagine or believe in the perverse
details of our coupling.

And yet his didn't seem to be the case, here. Our companions weren't disgusted, but appeared
impressed, amazed, open-mouthed chewing; Sally so enthralled that she knocked over her drink.

Alec was pink, I puce; that night in the Penge guest bedroom had been so much ours. To think that
others could access a glimpse of this sacred memory and it would fire their emotions! It made me feel
– optimistically – that our relationship didn't exist in isolation, that it possibly was part of the whole
human history of love.

“Whao..” said Sally, “Making a play for the Master's mate... Alec, the bare nerve of you!”

“Well..” said Alec, maybe modestly, maybe not.

“What would you have done if it hadn’t paid off – the risk?” said Sally.

“Huh?” said Alec.

“Aye, yeh,” said Davey. “What if old Maurice had panicked when he saw you a-looming in the
window all dark and shadowy, the look of a serial killer about you when you have your game-face
on, and he pulled the servants' bell?”

“They don't work any more in the guest-rooms,” said Sally, and to me she added, “But still, you
could have yelled and banged on the wall.”

Before I could explain, Davey went on: “Alec, what if Maurice had obeyed a different primitive
instinct on seeing you approach and yelled out: 'WHAT THE BLOODY HELL DO YOU THINK
YOU'RE DOING??'”
It may colour further the kind of establishment we were in that this didn't turn a neighbouring head.

“Well, in that case I would have grabbed anything I could of value from the room and straight back down the ladder and scarpered.. Swum out to meet the Normannia if I'd 'ad to!” said Alec. “How else could I explain my motives? I mean.. Better to get tried for house-breakin' than shirt-liftin'..

Land, if I got thrown in the nick with that on me rap sheet, I might just as well have gone about the gaol carryin’ a sign that says: 'Yes, this one takes it up the jacksie.'”

“It wouldn't be a lie,” observed Davey.

“It wouldn't be an invitation,” said Alec.

“Oh but – no,” said Davey hastily, firmly. “We'd never have seen you sent to gaol.”

“Yeh, if you ever did get imprisoned, we'd bust you out,” assured Sally.

“Cheers, lads,” said Alec.

All three of them turned to me.

I spluttered: “But – But of course I'd never have – rejected you, Alec! The very idea! Anyhow, despite my feelings, I'd never have pressed charges. Goodness.”

“Durham would, had he got wind of it,” said Davey.

My mouth twisted, searching for a reply, and Alec said deftly, “Still – I really don't think it could have gone wrong that way. I'm not so impulsive as you think – I mulled it over a couple of days, got the measure of you, Maurice. Figured I were safe. I think you were already a little in love with me.. God knows I were bothered over you!”

I set down my glass, at his tone, his sincerity.

“I noticed you noticing me,” he said, and I burst out laughing!
“Then you know me better than I!” I said. “However could you tell?”

“T'weren't so hard to see, to someone true-lookin',' said Alec. “.. I could tell you needed something. You was terrible unhappy.”

My face fell – a fraction. Because – yes – I had been unhappy, dreadfully so, and he'd seen it, and sought to do something about it.

Sally articulated my feelings for me. “Haven't you found yourself a nice sensitive boy, Maurice?”

Our empty plates were taken – Sal's face again fingered – and we were presented with bowls, spoons and our own big flaky apple pie and a knife with which to hack at it, steam billowing, and custard in a flower patterned jug.

Though the story of Alec and I hinged quite prominently on luck and feelings and the Romantic, Davey attempted to consider it in real terms, logically, which when you think about it, was jolly decent of him. He was anything but dismissive.

Said he: “Alec, even if you did get caught getting up to these hi-jinks – with fellows – well, with Maurice – surely you wouldn't get into real bother? I've only heard second- or third-hand tell.. I was exaggerating before, only – you'd not really get the book thrown at you – surely not.”

“Ha! You reckon?! I'd get painted to the wall – truth. Hardly a jury o' my peers if I'd never be let in among'em.”

“You've never been called for jury?” said Sally. “How come?”

“Butchers,” said Alec, leaning back in his chair and feeding his fingers into the waist-band of his trousers. “We're seen as naturally bloodthirsty and murderous – and garrulous – so, watch out!” To demonstrate, he pretended – or attempted – to throttle Davey, who went along with it for a few moments, before stopping Alec one-handed.

“Really – you're exempt?” I mused. “I never heard of such a thing. Clive never mentioned it in the course of his coursework – then again, maybe he did, I'd a habit of listening more to his tone than his message..”

“It's ironic, Alec, because really your dad wouldn't hurt a fly,” said Sally.
“True, he’s a teddy-bear,” said Alec. “Only got into the butcherin’ line because o’Grandad – passed it down, father to son, like – he’s not really cut out for it, so to speak!

“Why, when any of the family pets died, Da couldn't bear the ordeal of buryin' 'em. So I had to, from when I were about six year' old. Well at the time I said I buried the cat, but our Tiddles, she had a fair lovely coat.. All different browns..”

“Oh ALEC!!” cried Sally. “You sold her pelt?!”

“Well – where's cruelty? She died o' natural old age – hadn't a fang left in her head! I were the one who'd been mashin' her food for her for months! Her soul were gone to Heaven – what good were the rest o' her in the ground?”

“It's sacrilegious,” said Sally stoutly.

“Folk just won't discuss reality,” said Alec. “That's what's wrong wi'the world.”

Thankfully, that was it for dead cats, and Alec went on with the tale, our tale, licking pastry from his lips, enjoying himself.

“So. I need hardly explain in detail why I were more crazy than ever about Mr Hall after our one night together. It were more'n that though. He'd got right under me skin and into the depths o' me thinkin'. He coloured up everythin' in my life what'd been normal previous.”

Amusing and thrilling, to hear Alec narrate the story, his take on it; me in the third person as if I weren't there, as if I was this – his – amazing fantasy figure. What did I do to deserve him!

“Yeh, I knew what I done – the doing if it. And I felt responsible for Mr Hall, but all the same it weren't for completely altruistic reasons I pursued him. I mean, at that point, I were in a bind too, caught 'twixt one thing and another, not enamoured wi'either. I didn't really want to emigrate. But I didn't know what to do wi'meself if I stayed.. All of a muddle, I were. Didn't realize at the time, but actually I were primed and set perfect to fall in love.”

And he turned to me, eyes shimmering. “And then you come along clean outta nowhere! Took over my mind and were so kind – when were were alone and could be frank wi'one another. Suddenly there was a gorgeous alternative.”
We all listened captive. Alec ought orate.

“And me going off the way I done wi'Maurice – well, o'course it's an odd course, off the beaten track – that's alright. I like forgin' us way through the forests. It's been ever so much fun!”

“And I suppose it never occurred to you that you might be doing something wrong? Riding men?” said Davey.

“Wrong? Oh, I'm just a simple country lad – I don't have room in me brain for all those – philosophical considerations,” said Alec airily. Like as if butter wouldn't melt!

Saint Alec looked at me over his crossed arms. “You took a little longer to realize that there were nowt wrong with us pairin' up. But I fair persuaded you back to my loving arms wi'those letters.”

“I wasn't left with much choice,” I said.

“Why, what did you say in your letters?” said Sally.

“Tried to get old Maurice to see sense. I says, more-or-less, 'Now, don't come the cowboy with me, Sonny-Jim; I know your game and it's the same as my one, so you better come meet us so we can sort this out.'”

“Mm, wouldn't be the first time Alec had to resort to threatening someone into friendship,” said Davey. “Remember the time you said if I didn't come to your birthday party, you'd break my arm?”

“I were only jokin' – I knew you'd not let me down.”

“Well..” Davey tried to look exasperated, and ended up ruffling Alec's hair.

To me, Alec said: “And I didn't want to let you down neither, after building you up so.. I know what I done. It were bad, too. I knew I were all high-and-mighty leavin' London, trying to think: 'Now, that's showed him, bloody toff, that he can't treat-a-me that way, no sir, that'll soon learn him!'

“Only, it weren't long before I felt the pangs.. I'm a softie, you know it. Suddenly, whenever I stopped to rest, there he was – old Maurice. And all I could think, 'Oh, God. God only help me. The
poor love. He were in a bad way. What can I do for him? Haven't been able to shake that feeling since.."

Smiled at me, embarrassed – proud expression, that I'm sure I mirrored. It was chaotic in the bar; Alec inched his hand over to cover mine, just while he said his piece.

“Wantin' you,” he said to me low, “And more – gettin' you, made me feel like it weren't so outrageous for me to want higher things, to aspire like, to aim for more in life than what lay flat ahead o'me.

“You know – and you two, you'll agree – I didn't always want to be labourin' in the background, makin' things nice for the upperfolks – settin' the stage for them and their delights. I wanted some o'what they got for myself – and I'm not talkin' money nor power nor glory neither.”

“Then what?” said Sally.

Alec fixed his eyes on me steadily and said: “Beauty.”

“Oh Alec,” I said, not sure whether to downplay or encourage his bathos. No – of course I was sure. “You're such a darling. The very loveliest boy in the world!”

“No, that's you..” said he, “...Well, mebbe I'm a close second.” And we smiled so foolishly at one another that we had to laugh, to cover-up.

“You two! Pair of no-hopers. We'll be hearing wedding-bells next,” joked Sally, only it wasn't a joke, only she didn't realize this!

“Funny you should say that, Sal,” said Alec, “Actually, not funny at all – perfect serious, it is.”

“What is?” she said.

“Maurice and me – we're tying the knot.”

“Yes indeed,” said Alec comfortably.

“Ye can!” said Davey.

“Oh – why not? Because two lads ain't done before? That's no reason. How boring to keep goin' on the same way! See – changes and innovations happen all the time – in history. Sure not long ago we was all livin' in trees – you'd know, Davey – and – and – goin' and doin' the daily out in the woods. Now we have the indoor W.C! See! Progress!”

“That's your explanation? The feckin' bog?!” said Davey in disbelief.

“Just an example,” said Alec.

“But look – see reason – see sense,” pleaded Davey, who struggled with seismic social change, apparently. Most people do! “What about the law won't let you, and folks' reactions – people general – and your families!!”

“Oh – details,” said Alec, unconcerned. “Can iron 'em out any time. It's a right doddle, marriage, once you know you've a safe bet on your hands – in your arms. The tricky part is findin' someone who'll have yer – hay, Maurice?”

Alec had all but summed up my life entire in one sentence. “It certainly is,” I agreed.

Still disgruntled, arms crossed, Davey startled when Alec went on: “In fact, Davey, I were thinkin' you could marry us.”

“Marry – what, me an' all? Ain't one man enough for you?” And Davey winked at me. He accepts when he's beaten quite well – or he'd been teasing all along, arguing with Alec as a matter of tradition!

“No, I mean you could do the honours at the ceremony at the end of July,” said Alec. “Out of all of us, you're the most – oh, holy.. A Catholic is the nearest we'll get to a man of God. Not that it's so all-fired necessary – I'm not exactly expectin' God to show up in attendance – but, y'know, I've this vision of the day, like everyone does, and a bit of religion might add a little.. um..”
“Ambiance,” I said.

“Yeh,” said Alec. “And if it were led by a person of – of -”

“Gravitas,” said I.

“...like yourself, Davey.”

Davey liked this muchly. “Well, now you say on it, four of my brothers are priests.”

“I knew it!” said Alec.

“And eight of my cousins...”

“Jaysus.. and I s'pose your ma's a nun?!"”

“I'll do it,” said Davey graciously.

“Oh reet, reet Davey, thank you! I'm made up!” Alec shook Davey's hand energetically and turned to Sally: “And you'll be me best man.”

“You what?” said Sally, who was leant dreamily, chin in hand, on her propped elbow.

“If anyone's going to see me right down that aisle, it's you – in this case, the only man for the job is a woman.” And he grabbed her hand to pump too. When Alec wants to be your friend, and likes you heapfully, you have little choice in the matter.

“Ha! Ha! Well, sure and I am! If that's what you want, I'm your man!” Sal pushed back the peak of her cap jauntily, theatrically.

“I'll bet you are!” said the by-now familiar husky tones.

“Aaaaargh!!” said Sally.
And she turned around slowly in her chair, her elbow over the back rung, and faced Violet the waitress and showgirl who had one hand on her hip again, tray of drinks aloft in the other. “Well hay there chicken, I heard your laugh from right across the way. Really lights up my evening!”

“Umm..” ventured Sally.

Violet was undeterred; she set our tray of drinks on the table and perched herself beside it, facing Sally.

“So what's your name, then?” she said.

“Uh.. Uh.. Sal.”

“Your folks just stop at Sal?”

“Sal Mineo. It's – Spanish! His folks come over donkeys' ago wi'some invading Armada or other and set up home and stayed,” said Alec.

Sally's beautiful blue eyes couldn't have looked any less Spanish.

“Sal.. Hm.. Very nice,” said Violet.

“It's only my name!” said Sally desperately.

“And a lovely one it is. Just like its bearer. Tell me, is it true that Europeans are so much more sensual than them what's home-grown?” purred Violet.

Sally's reply was to sweat out bullets; Violet laughed heartily (“Dear thing!”), patted Sally's cap and swept away to the stage again. Davey whistled but Alec couldn’t – so slack-jawed was he by the whole encounter.

“God almighty,” said Alec. “She's some woman! Got bigger balls than any of us!”
“HELP!” said Sally.

“Help?! You don't need any help, Sal, lucky gel! She's putting it all right out there on a plate for you!”

“She surely is,” laughed Davey.

“What if she comes back? What'll I do?” wailed Sally.

“Distract her away from you.. Someone'll have to take one for the team,” said Alec. All eyes turned to me.

“Me?! I'm the most under-qualified out of all of us!” I said.

“You're the best-looking,” said Alec.

“Well.. It's a burden,” I sighed.

Sally poked me. “And how are you the least qualified? At least you have all the right equipment.” She eyed my lap.

I tapped my head. “Not up here!”

“Not like you, Sally. You tellin' me you never hopped into bed wi'one your classmates at school after lights out?” Alec still has the typically erroneous impressions of boarding-school. People tend to imagine we spent the whole time playing sports and toasting crumpets and canoodling with each other, instead of getting the absolute life thrashed out of us for incorrect calculations or missed notes at piano-practice or insufficient trophy polishing.

“Did I heck is like,” said Sally the realist. “Coventry, remember!”

“Alright then,” said Alec, “Tell me you didn't show yourself the good time under the blankets a-
listenin' to your bunk-mates at it?"

Red-faced with outrage, Sally said, “You disgusting PIG Alec!” And she banged her glass on the tabletop.

Alec never knows when to quit. “I don't hear thee denying it!”

“Boy, I'll kick you all the way home!” said Davey.

“What'd I say!” wailed Alec. So late-stage is his foot-in-mouth syndrome that he actually sounded injured that the kind tides were turning against him, and I attempted to temper, and said fondly and quickly, “Alec, you and your wild imagination.”

“Well... Now... He’s not exactly wrong..” Wouldn't you know, Sally was well able to run her own big mouth. Birds of a feather..!

“It did go on a lot at school, when I were in the Upper Sixth especially, girls hopping, swapping beds, giggling all night. All night. Got so that there were a roaring under-table trade in cotton-wool – not for sanitary purposes, but to use as earplugs. To drown out the laughing and squealing. So you could actually sleep and be up in time for prayers.”

This shut Alec up like no admonishment ever would. In fact there was even a blessed moment of silence before - “Jesus, Sal! And you have the nerve to complain? When I were that age, were I you, it would have been heaven! Oh to have been a fly on the wall!”

“In the ointment, more like. Don't sound like they needed your input!” said Davey.

“Heaven? You think so?” said Sal thoughtfully. “For a night, p'raps, and I did get sort of lonely when I heard the other girls pairing up, but.. The theatrics. I seen 'em. Shiver ya. I mean, it's bad enough the fallings-out and jealousies amongst friendships – when you amplify that to relationships – well! Christ, the drama! At that enraged age.

“Imagine being all cozied up with your best-girl, and the next thing you land in the common-room or dining-hall and it's all over and she's all over someone else! Maybe someone from a different house, even!”

She shook her head with the remembering. “Cripes! Same thing went on, so they say, at the Boys' School across the avenue, that we were twinned with. Add that element to the chaos at one of our mixed-Garden-Parties and then the fireworks.. Bedlem, total.
“People didn't know who fancied who, couldn’t remember, and romance came down to blows between every measure of a couple – girls and girls, boys and boys, and girls and boys – no-one was safe! ’Cept me o’ course.. I stayed right on the sidelines. Hovered in the periphery, in at the hedgerows, and watched the fur fly.”

“All the crossed alliances. I remember it all too well,” I said.

It was a night for re-visiting and reminiscence. All of us could recount our childhood grievances and troubles with a fond, even hilarious air, given that we were now on such sunny shores.

Alcohol poured, more food, loud music, tobacco and funnier stuff wafted through the thick, eye-watering air.

Davey stood and held a hand out to Sal. “C'mon, loveen, they're selling lines of nose-sherbet by the bar. I'll get you one – maybe a half-a-one, as you're so little.”

Sal played up, though clearly pleased. “Wot a gentleman!” Though of course she couldn't hold Davey's hand as she accompanied him – she returned her hands to her pants pockets and lumbered.

“What a ham!” said Alec. Turning to me, he said: “You indulging?”

“In anything sniffy? No. Beer's hitting me hard enough as it is.”

As the white lines clearly did to our table-mates. At one point some time later, when Alec was carefully pouring out whiskey-shots at our table, there came the sound of a glass breaking from the far side of the room, all the way down the steps and near the stage, and there was a subsequent shouting, banging -

“A fight!!” Davey was out of his chair in a trice to chase the source, though he'd had nothing to do with it – still his adrenaline had leapt to attention!

Of course Sally wasn't having any of that – she immediately jumped out of her own chair, gathered her britches – she forgot she wasn't wearing skirts – yelled, “Oh no you don't, Daniel Fingal O'Flahertie Wills DAVEY!!”
(“I always knew he’d be a fair mouthful!” said Alec.)

And Sally raced after Davey, overtook him and stuck out her foot trip him up neatly. Davey's huge frame smacked the hard stone floor, which was no great impediment – he launched himself back up standing and turned to Sal furiously - “What the fuck!!”

And, facing each other, they both squared-off like boxers, shoulders risen, feet planted, hands balled, panting, glaring at each other: Sally with her head tipped right back looking up as Davey glowered down at her.

Around them revellers gathered – it hadn't gone unnoticed – does anything – and the rowdy crowd clapped encouragement: “Fight! Fight! Fight!!” Though – very hardly a fair one – if only they knew!

Quite instead of inducing them into battle, the chanting brought Sally and Davey back to their senses: they looked about them, dropped their shoulders, embarrassed expressions; to the onlookers' audible disappointment, Davey stuck out his hand and Sal hers and they shook the old white flag.

“Er – you're right o'course, Sal – pal – we mustn’t scrap – we mustn't spoil..”

Long lingering glances then, pink cheeks, a palpable reluctance to let go of each other's hand.. Not the usual accompaniments to the male peace-making. But if you knew what to look for – if you were familiar with it – love and attraction – you could discern glittering fragments of it everywhere.

They retreated back to the table, small smiles, shuffled rather closer together than they had been. Alec of course couldn't leave bloody well enough alone.

“So much for the Fightin' Irish! You Paddies – all talk and fiddlin' and singin' and poems.. No push, no might: you pull 'em down – and there's nowt there.”

Davey flew back into the fighting stance with astonishing ease, grabbed Alec by the collar: “You want to see what's down there, me'laddo?”

As they fought – verbally – loudly – I stood up and bent over Sally's shoulder.
“Let's go ask those ladies to dance,” I said. For the showgirls were hovering, fanning themselves and swinging their legs on their high bar-stools.

Sal rose and fixed her cap resolutely: “Mine's the blonde.”

“I think she's already decided that,” I said.

And so thus did we spend our night remainder: we danced – the ladies were splendid at it, well they would be, being professionals; and we danced more, we sat back down to get our puff, Alec produced cigars, we laughed at each other and joked with strangers – what strangers, indeed?

For when we took our leave, Sally took Violet's hands – both of them – enthusiastically – she was dually mellowed and excited by the course of the evening – and said: “Now Violet, any time at all you need flowers – they're me line – come and see me. Don't hesitate! I'll see you right. Come, come visit.” She scribbled and handed over a card, a connexion.

Pleased and pinked, Violet said: “Really?”

“Yes of course!” Sally swept magnanimously into a bow, then kissed Violet's hand. “Any time! *Mi casa es tu casa! Adios! Adios!*”

We tumbled out of the turbulence into the tramping streets, unaware of the time, only knowing we'd had a *good* time.

And would go on doing, apparently! For when we gained the outdoors, Sally collected Davey and pushed him up against the side wall of the building, his back pressed to the wet stones and the pair kissing madly.

He ran eager hands all over her back, and she all but crawled up his long body, climbing him like a tree with her arms around his neck and one leg wrapped around his hip, the other on absolute tip-toe
so as to reach, engrossed and gorging.

Even I could sense the touch of eroticism – Sally was dressed like a man, after all! But in all seriousness, even so, their passion was clear, and now that I knew them well, and was rooting for them, as it were, as they were we – it was rather endearing. Love is love.

Those of us in a more practical mindset saw about flagging down a bus or stopping a cab; by now Davey had his hands on Sally's bottom, and only when he crept them up a little to ease his fingertips into the waist of her trousers did Alec snap and intervene: “Alright, that's enough you two! Hold that thought, will ye, until we get home – ARGH!!”

For if Alec thought that forcing himself between the loved-up pair would dampen their ardour, he was sadly mistaken!

A scuffle, and an escape, and Alec peeled Sally away while I supported Davey, who nuzzled his face into my hair, as if one had to only gradually stop courting, it couldn't just switch off!

“Come on Alec, you poor bugger, you're drunk – there's a boy, I got you -” Sally tried mightily to pick up Alec in her arms, succeeding only into hauling him into a struggling headlock.

Freeing himself, he put his arm around her shoulders, and the other around my waist; I tugged Davey to my other side and all a stumbling row we wandered down what was presumably the right road home, like as if we were on a sodden quest to visit the Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

“Stone me, can't wait to get home and take these corsets off,” said Sally.
I wonder if I remembered to detail that this all occurred on a Thursday? That is an important point, for the next day found all of us at work, trying to drag ourselves thorough the day – I know that was the case for me; sore head, aching limbs, gurgling stomach – hungover to a fault.

As anyone can tell you, the cure for such sufferings is rest and relaxation – chance would be a fine thing at our office.

Great, chattering, squealing excitement clattered into the cramped, box-lined Post Room where I was sank in an old worn chair, Miss Rathbone at the table near with her cigarette and notes. As the office-women squeezed in, I was too tired to even attempt to hide behind the sacks of letters.

“Mr Hall! We've been looking all over for you – I do apologize but -” said Miss Ellman.

“Show him, show him!” said Miss Ellison.

“I will – I will – don't jog!”

“Please, fellows,” I said weakly. “I'm very busy here with the post.”

“Are you really?” Miss Gardiner poked at the newspaper resting on my lap, then removed it and replaced it another, flapping it front of me.

“Hay! What's all this? I'm – I'm ill..” I croaked.

“Ill like a wine-taster,” said Miss Gardiner.

“What's your middle name?” Miss Ellison asked me.

“Edmund,” I said cheekily.

“No, it's Christopher! I went to Payroll and asked!” said Miss Gardiner.
None of this improved my temper. “Well if you know it all, what do you need me for!”

“Not us,” said Miss Ellison. “Someone else needs you, look -” And she folded the newspaper they'd brought deftly and pointed at a squared note, in larger type-face then the words in the surrounding columns.

It said, or read: 'MCH, who is AWOL; if you please WLTM CD contact PO Box 5739, Main Centre, London.'

I was thrown, rather – I admit it; took a thoughtful lungful. I flapped the paper myself. “Mightn't be me at all – could refer to any number of people or situations. Big town! The biggest!”

“It's been appearing in the *Times* every day for weeks now – I checked the back issues gathering in the reception area,” said Miss Ellison.

“And always in the same section – not the Personals, neither, but in the Stocks pages,” said Miss Gardiner.

“Oh, I never look at that section any more,” I said, and let my eyes idle over the once-familiar cram of figures – hold on – hullo – I jumped to my feet and swept the paper closer to my gaze, right in front of my face – clutching it in between two trembling hands - “What – what's – COAL IS SELLING FOR HOW MUCH?!! Oh – oh my God!! Oh dear Jesus it's shot clear through the sky! Oh the amount of clients I've steered that way.. And even just a percentage of their recoup.. I'd be minted!!”

Overcome, I fell back into my dusty chair, all but weeping; the professional knife to the gut protruding.

“He's lost it,” said Miss Gardiner, and she and the others argued over the paper and the message and spies and decoding and cryptic and my word how exciting.

Miss Rathbone, who had glided to the background for the whole scene – she's rather like Sally used to be when confronted with gaggles of women – now she crept over to my chair, crouched down, lit and handed to me a lipsticked cigarette and said low: “Maurice.. *Do* you know anyone with the initials C. D.?”
“No, Eleanor..” Again I'll concede a sniffle. “I thought I did.”
Well well! Could it be that it's not all over in the eternal love triangle between Clive "Oops.. I Did It Again" Durham, Maurice "Stronger" Hall and Alec "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" Scudder??

You probably already know the answer to that :P

And look who got his own character tag at last :)
“Ah yes. Tony Lumpkin.”

“No, Kate.”

“Ah..”

“Did I not say – experimental? Offbeat? So you might enjoy it.” He sent me a wink.

“Well, send along tickets then.” I puffed out a smoke.

“Oh, no – you can just show up. Introduce yourself at the stage-door as my special guest,” grinned Philip.

Was he mocking me? I remembered him as being rather arch. In fact he was the sort of a person who would usually be many miles ahead of me, in terms of wit – and yet – we were, actually, intrinsically similar in a fundamental way.

And I pondered: in terms of friendship, is there more to be said for an honest lack of judgement, a plain social grace, than, say, for years of loyal but subdued companionship?

Put simply – Philip was a man who would tease mercilessly – but he would understand – surely.

“I say!” I said. “This might be a bit forward, but – I'm getting married in a few weeks – I don't suppose you'd like to be my best man?”


“What about -? Oh, I'm sorry, wrong end of the stick – it's to Alec I'm getting married.”

This provoked just as startled a reaction, though the emotion swung quite the other way.


“Yes! Really. Well. It's right and fitting to do the decent thing, isn't it? So I asked Alec a few months ago, and I must have stuck lucky somewhere along the way because he said yes.” I felt warm all over just from remembering his ready acceptance, and imaging our lives together.

Philip felt a similar delight, it would appear; I thought he might sneer but instead his smile split his handsome face, he seized my hand again and pumped it wildly between two of his: “Oh well done you! Oh – congratulations! How simply, perfectly, marvellous! I can hardly even – ah, wonderful!”

“Steady on,” I said, straightening my hat. “You're making me seasick.”

“Ha! Ha! Sorry about that, sweetest!” He let go of my hand but kept bouncing on his heels, his own hands on his hips and fag in his grinning mouth, and he said,

“My God. Well I never. How absolutely smashing.”

“I'm touched by your amazement,” I said drily. Clearly, Philip doesn't generally wear his heart on his lace-frilled sleeve, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have one.

“I'm touched by your overture! I'd love to be your best man, it would be an honour! Have you got everything organized? Do you have premises?”
“Well, the priest and his – er – girl-friend said they are going to arrange all that,” I said.

Philip roared laughter, and threaded his arm through mine so we walked alongside cozily – in completely the opposite direction to the one I had been going when we met.

“Zounds! Sounds like it's going to be a top party! And what of you, Maurice, are you all prepared? Who are you wearing?”

“Who?!?”

“Burberry? House of Worth? Oh, come along, darling, I can see you're quite clueless. Come with me and I'll see you right.”

I was dragged towards the road where Philip cheerfully waved the hand that held his top-hat and suede gloves at the traffic; his other hand clutching my elbow firm.

“Hay – wait!” I said as a cab drew up and the driver jumped down and opened the door.

“Don't worry – and do get along. This is important,” said Philip, and because I know nothing of such things, I believed him.

Inside the cab – which was very warm and luxuriant and comfortable – I'd not sat in one in ages – Philip said: “What were you doing in Soho anyway?”

I showed him my paper shopping-bag, and he took out and examined with fascination the contents – a pair of brown leather football boots.

At the theatre, we were greeted and offered tea, and I was instructed to take off my coat and shoes, and stand in the kitchen subject to Frank's measuring-tape.

“Dreadfully sorry about all this,” I said. “No appointment or anything.”

“Not at all,” said Frank, around the pins in his mouth. “It's no bother. Spread your legs?”

The girls lounged on the kitchen table, eating chocolates and watching; Philip stood and peered quite shamelessly at me, up and down, slowly circling like a tiger.

“It's all about the throwback to ostentation this season,” he said.

“Or every season, for you,” said Jens.

“I'm thinking Regency..” Philip murmured, “Kneeboots.. top coat.. seal breeches.. the tighter the better.. Maurice, how do you feel about powdered wigs?”
“Violently opposed,” I said.

Philip waved that away like as if it was a joke on my part. It most certainly was not!

“Have you got your speech all written out and prepared? I'm alright – I'll knock out a poem for you, easy – but you'll have to say something venerable too. You're the groom,” he said.

“One of them. When it comes to speeches and things, can't I play the part of the bride? Simply – sit demurely?”

Another of my suggestions – or defences – that Philip wouldn't consider. Crammed on the kitchen dresser beside the sideboard were stacks of books and papers, no system discernible; all the same Philip went to the shelves and began to pluck out particular books from here and there and he said: “I'm taking down all of His Comedies which climax in a wedding. We ought to find plenty of poetic fodder. After all, you'll love him, 'dearly – ever so dearly!'”

“But those two only got together because they had to – surely that declaration is over-compensatory and insincere,” said Jens.

“Shakespeare is always trying to pull a fast one,” I remarked.

“That's why he's such fun!” said Philip.

I looked at the gathering pile of literature on the table. “I'm not really sure how keen Alec is on plays.”

“But he's pretty keen on players, or so a little birdie told me?” Philip looked wickedly at Katherine, who was sitting at the kitchen table drinking wine and – well, that was all. Just drinking. One hand on the glass, one on the bottle.

“You stirring trouble, Green-Eyes?” she said to Philip, then smiled at me. “Don't worry, I'll help you kids with your speeches. It's a very important part of the day. That and the booze. And the cake.”

“Oh Kat, what would you know about that which dances in the fluttering young – oh crumbs, is that the time? Shit! I'll be late! Fuck! Shit!” Philip raced out of the kitchen door, and we heard him bounding up the stairs, cups in saucers rattling.

“Where's he off to?” said Chuck.

“British Museum Reading Room,” said Jens.

“Oh yeh.”

“Off to get stuck into the books, is he?” I said.

“Well, he'll be a-licking his fingers alright,” said Chuck, and she clung to Jens as she and everyone else laughed, except, I need hardly detail, me.

Philip bustled back in, pulling on his gloves and clad now in a huge, ridiculous purple hat and a CAPE.

“You look like one of the Three Musketeers, Phils!” said Jens.

Taking his cane from the kitchen umbrella stand by the woodpile, he said: “Right I'm off. Don't miss me too much darlings! Oh and you – Lover-Boy -” He pointed his stick at me and my undershirt. “Don't think I've forgotten you! You're in my clutches now and you won't get away on me!”
I looked behind me just to check if there might be someone else he was talking to; when I turned back he was gone, though we heard him singing merrily as he went up the outside steps, past the open window and away into the evening.

“There's a one who'll never have a blank space on his dance-card,” remarked Katherine.

“What's his angle?” I said, pulling on my shirt.

“Philip?” said Jens. “Oh, he's a sort. His folks are rich – titled – pots of money – and Old with it. Right establishment.”

“That's right,” said Chuck, stretching her legs out onto the worktop. “His family know he's peculiar. So they let him go away to act, but we wanders back home every so often to the townhouse in Kensington, just to drop by. His father is glad to see he's still alive, but gives him money so he'll sort of go away again. Philip's content enough with that.”

It didn't sound all that jolly to me, but I suppose there are worse circumstances. Surely better ones, too, though. “I see,” I said.

“Yeh, you see, he's a natural gadabout, and money ain't everything. Old Philip was born into privilege, but that kind of life was so confining, that he had to break away and turn towards the loose and uninhibited ways of the alternative fringe lifestyle. Sound familiar?” said Chuck.

“No,” I said.

“Exactly like you, you idiot!”

“Oh. Oh yes. Ah. So it is!”

As the music started tuning up below us, Frank said, “Could you raise your arms again, please, Maurice? As this will be a fitted costume, I'm afraid I'll have to take every little measurement.” He put his arms around my torso.

“Or not so little one,” I said.

“Ah, now..”

“You may be some time.”

“Oh be quiet! And don't suck in your stomach – I know you are,” said Frank.

“Well, I did have a particularly large lunch today.. Maybe I ought to starve myself for the wedding.”

Frank jotted some figures in his notebook. “Not at all. There’s no shortage of material!”

Now why wasn't that reassuring?!
Reassurances were much required in the face of my upcoming mission. Oh my sainted aunt. I could study him for a hundred years and still never understand the motives and inner-workings of Clive Durham; I'll allow that one evening of revision wouldn't kill me.

For yes – I had agreed to meet him. You may well question the wisdom of this – given our history which has been elsewhere so elegantly chronicled, and which did not end so wonderfully, in terms of – er – good terms. No thanks to me! So whyever did he seek me out now?

“'E's on the scrounge,” said Violet, who was often at Rain Lane these days, her feathered bonnet on the hat stand and her long legs crossed comfortably up on a tea-chest.

Evidently, Violet had known all along – from the very start of our night out when she was fit to burst laughing – that Sally was a woman, and when the two met back up in normal attire they took to each other staunch.

Violet was all for giving Sal friendly advice about women's clothes and face-painting and scent and such; Sal was all for rejecting it, and racing around their flat knocking things over as Vi chased her with the cosmetic puff and powder.

“What're they doing?” said Alec as the ladies flashed past, shouting.

“Gilding the lily,” said Davey.

But from the time of that fateful Times onward, they were all of one topic.

“It's a head-scratcher, alright,” said Davey. “What can he be pulling, the squire? On the make? His home may be dusted-up, but he'd be scraping the barrel looking for help from you – isn't that right, Maurice? Sure you're poor as a church-mouse now.”

“That's true and all,” I said. “Pay-day, rent-spent.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Violet, who'd given up the Hunt and collapsed on the sofa. “You don't know why he wants meet – this – Thingy -”

“Clive,” I supplied.

“Clive, and the two of you fell out because he broke your 'eart.”

“Oh – in a nutshell,” I said.

“Why the bloody 'ell would you give 'im the time of day, then? Why'd you even want to see 'im? 'Ey – I know – to rub 'is nose in it.” And she flashed a smile at Alec.

“No more'n he deserves,” said Davey.

“No – of course that's not my standpoint,” I said. “That's not dignified. Still, there's – oh, I don't know – maybe he's in hot water, something wrong he wants to talk about – Lord knows, he must be desperate if he's extending the fronds of friendship to me – we haven't been tight-knit in simply ages.” Understatement of the century!!

“That's true,” said Alec. “P'raps he has summat important to tell you – he is a man with information.”

“Maybe he found an itch 'down below' and was instructed by the doctor to tell all his formers.”
“Vulgar as ever, Davey, thank you,” I said.

Only Sally was truly honest.

“Oh – who cares about his reasons?” she said. “I'd meet up with him just to be nosy – what's he up to, how's he fared? Go on, Maurice, I'm curious and I bet you are too. What's the point in baring boring grudges?”

Of course there was no logical point in harbouring resentment. And refusing an entreaty, an outreach from an actual, vulnerable, real human being – albeit one you've had a rocky relationship with – seemed mean. And I used to be mean, but I'm not now; it's very important to arrange the world to reflect Alec – the very epitome of generosity.

“I s'pose I could spare you for one evening,” said Alec. “Mebbes Clive's got another campaign or promotion or other coming up and he wants to make doubly sure that you – that ye -”

“That I won't blackmail him – hay?” I said, as I sat down beside Alec. “As if I would. I don't want anything he's got, anyway. But if he wants reassurance that we've absolutely drawn a line under everything, he can have it. I'm perfectly happy now – so I can at least grace him that.”

“Aye,” said Davey, “And if he starts to feel his oats, challenge him to a pistol duel, or slap him in the face with a glove, or however it is you people settle your differences.”

“You people”?!” said Alec.

And so, I sent word to old Clive at that PO Box, he promptly sent back – or more likely did his secretary! So it was all above board – not to be some hidden back-alley rendezvous.

Just as well, as it was raining the day we arranged to meet, at Clive's club in the city centre – a much more exclusive postcode than the one we'd belonged to before – the pinnacles of Parliament do certainly elevate.

Raindrops hit the windowpane at our flat, as I stood and Alec did my cuff-links, and squeezed the seams of my trousers, and brushed the shoulders of my Chesterfield coat, as careful and particular as a mother sending her child off to school.

I wondered just how much of his sympathy really extended to Clive – was he truly alright with my going to see him? When I'd first brought the newspaper advert home and showed it to Alec – which I did the same day the office ladies had showed it to me – Alec was surprised – very, and anxious – a little, and thoughtful – a lot.

“Don't say, 'It's up to you' and 'It's your decision' and 'Do what you like',” I said. “This has to be a joint course of action.”
“Of course it has – I weren't gonna say anythin' of the sort,” he said. “What's thrown up in your way
is thrown up in mine – as we're both going the same path.”

He took the paper to read the blurb again. “Cain't say I'm all that astonished that he reached out to you, wanted to search you out.”

“Well I jolly am. I'm blowed if I know what he wants – not that I ever knew, evasive old thing,” I said.

“Oh, it's obvious what he wants – you! Even if he don't know it himsel' or wonnot ever come out and say it."

“Nonsense. But absolute rubbish.” I shook my head.

“Maurice. Really. Take a look in the mirror sometime – and I wish there were a mirror that'd show
how lovely you are on the inside too – it'd fair save me a lot of breath. You aren't the kind of a fellow
that a bloke can just get over – look, I knew you only two bloody days and I couldn't live without
you!”

“Are you saying Clive wants to win me back?” I said. “Alec with everything you know – and you
know everything – how could you entertain such a preposterous notion. He washed his hands of me
years ago.”

“Or seemed to,” argued Alec. “Pretended to.”

“You've got a screw loose, Scudder.”

I didn't like thinking about Clive and his distant feelings and motivations and smokescreens, and his
teasing and drawing back, warm and then ice. Such a complicated fellow!

It is rather conflicting I'll grant you: he used to be my best friend – more – I'd loved him – yet we
rowed something dreadful. That's not very friendly. He hurt me badly, and yet – he's not wicked.
And if he was sorry – well, how sorry? For what precisely? Just what was his angle?

Alec supplied: “Clive's a shit-show, personality-wise. All over the place. The many faces. But I
know the real thing and a cover-up when I see's it – land, none o'my old flames are gonna bother
their arse lookin' me up. Fair sprung on you.. So his reasons'll well be kind. He might be a weasel
but he'll have your best interests at heart, he wonnot be able to help it.”

“So.. You think I ought to see him?” I said.

“So why not. He's just a man, I can't see a right reason to turn tail on he. I know you think I'm an awful
child with the dramatics, but actually I hate folk fallin' out and grandstandin' – they ought talk, and
say what they mean. If you think some good might come outta chattin' with Clive – clear the air and
that – he might've copped on a bit – then you oughta.”

“Very well. I've got nothing to lose because I've got you already and that'll never change,” I said.

Alec smiled and nodded.

“I'll go talk to Clive, and if he's nice we can be jolly, and if he's nasty I'll fair deride.”

“Not quite what I meant...” said Alec. “Look. You should aim to – not to pick at old scabs, but to
smooth over new skin.”
“No-one’s skin is lovelier than yours,” said I, feeling it.

“I know.” Alec palmed my face seriously. “Remember that.”

How could I possibly forget? A week and a half later, he tended to me, straightened my tie, and brushed my face a little as we stood in our flat before my departure for the city centre.

“No.” Alec flattened my lapels. “Don’t you look smart.”

“I don’t want to look too smart. It’s not as if I’m dressing up for him.”

“Yes. For us. You’re – putting your best foot forward and showing Durham how well you’re doing now.” Alec noticed a rip in my coat-sleeve. “Argh.. Mebbes not financially..”

“What does that matter a jot?” I said.

Alec fetched a needle and thread and indicated for me to hold level my arm, and he began to repair the tear.

Carefully, maybe rehearsed, he said as he worked, “I know you has your own history – and Clive is a part of that – I’d never make you deny it. And I’ll not fuss.. I know you loved him.”

I was going to protest, or – at least, moderate, but Alec went on, expertly pushing and pulling the needle through the material and away, his hand warm when it touched mine. “I know that in taking up against Clive I’d be pure tilting at windmills. You're mad about me.”

“That’s a fact,” I said.

“But, we wasn’t born the minute we met each other. And what’s more, me and you was at different stages in terms of coming on to someone.. I were ready, and available and open. You had to crawl out o' bein' in love wi'Durham.. Still covered in thorns and burrs.” He mimed brushing the detritus of heartache off my shoulders and sleeves.

“But that were a long while ago,” he continued. “Happen you’ve come a long way in the right direction. I think meetin' him today might do you some good in yourself, lay to rest anythin' that might be hauntin' at you.”

“Like an exorcism?”

“More like.. Buryin' the hatchet. I don't like hard feelins'. I don't do a bundle on havin' enemies. What's the harm on you seein' him? He'll be decent. No-one could possibly dislike you.”

“Oh you kidder.” I pinched his cheek. “When did you get so wise?”

“I weren't always! Ask anyone! You built it up in me. All's I can see is the good in it now. Clive! Alright he's a wally but is he really such a bad old stick?” Facing me, taking my shoulders, Alec said seriously, “When I look at you, I can't feel mean about anyone. I got faith.”

I looked back down at him in no small amazement. Did he mean it? I helped create this – this – proud, strong, clever, wonderful giving man?

Pulling the needle taut, Alec bit the thread off, smoothed my jacket-cuff, and walked me out to the gas-lit landing outside our flat. He handed me my hat, took my shoulders again and said: “Now just you remember, when you're there, that you're the most important person in the room. In any room. Alright?”

“You will indeed,” he said.

I went down the stairs and was on the fourth floor landing when “Hay!” from above. I looked back up to see Alec leaning on the bannister, his chin resting on his folded arms.

“Tell Durham thank-you for the fiver he put behind the bar when I were about to leave for the Argentine. I know he only done it out o'courtesy, but still – he done it.”

I smiled up at him from under my hat and waved. “I will do. Adieu, ere long, my darling.”

“Cheerio!”

For all my careful preparation, I was just about exactly on puffing time when I arrived at the big ornate grey building in the slap-bang centre of town – just a hop and a skip from Westminster, God sake!

At least the W1 location made it easy to find and didn't it stand out: the many elegantly carved Gothic windows, solid brickwork, free of moss, beautifully-cut trees, the large glowing street-lamps – although it was nowhere near dark yet.

I hurried up the wrought-iron railinged front steps to the Sirloin Club's huge, dark, wooden front doors. They were both closed, and at a more human-sized rectangular opening in the left door stood a doorman, top-hatted, stern and imposing, and he held his white-gloved hand out for my card – and I had nothing to give him, merely looked from his hand to his frowning face with a quick smile, and I wondered – quick! What next?

No point in giving him my name, I was nobody, in fact worse – a lawbreaker. So I hesitated to mention Clive's name either, lest I incriminate him, contaminate him with my association.

Just when I thought I'd better give the guard-man one last grin and take myself off back down the steps again, there was a clatter of footsteps along the parquet floor inside the foyer, and Clive appeared, huffing for breath.

“It's alright, Hughes,” he said. “This is – this is – my guest, you know, whom I said I was expecting.”

“Oh yes.” Hughes consulted a book. “Mr Hall.”

“Yes, that's right. Jolly good.” Clive looked up at me with that arresting half-smile of his.
“Hullo,” he said.

“Hullo, yourself,” said I.

“Ahem!” said Hughes.

“Aha, yes – all fine now, Hughes, you can go back to your duties.” Clive pulled out his wallet and surreptitiously gave the doorman quite a lot of money – while, for civility's sake, I averted my gaze away, to the rest of the room – the reception area, which stunned me rather when I stopped to take it all in.

It was huge – vast high ceilings you'd not even guess from the outside: the long walls were gold and amber, with white panelling, and lined with large portraits, each one lit with a gas lamp.

Interspersed with the artwork were huge columns keeping up the upper balcony – and above that – another one! In front of the columns were carved marble plinths displaying all the old chestnuts in Classical style – Bacon, Milton, Newton.. Dionysus was right beside us and I only knew that because of the little plaque in front of him.

Oh it was college all over again! Décor designed to intimidate, allusions and reminders of forefathers and conquering glories one couldn't possibly hope to emulate; is it any wonder students drink so much. Even smelled formal and austere in here, and I felt the cold familiar rush that I'd forgotten to do my homework.

“Maurice..” Clive stood behind me, and I turned back around to him.

“Oh sorry old boy,” I said. “I was quite drifting away. This some pile, I'm telling you! Fair gilted! Well, shall we go and sit down and have a drink? Lay on, Macduff!”

“No – Maurice, your coat and hat..”

“Hm?” Another man in his black and tails had appeared behind Clive and I just waited in confusion before realizing – well – remembering. “OH! Of course! Ha! Ha! How bloody silly of me. I suppose I was going to take them with me and throw them over the back of the chair.”

A tight smile from the attendant as he accepted my coat and hat.

“Lovely, lovely..” Clive gave his hands a clap, and a rub, smiling widely.

“Will that be all, my Lord?” said the hat-and-coat man.

“Yes, thanks, that's absolutely top. You can come attend later,” said Clive.

As the butler bowed away and Clive and I made for the glassy door-way across the hall,

I elbowed Clive in the ribs and said, “‘Mi-lord' – Ha! Ha!”

“Maurice – for God's sake – behave!!” said he between his teeth, and he smiled around at perhaps ten or twelve other fellows standing around smoking and drinking in the dark-panelled library we had entered.

“Alright – I'll be good,” I said.

As we walked the long, grand room, I chanced a good look at him – hair a little thinner, but eyes still bright; his nervous expression, his hurried but somehow diminished gait.
On one hand, he looked so much older – grey tufts, lines about the eyes, slight tremble – yet his coltish demeanour reminded me of the Clive I'd known in Cambridge, where our acquaintanceship had deepened and he allowed the odd frustrated flash of vulnerability to shine through the cracks.

So different was he now to what I was used to – in a word, Alec – that I told myself I could easily maintain a healthy emotional arms-length.

At the same time, his features were so joltingly familiar to me that my fingers twitched for the feel of his hair – mere memories piping! - and it was difficult to decide whether I wanted to rush to him or to the bar!

Of course there wasn't really a practical war within me. I know where my bread is buttered. My love for Alec is a hundredfold the stars in the sky – and yet also as soft and commonplace as a sun-shaft on the breakfast-table.

To counteract these confusing feelings, I tried to dredge up some of the old hostility that I had felt towards Clive, the heartbreak, the arguments, fights and frosty silences. Just then I couldn't remember any specifically but maybe they would resurface with a drink or two.

As I say – the room we'd entered resembled a library, although no-one was reading apart from the odd newspaper. High bookshelves lined the walls and helped contain the heat – there were several fireplaces all along the rectangular room; Clive led me to the far corner, where a few felt armchairs sat around a glossy coffee table.

To our left was a roaring fire with more shelves besides and the usual painted figures glowering down from above.

Clive indicated for me to sit in one of the chairs facing a high, ten-paned window that faced out onto the leafy street; the thick maroon curtain was held back with gold velvet ties. He seated himself in the chair just beside and tilted towards me, so it was in effect a fairly private little nook.

Despite this, no sooner had we sat down than a waiter came over to make his enquiries; Clive ordered whiskey, and was bowed at and obeyed. Mi-lord.

Clive sat well back wearily in his chair, and – why the devil – bit a thumbnail. That put me in good spirits. I sat upright and slapped my thighs.

"Well!" said I. “Just look at the two of us. We are a couple of battered warriors!”

Clive just sent me his doleful look, the one which meant one could cower or – idiotically – carry on.

“So – ah – how've you been, old man?” I said. “Sorry I'm – um – a year late for your invitation to meet in town – I do apologize. I got distracted. Well, you know how easy it is for time to run away on you when one's off on one's exeat. Ha! Ha!”

Still stony.

“Um.. Well, my word! Did you hear about all the upheaval out in Austria? I'd say it's a fair water-cooler topic at work. That – what-is-it – Archduke and his wife. Crikey, what are they up to out there on the Continent? When will they learn – oh, thank you, thank you very much.” For the server had returned with the drinks; I took mine from the tray before he even had time to set it on the table and I took a grateful gulp.

I decided to forge on bravely through the thorny path.
“How’s Anne?” I said.

“Oh, you know, well,” sighed Clive.

“And why wouldn't she be. Aren't the two of you still sprightly young newly-weds!” I said warmly. “Did I ever tell you, it was a lovely wedding? What a right ripping day ye got for it! As you can never predict the weather -”

“Oh, bother the weather! We're not here to discuss the weather!” snapped Clive.

A bit of a silence.

“That restricts things somewhat,” I said. Wasn't it very early in our meeting to start getting shirty! Clive would want to work on his rhetoric skills.

He still presented a little stiff and sulky, so I poured us both a measure. “How did you know where to find me? A private detective?” I kidded.

“No,” said Clive. “I did hire one but he couldn't find a frozen frig in a snowstorm! He kept coming back saying, yes, yes, he was following leads, getting ever-closer to the mark.. And I paying him a weekly retainer, the shyster!

“One day, he brought someone into my office and proclaimed, 'Here you are guv, just as promised, and I'll collect now.' And I said – 'That – is not Maurice. This person is five foot two, quite ancient, and a WOMAN.' Turned out to be his mother and they were both a couple of fraudsters. Ought to have thrown the book at him – but really didn't want to go through prosecution process – still I sent him packing with a flea in his ear.”

All of this was said with a completely straight face and a mildly discommoded tone. I'd forgotten how unintentionally hilarious Clive can be and chuckled: “Well, well! Some amount of cowboys out there, what?”

“Well, quite. Why pay for a rotten service when you just end up doing it yourself? Though it was a fluke I suppose, how I found you. Or found of you,” said Clive.

“How's that?”

Sighing – he'll do quite a lot of that over the course of the evening, you'll see – but resigned, Clive reached into the inside pocket of his coat, and to my surprise, removed and handed me a folded newspaper clipping.

I opened it up and saw that it was a photograph printed in The Telegraph some months back, from the footnote at the bottom. It depicted a crowd of labourers – all men and all donning caps, scarves, cheap waistcoats, boots; three rows of them, holding various tools and some with a hand on his neighbour's shoulder, or arms crossed, leant against his mate.

As I roved my eyes over the picture, I gave a startle that sent a smile clear across my face – there in the bottom left hand corner crouched Alec! Unmistakable!

In the front row, all the lads were either sat cross-legged or kneeling, the train-tracks visible just in front of them. Alec was kneeling on one knee, his elbow leaning casually on the one propped out in front of him. In his other hand he held a spade, the tip of it in the soil; his cap was pushed back and his hair tumbling, and one eye was squinted closed in the bright lamp-light, and a big toothy grin was on his face.
What a land it gave me to see him – in miniature – here! In this forbidding library! And his childish, buoyant expression – I remembered well how he had hated that job, those tunnels, but he must have hammed it up immediately the minute he saw a camera. Right at the front, no less, the little poser!

I might have laughed, and I'm sure my face warmed; 'EXTENSION OF THE SOUTHERN LINE' read the caption. I waved the clipping. ‘Can I keep this?’ At this point I didn't have any photos of Alec. Hadn't occurred to me – he was always, flesh and blood, to constant hand.

Yet seeing his little representative here suddenly! I grinned; Clive glared.

‘Or – no?’ I said. ‘Alright, I'll – hang on – I'll make a note of the date and edition, and write to the newspaper offices for a back-issue. Or even a copy of the original photograph..’

‘Oh – keep it. For God's sake.’

‘Thanks, Clive.’

It would be a bit over-the-top, I felt, to tuck the picture lovingly into my wallet – to be honest, I'd vowed to mention Alec as little as possible today – because I'd only end up showing off. My lover who loves me! And that would be a little distasteful, given the history I shared with Clive.

All the same – as I say – steely me confronted with a delightful, delighted Alec! My favourite thing and greatest weakness.

Instead, I folded the clipping back up – it looked a little worn already, and led me to wonder if Clive hadn't his own mini-obsession with that Scudder fellow – that criminal, that confounded lowly – and I put it safely into the inside pocket of my jacket.

(Alec would later bemoan the state of his teeth in the picture, but didn't object to its position in the bottom left corner frame of the sitting-room mirror.)

‘I'm amazed that you spied him. Aren't you eagle-eyed,’ I said.

Clive swirled his whiskey and took an expert gulp – I was a little surprised, he's never been the keenest drinker – and sure enough, he coughed as he replied:

‘Well, perhaps subconsciously I was ever on the lookout for clues. At any rate I now knew that you were both still – foolishly – in England. In London!’

Shifting around in his seat, he said more sternly: “Further confirmation was to come. Kitty came to see me, some time after, and raved an absolute STORM down on me, about a letter she'd received from – someone.”

I made my face impassive, only mildly inquisitive. No – Clive had arranged this meeting. Up to him to do the emotional legwork – for once. And indeed, it did seem to come dragging out of him effortfully. “About – you. And what you were doing. Who with. Well. Although she was so cagey – wouldn't disclose any details. She said it was utterly baffling, a load of gypsy gibberish, she didn't understand. I asked to see the letter, but she said she'd burnt it. She was really angry with you.”

“As well she might be. Cause to be,” I said, and I remembered with some no little shame how callously I'd treated her, when, taken all around.. Kitty. Impulsive, bad-tempered, bungling, so at odds with what is suitable for her sex.. Were she and I not so very similar, parallel portraits in the family photo-frame?

Though I, being the male, am of course the more guilty party in our rows – I had the agency and
chose to be a cad about it. I was rotten to her as a matter of course, and because she was an easy target and representative of all that eluded and intimidated me – or so I thought.

Why did I see her as my enemy, when really, we were equals – should have been comrades-in-arms in the family war? Who would understand better than she what it was like to grow up in the hallowed Hall halls?

But I had been too busy feeling alone to notice other people. When I ought to have seen Kitty as someone to relate to – someone to help. All of that Domestic Science business! Why did I deny her the chance to learn how to type, or use a sewing machine, or – or make meringues? I suppose I had seen her as an overgrown, overloud child. But who could blame her emotional injury? Think of inheritance: I got Father's job; Ada got Grandfather's money. What did Kitty get? Mother.

So if Kitty's nose was out of joint – it wasn't her what done it. I'd like to make amends – indeed I tried, just after leaving with Alec, by transferring over my own shares to her and the others – I tried before that even, when Clive first got married and I decided a life of charity was all that there would be for me.

Friendly overtures – she wasn't having any of it – a prickly sort, is Kitty. I tried to be kind and was cold-shouldered out of the domestic sphere.

All of this sibling misery I reported to Alec, who told me to stop beating myself up, and shouldering all the blame; yes I'd been a beast but I wasn't a monster, and if I'd tried to make it up to her – well, what more could I do?

Little else; Kitty is the sort of a person who would rather hear your petulant cries of apology come from within the Iron Maiden. She doesn't make it easy. Still I feel I could love her properly now, but I feel the damage is done – maybe. Perhaps. You just never know.

If we ever meet again she might like me better, so transformed and enlightened – and lightened, even at this early stage in the evening, only the second whiskey yet – am I now.

Certainly Clive seemed wary of me; our old dynamic was much changed, and he reacted defensively. Wouldn't be swayed from the wounds he had suffered from my behaviour.

“Cause – nothing – well she might – but Kitty blamed me somehow for your actions!” spewed Clive.

Ah – I could see how that would concern him – the implications, the putting together of two plus two. Clever Kitty! Still I oughtn't add fuel, I should seek to reassure – this meeting was for conciliation, not exacerbation.

“Oh – she's likely just venting,” I said. “My taking-off had absolutely nothing to do with you - I'll put that in writing if you like. You are completely uninvolved and blameless – not partner, nor accessory, nor witness.”

For some reason this vexed him all the more; the dark clouds gathered and hung ominous before they burst: “Well, damn you, I just don't fancy that it was ME left picking up all the pieces after you – vanished into thin air! Kitty, your mother, your partners at the firm in town – AND that – old – Scudder man and his wife came up to see me at the estate. Where anyone could have seen them coming in! Well, they called to the back door, but still. And I had to shuffle them away up to my study, and they begging your pardon, your Lordship, sir, but had I any idea where their son might have gone, and him disappeared?”

Clive banged his fist on the carved mahogany arm of his chair. “And I had to say that I don't know
where your son is, what could have happened to him, and all the while I was obliged to keep agreeing with them that he 'wasn't a bad lad' – through gritted teeth!”

I could well imagine. Does Clive ever un-grit them these days? I said: “I'm sure you dealt with it admirably and diplomatically, Clive. After all, you are a man of the people, are you not?”

“Yes and believe me, I have ENOUGH people to deal with without having to clear up the nonsense you created after your flight!” He was getting agitated – ran his hand through his glossy hair and it came away from its styling all down over his forehead.. I tried not to notice much.

“That's why you asked me here? To complain that you got lumbered with damage-control after I left? Darling, you're so armoured in Establishment Clout that you could see off much worse embarrassments. Damnit, Clive, this is just so typically you! One little inconvenience to your perfect lay-out, one ink-blot on your homework, and you chuck a strop!”

“What's perfect? Nothing's perfect.” Clive was at his hair again – I did wish he'd stop, it was very distracting.

Petishly, he said: “It's quite alright for you to brush things off dismissively – but – but – why do you get to do everything, get out and get everything, and leave me holding the mop?”

At this Clive reclined right back on his plush stuffed armchair, his legs crossed, and he took a deep draught on his cigarette, and looked at me expectantly.

I tipped forward on my own chair, elbows on knees, chin in one hand and fag in the other, and took my own puff of smoke.

“Well?” said Clive.

“Well, what?”

“Well, I think you owe me an apology.”

“What!! Clive, exactly how long have you been sat here drinking? Several weeks? You must be clear off your rocker and out of your tree. That thee must! I won't apologise for leaving, nor for the trouble my departure apparently caused you. Christ man, are you in the land of the living at all?!”

I shook my head: “My land! It would have been the easiest thing in the world for you to say, 'Don't ask me - I am not my brother's keeper, and I can't think what his motivations are – he was always a queer fish – Maurice – I hardly knew he.' Which would have been true, in any case, by that time.”

“Oh, come, come, my dear,” said Clive.

See, this is Clive all over! Maddening. He insists upon logic and theoretical details, but when his images contradict the reality, he's a house of cards.

“You come, come, Clive! By the time you got married, we'd not spoken properly in ages – and we barely related at all after. I don't know why you're trying to drag emotions into it now. We were a dead duck – you made that crystal clear.”

I took another splash of drink – not because my hand was shaking but because my mouth was running dry from all the talking. A rarity when conversing with Master Durham!

“As did you – when you came to see me that night last August, when I was trying to write my speech and you came out with all the guff,” said Clive.
“Me, guff? And what was in this famous speech of yours? Statutes and changes of such significance as to rival the Magna Carta?”

Clive sniffed. “You were very cutting that night, Maurice. I wouldn't have thought you capable of such crassness. You said some very cruel things.”

Did I? I couldn't quite recall. And it had been playing on Clive's mind ever since? Impossible.

“Oh, really? Well, that's most unlike me. What did I say?” I said.

Temper shooting upwards, Clive said: “You don't even bloody remember!!”

“Alright! Keep your hair on. I had a lot on my mind that day – and anyhow, you'll remember from when we were Up how dashed my memory is.

“Anyhow again,” I went on, “I suppose if I did give you a dressing-down, you thought it completely undeserved and out of the left-field? When you had hitherto given me five minutes of your time that whole visit – practically that whole year! Your trouble is, you expect everyone else to grin and bear the way you do.”

Clive who had sat upright on his High Horse now sank back somewhat against the back of the chair. Rather reluctantly, he said: “I suppose I was rather – clipped. I suppose you could say I treated you a bit shabbily, as a host.”

I rolled out my best Alec 'You-don't-fucking-say' Scudder look; Clive replied with, perhaps, his tragic Anne 'Darling, we must endure' Woods expression.

“It's possible that my feelings for you were somewhat conflicted,” he admitted. He said this softly, not looking at me, but out the window at the buildings and rain-clouds. I was at a loss as to what to say, how to help; it was a can of worms I didn't want to see opened at this late sorry stage.

“Well.. You said it yourself,” I said. “I do remember some of your pearls of wisdom. We were young idiots way back when. Why hash it out now?”

Deflated down into the cushions, Clive didn't reply; only gazed out a the summer-evening drizzle, nibbling at his nails.

How was I to challenge him thusly, robustly, meet him head on, and him in this collapsed state? We were just in entirely different weight classes now – physically and otherwise. I didn't want to fight with him as such – I was here on a mercy mission. Not so much to pick up the pieces but to at least tidy them up a little – stack them in a corner.

Food arrived and Clive rallied a bit; although I was concerned to see him reach for the decanter of whiskey much more often than any of the cakes and sandwiches on the layered display.

I myself gave a wide berth to the caviar but shovelled down the toast with butter and blackcurrant jam; it's tastier that way. Ravenous now – I'd been too nervous to eat all that day – can you believe it!

Conversation-wise, we seemed to have hit something of a wall, because clearly there were certain topics that were off the table, closed for discussion; I simply can't imagine having to moderate my words – tip-toe around topics – with Alec. Certainly he doesn't shy away – will generally babble away on whatever topic happens to be at the top of his head!

Music – Mozart – drifted in from an adjacent room; the smell of cigars and mustiness from the ancient furniture permeated also. It was very warm.
It really was so very opulent. The size of the pictures! The high vaulted ceilings and dripping chandeliers! Older men than we drifted about, all designer suited and, no doubt, money and the means to it was the main talking topic.

And yet it wasn't very Clive – my Clive – dear Clive, the one I'd known. That boy was all about possibilities and new ways of thinking – only to look down and find his own feet made of clay. Hence the rather stilted creature in front of me now. Then again – I'll hazard that I present quite differently to the fellow I once was too.

Clive, indeed. I ran my eyes over his small frame as he lit his cigarette carelessly with the match in his right hand, his left one hanging idly over his knee; he didn't have the habit of automatically cupping the flame against the wind – a man who was used to, accustomed to and belonging to the airless indoors.

Wasn't always airless though.. Hadn't always been stuffy. Things had grown there. The cozy rooms at Cambridge, and Penge, and St John's, all had provided us with a space to be together, to find out more – at the time, so desperately needed.

Almost fondly, I recalled how much we had once loved one another – at the time I believed it to be so, so it must have some formative merit. How lonely I had been before I met Clive – how dull college and those early adult years at the brokerage would have been without him!

Verily, I remembered mostly the good – and I was pleased to realize this, and to be here smoothing over – Alec and his advice were right, again.

I was, to my surprise, actually glad to see old Clive – a shadow of the past I'd almost forgotten – yet I was grateful we'd met in a relatively public place. He just didn't suit or crave intimate spaces to whisper private disclosures the way Alec and I do.

Clive prefers the general, the abstract; that way, if he ever falls foul, he can blame academics rather than ever take personal risk.

I couldn't be doing with that – when I feel a thing it rushes to me instantly, almost physically; I don't have time to be consulting books and weighing up theories.

Imagine having such a restrictive relationship with Alec! Based on words but no actions; all love expressed primly through letters, without ever really getting to touch him? Oh rubbish! Such restraint, forbearance, self-denial with Alec? It would be like running through the river-water, the light gleaming above, but never ever getting near enough to the surface to breathe, to love, to truly live.

Silence elapsed; I was rather used to that with Clive, though. He does communicate in bursts of brilliance. He has so many important thoughts that he has to gather them, examine them, then filter them out into the world for approval.

Would that the same could be said for me!

I gestured around at the walls and said through a mouthful of grapes: “So does anyone ever actually read these books? Or are they just for decoration?”

Clive crunched on the corner of a piece of toast. “Maurice – you're such a hick.”

“Hay!” I garbled out my words and food. “You swine. You're the one who's actually from the countryside – corn-fed yokel – no wonder you overcompensate with culture.”
Clive pointed his toast at me the way he might with his pipe. “I won’t be distracted – this isn’t about me.”

“Isn’t everything?”

“Droll.”

I was pleased, despite myself, every time I managed to land a remark he liked funny; there is something about Clive that makes one want to impress him, even when he’s being all aloof and authoritarian – maybe the way a child seeks approval from their father. But I wouldn’t know about that.

From down beside his chair Clive pulled a worn brown-and-tan satchel – I do believe it’s the same one he used in college. Straps undone, he removed quite an absolute bundle of papers and letters, which he handed to me unceremoniously.

“Your post,” he said.

“My what! Oh my word!” Here was heaps of paper! However could one manage without a secretary? Or a paper-shredder; to this theme I added: “Well, something to line the canary-cage with, what?”

All the same, from sheer force of habit, I began quickly and adeptly sorting the sheets and envelopes into smaller piles; they seemed to be in date order, but still – a mad jumble of bills, memos, adverts, telegrams, nothing too interesting, oh, those charities I signed up to asking for more donations, yikes...

“I say,” I said around my cigarette. “Some of these have been opened and – administered with!” For some of the bills had small neat handwriting saying ‘Paid off’, while the brokerage-enquiries from clients said, 'Copied and Fwd to Mr Hill'.

“That was Ada,” said Clive a little accusingly. “She did it to be helpful.”

“Well, well,” said I. “All hands on deck over at the Hall House, hay? Ada, you say... I better check to see that she hasn’t snuck in a letter-bomb.”

Clive raised his eyebrows so I explained: “We had a bit of a row, a falling-out, Ada and I, a while ago – over you. Because we both fancied you. Still! Many moons ago – don’t let that stop you from getting a big head though!”

A big head – and a face like a slapped arse. Poor Clive looked most personally victimized and aggrieved by being fancied by anybody; I left him to his mouthing outrage and took a smoke over some more of my year-long, one-sided correspondence – I mean, some of the notes were so old as to be completely redundant now!

“Oh golly gosh,” I said around the fag in my mouth, “Well, this lot's for the pyre, I dessay. Out-of-date invitations? Shares long, long sold and settled? Reunions, business-mixers – ah, pah. And what's this -?”

An envelope that had a crown on it, and a lion, and a unicorn, so you know it was serious business. I opened it. “Ah. Jury Summons.” I tossed back down on the coffee table, where Clive pounced on it.

“Ah! Hay!” said he, waving about the letter. “What are you doing? You can't shirk that – you have to report for Jury Service. It's the law.”
“Clive, do I look like I care a whit about the law anymore? Certainly it doesn't care for me and my safety.” I took another strengthening sip.

“So that's it then? You've truly gone over to the criminal side?” said Clive.

“That's it indeed. You've got it quite correct.”

“I don't believe your deliberate insolence!”

“You don't believe me?” I said. “Would it have helped if I'd shown up today wearing stripy pyjamas and a mask, with a bag of swag over my shoulder?”

Clive looked floored for a moment, then covered his face, making a strange noise.

“Clive, are you alright?”

He waved me away, shoulders jumping – oh, he was laughing. Or trying not to.

“Oh, just give in and chuckle, would you. Surely one a year won't kill you,” I said.

Reapplying myself to the letters, I flicked through the last few and sighed them into their haphazard pile on the tabletop, and tapped my cigarette at the ashtray while I was at it.

“Nothing worth hanging onto – thanks ever so for bringing it all though,” I said. “I suppose I ought to destroy all these papers, really, lest someone glean my details and use them to steal my identity. Well, land – they can jolly have it!”

I chucked down the last letter as Clive tittered some more – I don't know what ailed him, honestly.

Recovering, with the aid of a generous sip or two of spirits, Clive propped himself back up sitting and pointed his cigarette at me: “Now, Morrie, don't you divert me!” I widened my eyes in innocence.

Clive picked up some of the literature on the table as might a strict, disproving school-master, when confronted with some badly-done prep work.

“Maurice, you were always inattentive but I never had you pegged for a fantasist. Did you really think that you could just cut and run from all your responsibilities?”

I rather think I have, Clive. Aloud, I said: “What responsibilities? Let's stop the generalizations for once and talk sense, talk specifics. Come on – I weren't particular needed to anyone, back home. Whereas, now...”

“Not particular?” said Clive. “What about – your mother?”

“Mother has the girls. They don't rate me. And if she needs some male influence – she doesn't – well, there's always old Chapman.”

“Arthur is hardly an adequate substitute for you,” said Clive.

I blushed. “But I didn't fit-in – never did – that must be abundantly clear now!”

“Didn't fit-in – of COURSE you didn't! Why else do you think I noticed you so particularly, so daily? It isn't – what you think – God, we need more of your rare sort around, putting shoulders to the wheel – not hiding away in the slums.”
Again I coloured but I stood my ground. “Maybe I am hiding – but what of it? Maybe I’m not brave enough to take some mighty stand.”

Clive sighed. “Yes, Maurice, you are.”

“Not on my own, I’m not! If I’m stronger now, different now, it's because everything noble and right and strong and honest and loving has been taught to me patiently. The humanity I wished to show has finally opened up and drawn breath. I am a whole man now. But only with – him – only him, beside me.”

More silence. I’d somehow won this little verbal spar too, and was almost embarrassed to; I’ll say again I was not accustomed to besting Clive in wordplay! When I consider it back, I used not clever refutation but rather pure emotional honesty – something shimmering and squirming and alive and adaptable that he could not attack with his treasured sword of objectivity.

It plagued him, it did really, the distance now between us.

To wit: I was transgressing, he was obeying. Therefore, I was Wrong and he was Right. If we were cases in law books this would certainly be inarguable – but we are not – we are flesh – even Clive is – I think! No wonder he folded himself so sullenly in his chair.

Yet I didn't want to triumph over him – only to explain! I cast about. How to properly instigate polite conversation? Talk about the other person, of course. (Alec has yet to learn this.)

I decided to edge around Anne for now and asked, “How is Penge getting on? Are you still having that spot of bother with the right-of-way path? I'd imagine it's a right pain in the proverbial.”

“Well – quite,” said Clive.

“Surely you can -” I waved a hand. “Flex the constitutional muscle.”

“You might think so – seeing as how it IS our land and has been for generations – but no. Even when you've perfect rights, one can't do as one pleases – to no consequence. You bring in the law – you piss off the people. Mother does not understand this.”

“Let them eat cake’ – hay?” I took out my cigarette-box and tapped out another. “Oh, I do apologize, Clive, I'd offer you one only you might find them rather coarse.”

“Oh, do crack another unanalysed smile, darling. It would do you the world of good. Jeepers! You know, you've completely lost your sense of humour, Durham.” Flopped back in my chair, I crossed my ankle over my knee and examined my cigarette. “It's like as if you had a personality transplant in Greece. Just what happened there, anyway?”

At this Clive roused, slid to his feet, drifted to the large mantelpiece beside us – I watched him – and
he stood with one hand on the mantel, and his head resting on it; the other hand in his trouser-pocket. He stared with a melancholy air into the roaring fire. And you know what that means!

That weighty silence, the meditative mien – dash-it, he was about to go off on on one of his lectures. Saints above! If Alec rambles, then I don't know what you'd call Clive's output – it's only now, outside the pink haze, that I realized how pompous and dull Clive can be.

And what does that say about me? That I'd loved someone so boring? And listened to them endlessly? (Alec: “It means you were horny. Folk have suffered more for less!”) Alec was almost right – but back then, more than horny, I was lonely. And was to go on being.

When Clive and I had split up at last, after his hols, only then did I comprehend that I'd been bloody to my family, and by then they had no time for me – the ties severed. I'd made a loss on my foolish investment.

Thank God for my own 'conversion' – towards accepting men – a man – my own one!

“In Greece -,” said Clive now.

“PORT!!” I called hoarsely to a passing waiter, who, noticing my panic, gave me a glass off his silver tray.

“Thank you.” I took the crystal glass and drank thirstily.

“I'll.. bring you your own bottle, sir,” said the server.

“Thanks awfully!” I said – it was just in time.

“The Ancient Dionysian Mysteries,” said Clive, “were the ritual practices partaken by all classes and creeds of Grecian Society in order to make the cleansing journey back to the original, uncluttered human state.” I suppose this kind of hot air is Clive's idea of socialism.

“What is very particular about these rituals, is that they were planned, deliberate: temples erected, high priests elected, various rite-related paraphernalia collected. Do you follow?”

“Yes, I follow, Clive. You haven't quite out-foxed me yet.”

“Right.” Clive was warming. “But do you see? These celebrations, these ceremonies, and rituals were all wrought specifically – in those admirable but less-advanced times – to bring about a change what was going to happen anyway, ie a scientific process or natural development.

“Such as the coming of Spring after Winter Equinox, or the Fertility Festivals to bring about the growing of crops and so forth – all of which, as I say, would irrevocably happen despite all of the bells and whistles – because of – of – farming, and ploughing, and watering and however else it is crops are grown. With me?”

“Yes,” I said. An utter lie.

“So, though these events – and the history, the antiquity that prolong their influence – are mere symbolism – still they are an acknowledgement of change.”

Clive came and crouched at my chair, his hands on the arm and looked keenly up at me: “Do you see? What's in the mind -” He tapped his temple - “That's what's undeniable. When the eyes are open one cannot go back to Oedipal blindness.”
“I should think one can't, no.”

“Once you can finally see the delights around you..” said Clive.

And what delights are these? I watched, bewildered as Clive strode around, his arms folded or waving in description, as he extolled the virtues of modern-day Greece: sun, women's clothes, motor-cars, films – all the basic tenets of current common culture. Finally I began to see Clive's True Love: compliance.

“Well lordy,” I said. “Can I believe my ears? You brought up the good old Greeks only to dismiss them in just the same breath. Really, what would the gods think? Stone me, I thought there'd be some great big story about – mythologies, and forces of nature, and secrets of the cosmos and shit.” Pointing at him with my fag: “And yet your head was turned because you looked good, and you felt good, walking beside a lady under a parasol? You're more superficial than you make yourself out to be, Clive. I must say I confess disappointment.”

“Maurice..” said Clive warningly.

I looked away, as if in disgust, my nose in the air. “Frivolous as the next man.”

Clive circled my chair, trying to face me, as I turned away again. “MAURICE..”

“Maybe even more so!” I said.

“DAMN you, Hall -! You're one to think of calling someone else frivolous when you're the one who threw over everything for a bit of tail!”

“You're so reductive, Clive. That interpretation only holds water if one believes that sexual congress is the lowest form of human connexion – and it isn't.”

“It is!” said Clive.

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“How would you know?” I said.

“I just do!” said Clive.

“Does Anne know?”


I held up my hands in peacekeeping. “Alright, alright – I do remember your letter. You fell in love with all of womankind.”

Clive smoothed back his hair and tended to his wrinkled lapels. “As I said – I transformed – I couldn't help it.”

“If you say so,” I said. “Still, you didn't have to be such a little bitch about it.”

“That is – so – very – spectacularly rich coming from you, who had to turn your smoking-room into
an amateur-dramatics matinee!”

“Oh yes. Well, I did overreact, I suppose. I'm sorry about that. I was a pretty bad host too, come to that!” said I.

Clive went seriously to the long window, clasped his hands behind his back, and gazed out at the rain. “I matured, Maurice. You may want to try it sometime.”

“Matured. Oh Clive. You are adorable. But then – you always were.”

His shoulders fell in his standing – so help me – I'd won again.

Clive looked around at me, laughed a little drily, and waved his hand between us. “This – this is inane.” And he looked away again, almost wincing. Collapsed back into his chair.

“Are you alright Clive? I do hope this isn't distressing you. Last thing I want to do is stick the boot in, I swear. It's merely, that Al – er – someone thought it might be a useful exercise, this meeting, a sort of a healing process.. Now listen. Couldn't you consider Aristotle's theory of -” I squinted at my wrist - “Cat- Catharsis?”

Clive stared at my face, then down at my jacket-cuff that I was quickly shaking to rights -

“Maurice,” said he, “Did you bring along crib notes in order to have this conversation with me?!”

“Well,” I said defensively, “Is this an oral examination?”

“No.”

“Well then. Not untoward then is it!”

Clive held out his hand. “Hand them over.”

“What! Are you mad?!” I hid my hands behind my back.

“I mad? You are. Come on, that isn't sporting – pass them here.”

“No!”

“Give!!”

So I stood up to my full height, all six-one of me, and held the folded papers away aloft in the air as high as I could reach.

“Alright,” I said playfully, “Come and get them!” Exactly as I used to do to smaller boys at school. In fact it occurs to me that Clive is just the sort of ink-monitor type that I would have bullied ruthlessly at Sunnington. What a mercy I had outgrown that – somewhat – by college!

Near about a head shorter than me, as well he knew, Clive didn't even bother to suffer the indignity of standing up; instead he glowered up at me like the angry little terrier he is.

“When you've quite finished,” he said.

“Oh it's only a rag, old thing.” I sat down and immediately squirmed around in my clothes. “Christ it's hotter than a hell-hob in here! You'd think they'd take it easy on the central heating in the summer..”
I removed my jacket and had to go through another scuffle with the butler, who must have been watching, because no sooner was it off than he materialized to spirit it away.

“Really it's alright, don't trouble yourself,” I said. “I'll just drape it neatly over the arm of the chair – see?”

“But,” the poor fellow was red-faced. “That – isn't allowed, sir. Please if you could just let me put it away for you.”

“Oh – alright – of course – sorry if I -”

“That's quite alright sir. Thank you sir.”

Clive, who had watched this little charade impassively, handed the butler a coin, and he gave more of them to the fellow who took our empty plates, and to the chap who brought the lovely fresh bottle of port.

You might say Clive tipped with wild abandon – without thinking – but was this generosity? Or a way of re-affirming the divide between the haves and the have-nots?

As I watched the servers wait those couple of agonizing seconds while Clive rifled in his pocket, I felt uncomfortable and understood wholesale now Alec's aversion to tipping, and why he had refused my shillings way back when.. It was, from a certain angle – his angle – a form of ritual humiliation.

As I pulled at my shirt where it was tucked into my trousers to loosen it a little – such a confining atmosphere in here – Clive took his port in hand, sat back, crossed his legs and watched me.

“So, Maurice, after all, what of you? You do look – well.. What are you at now? Not at the Exchange, I know..”

“I'm a binman.”

He closed his eyes. “My God. You really have gone native!” I wasn't sure whether he believed me or no – was he referring to my supposed lowly occupation or my limp attempt at humour?

“How could you so lower yourself?” said he.

“Well, I had to go somewhere – down is a way,” I said. “I am more than just a glib side-character in the story of your life.” Indeed – when I have a higher purpose now, a choice role – the Romantic Hero in Alec's!

“Of course I know that! But – did you have to deviate quite so wholeheartedly?” said Clive.

“What's the point in doing anything if not with the whole heart? And I mean – you begrudge me striking out? What else would you have me do? Live out the rest of my days in constant crippling longing and isolation? Dying alone, and being found three weeks later, half-eaten by an Alsatian?”

“I'd expect you to behave properly,” said Clive.

“Marry a woman, I suppose you mean,” I said. “That's not fair at all on any party. A woman deserves a partner who can love her in a whole, adult, fully-functioning way. And so do I. And so does Alec.” And so does Anne, I thought frankly, but I didn't say it aloud – seemed a bit dickish, given the circs.
“You're full of earthy wisdom now, aren't you,” said Clive sourly.

“Oh I would never presume myself to be wise in the face of your mighty intellect,” I said.

Clive's eyes sauced in shock and then he: “Haw! Haw! Haw!! By Jove. More scotch!” He waved his glass around.

“It's port,” I said.

“More of it!” said he, splashing.

“Now Clive, do take it easy. You know how you never could handle your spirits.”

“Oh, it's alright, I hardly ever – I haven't – ha! Ha! - in the longest,” said he, and gulping.

“Then your constitution will be all the weaker for lack of use!” But he wouldn't listen.

The only thing for it was to take away the means, disappear the drink myself; so over the course of the evening, for every drink Clive poured himself, I sneaked half of it into my own glass – easy to do when he was so distracted, feverish, nervous as a cat.

All the same, with Clive so tiddley, I thought it a rather an astute time to say, in the spirit of all fellows being equal, “Alec sends his regards.”

Clive looked – well, just picture the most sarcastic expression you possibly can, and apply it to the image of Clive you might hitherto have built up in your head. All done? Good, then I'll continue.

“Alright, maybe 'regards' is embroidering it a little,” I said. “He really did want to send his thanks for – putting money behind the bar? On the eve of his emigration? Well, his supposed one.”

“That's quite alright,” said Clive with dignity. “SOME of us still know how to bow to tradition and behave the way we are supposed to.”

I held up my glass to him. “Well, here's to you lot.”

Clive narrowed his eyes. “Maurice, do you know what hubris is?”

Ah, we've washed back up again on familiar shores. Hello, Hellenic Republic!

“No, I do not know what hubris is. Please tell me because I'm dying to know.”

Looking wounded, Clive said, “How quickly you forget!”

“I haven't either! I – er – I swear, it's on the absolute tip of my tongue, now I think on it – yes. Good old hubris. Spiffing. Ah – just remind me? A little jog?” said I.

Impatient, then composed – a true Master – Clive said: “In essence – the mighty and over-blown Pride that must always be followed by a Fall.”

I blew out smoke. “Must it?”

“Even you must be able to dig up in your memory the most famous Christian example – that of the fall of Lucifer out of Heaven because of his lack of humility and his desire to challenge God. A non-adherence to -”

“But – he was – they were – angels, heavenly – hosts. One can hardly relate them back to -”
“No interruptus,” said Clive.

I shot up my hand. “Point of information!”

Clive pointed at me: “Denied. Now, as you have said, those were angels, it was Heaven; contextually, we are on Earth, where it is perhaps more useful to consider the doctrine of Jesus Christ, who believed every soul was divine, every sinner worth saving – as long as they atoned.

“Take ourselves!” he continued. “We – in our ignorance – committed our trespasses in the past, yet it needn’t define us. Look at me now! And you could follow my example!”

This from the very man who accuses other people of hubris!

“Why,” said he, “Anyone can slip-up when they’re young. And, with maturity and moral-work, still go on to become a pinnacle. Even Anne – like you – is not an automaton. Even she has had her temptations along the way – and bested them.” And a dreamy expression.

“Did she have an indiscretion with a gamekeeper too?” I said.

“Don’t be silly, Maurice, I told you.. She's from the sea-side.”

I swirled my scotch – we were making a steady pace through the bar that night. “Ignoratio elenchi. Alright – with a whelk-seller then. An oyster purveyor.”

“That IS – wrong, and irrelevant. Anyway good gracious. I won't go into details.”

“Why bring it up at all then? A poor gossip you are, Clive.”

“It wasn’t – MEANT – to be gossip! It was meant to imply that – one can draw back from the amoral abyss!”

“It says 'how' alright – but not 'why'.”

“For the saving of the soul – Maurice don't be so deliberately stupid.”

“I swear it just comes naturally!”

Clive shook his head sadly. “Was I wrong? Are you just a hopeless case? Perhaps it was misguided of me to try and compare you – or I – to Anne; after all, women are on a whole different plane.”

“That must make it frightfully difficult for a chap to meet one socially.”

Ignoring me, Clive said: “It's the right and proper way for things to be. For the fairer sex to be elevated above all the petty trivialities that don't concern her – politics, the arts, the sciences, the Vote. Because, you see, the woman is the heavenly matter, and it is for the man to give her form.”

As usual I was several bungling steps behind him, but when I finally twigged: “Oh Clive! Anne is pregnant then?” He looked scandalized; I had rather roared.

“Well, offer me a cigar, then!” I said. He didn't.

Instead, he said, “How did you jump to that deduction?”

“Ah well – stands to reason, don’t it, what?” I said. “The two of you are married a year, and – well – make hay while the sun shines, isn't that it? As you say – it's the natural way of things.”
“What would you know of the natural way?” he said nastily. I easily allowed him that pot-shot; the winner had taken it all, after all.

“Oh well. I’ve read about it in books. Heard it in songs. Seen it in the pictures. Only third-hand accounts, of course, but I get the general gist of the Gentleman and the Lady and their courtship. Stops outside the bedroom door for me though I’m afraid! Oh Clive .”

I took his hand and wrung it. “Oh, congratulations, old man. I know a family is of great importance to you, and to Anne.”

“So now all of a sudden you are interested in the welfare of Anne?” he said coolly. “You know, she liked you most awfully, and was very perturbed when you vanished.”

“I’m sorry if I upset her,” I said honestly.

“Ah – she’d forgive you – especially in her current condition – with child – it’s the natural state for a woman,” Clive said. And though I didn’t ask, he went on, explaining: “What you must understand is, women – they’re so pure. With them, one needn’t – Society needn’t – worry about a personal lapse in moral standing – they lack that baseness. Feel not those needs. All that women suffer is circumstantial – they do not seek to aberrate.”

Once again, Clive was dancing around the issue – back to the academic, but. Just because he made grand, definitive statements, and he was a man, an Anglican, an aristocrat, a solicitor and an MP – did all of that necessarily make him right?

“Are you saying that women don’t have sexual urges?” I said.

“Is that so shocking a revelation to you?” he said, a little complacently.

“Well,” I said, “I mean.. Ahm.. Maybe.. Because I’m pretty sure that they do.”

“How the devil would you know!!” shot Clive.

Alec would be able to tell him in a trice – Caligula would blush – but all I had to go on were Alec’s anecdotes, and women's keen reaction to him, and the innuendos of the ladies at work and at home whom I was friendly with, and, in honesty – reason.

“Well, I mean..” Was it a weak argument – or strong in its simplicity? “Why wouldn't they?” I said.

“Why need they?” said Clive.

“Need – for urges? What are they for? Why – they just exist – for recreation of course.”

Clive flared his nostrils. “The sort of a woman who would do that for recreation is -”

“Still a woman,” I said. “You cannot think of any reason why a woman would want to make love other than to be-get a child?” (Oh Anne! Lord love you!)

“Oh, I’m sure some do end up – giving-in – to that kind of thing, at the behest of a cad of a man, but they don’t mean to. It's in a woman's – confused nature – they subject more easily to flights of passion,” said Clive.

“What's your frame of reference for all of this – Wuthering Heights?” I said. “And again – you're being evasive. For what is passion if not lust? Whatever the invoker – it's there biologically – for enjoyment.”
“I don’t know what kind of people you’ve been rubbing elbows with -”
“More people than books,” I shot back.

But do you see? This didn’t interest him. Because he couldn’t think of a strong rebuke, he simply shook his head with a humourless laugh. I say it’s rather a jolly good thing he’s at the bench rather than the bar – he’d not win many court cases by sneering the lip as a rebuttal.

Then again – given his peerage – he probably would!

Clive took a drink – thought I’d most of it drank – and continued on this theme. “Men – are to strive towards status and financial security. Women are to strive towards purity of reputation – and thus, their mutual efforts meet in harmony.”

“Very neat,” said I. “Very divisive. How are they supposed to harmonize, having been kept to separate spheres all their lives and never allowed meet for rehearsals? Beautiful music doesn’t just happen. Effort and practice and compromise is required. And as for chaperones! How can love blossom when some old sort is constantly supervising and guiding all interactions, as the lovers recite their lines as if from a play?”

“Only the man need know the steps of their exchange,” said Clive. “Only the man knows what to do – and he can impart this knowledge unto the woman.” Via etchings in the sand I suppose!

“Clive, you are being quite idiotically naive; wilfully underestimating half the world’s population,” I said. Lord knows I’m no expert on women – I’ve read no sociological journals, or feminist pamphlets, or heard any Women's Institute discussions on the suffragette movement – yet I do rationally know this: because Clive was unfeeling, he was wrong.

“It's the way things are!” he said.

“It's the way things seem to be,” I said. “Millions plus people throughout history, following the exact same course -” I carelessly flicked my ash - “And it's not even written in a rulebook.”

“In the Bible -” said Clive.

“New Testament?” said I.

He wanted no examples there! “Well – we're not here to discuss the Woman Question,” said Clive, flustered.

“We rather are -” I said - “As in, to woman, or to – man – I'm sorry, can we help you?”

For a smiling, round-faced fellow had wandered up and plopped down into one of the vacant armchairs around our coffee table – sweaty – sauced – to listen to what he presumably thought was our state-of-the-nation round-table.

Merrily the stranger waved a whiskeyed hand: “Carry on, chaps!”
Clive muttered to me: “Harbourne.. Rep from Cheshire.”

“He looks as if he's seeing at least four of us here,” I remarked. “If anything at all.”

Harbourne was already falling asleep, like a student at the back of – I say.

“I say Clive – do you remember – at college – that mathematics prep you used to help me with? Well, now that I’ve got you, I have some exams coming up – er, calculations, that is, to do – but I wonder – you had this trick of working out percentages, really quickly, in a twinkling.”
“Trick!” said Clive, insulted.

“Well, but my method is very slow,” I said.

“Didn't you used to teach maths?”

“Ahem... Well, the, ah... Spirit was willing...”

“Alright, well, let's see. How do you do it?” said Clive.

And I undid my cuff-links, rolled up my shirt-sleeves, and arduously demonstrated on the back of one of my old laundry bills, how to get, say, seventeen percent of four-hundred-and-fifty.

Well. If four-hundred-and-fifty is one hundred percent, then... Four-point-five is one percent, and multiplied by seventeen... Hang on, where's my decimal place gone...

Clive put on his glasses and took the sheet of paper as I bit anxiously on the pen.

“Is that right?” I said.

“Yes, it's correct – seventy-six-point-five – but why all of this painstaking step-making? You know four-hundred-and-fifty is one hundred percent in this instance – why write it down?”

“To ground myself,” I whined.

“Honestly! You always did lug. There's a much quicker and more efficient way of doing it. Pass the pen?” And Clive took a swift drink while he was at it. Was that part of his method?

“Now,” said he. “The beauty of it is, that the natural number and the percentage value can be swapped around because of the associative power of multiplication. Maurice, do you remember BOMDAS?”

“No, I do not remember BOMDAS!!”

Painstaking isn't the word. Why did I ever think seeking Clive's input could possibly simplify a matter? Pages upon pages of jumbled scribble piled up, until I pretended I understood, and Clive leaned back, pushing his glasses up onto his head, knitting his fingers and puffing his pipe in satisfaction.

“See?” said he. “It's quite easy when you know how.” Clive always was perfectly content with false victories.

“Now look, old chap, I've just spied someone I ought to have a quick word with,” he said now. “But in return for my teaching, perhaps you might have a look at something I've been working on.” From his satchel he pulled out a moleskin notebook.

“Not more verse, is it?” I said warily.

He swore – yes, indeed he did! - and batted me softly on the head with the notebook, before giving it to me, and he bent down to say in my ear: “It's a speech I've been composing. I want to make sure it appeals to the common man.” And he slapped my shoulder, and strode off.

“Five minutes ago I was a 'rare sort' – take a running jump, Clive!!” But I took up the book all the same as he departed; when I was certain he had gone into the far drawing-room, I un-knotted and drew off my tie, undid the buttons of my collar, pulled out my handkerchief from my pocket and mopped the brow.
It was inordinately hot in the building but it was more than that – I was red with endeavour. Have I given the impression that I was quite effortlessly and enjoyably engaging in this repartee with Clive? Not quite the case – I was keeping up with him – and keeping my cool – just about; I'd forgotten, though, that even in the good old days when we were both so smitten – Clive was always and ever hard work.

I'd become so used to, and mellowed by, Alec's easy-going ways; with him, one mustn't always be one one's toes.

Clive returned. “Any good?”

The speech was deadly dull, but it did make sense – it was about hypothetical reform issues in relation to the distribution of State funding – with a curious emphasis on Defence.

“You've used the word 'strive' four times,” I said, just to be a brat.

“Oh have I?” Clive took back the journal. “Thanks for catching that. Not to worry, I shall replace three of them with – er -”

“Drive,” I said.

“Ah, yes. And..”

“Determine.”

“Excellent, excellent.. And.. Ah..”

“Assay.”

“And that's it! Thank you.” Clive put down his pen and surveyed his essay.

“It's alright?” he said.

“It's grand,” said I.

“Otherwise perfect?”

“Was there ever any doubt?”

“Oh, Maurice!” Yikes! His dangerous smile again and his hand went for my knee so I leapt away like I was electric-shocked. He didn't notice – too stocious.

“What I wouldn't do for your constant support!” he said. “It really is quite, quite good to see you, really it is – now that we've let bygones.”

Wagging his finger at me, he added: “Of course I oughtn't be even seen with you – the runaway renegade – the rumours – won't do my reputation any favours.” Clive's gone his life entire without 'favours'; I ought to know!

“Well thank you so much for descending for one evening,” I said. “Ain't I privileged.” (I could almost hear Alec splutter: “Tha'rt the very last word in it, my lad!” But playfully, as a prelude to a poke in the ribs.)

“Don't worry – I won't say a word about our meeting.” I tapped my nose. “And there'll be no lasting incriminating evidence. Not a scrap of our association remains – it will be like we never met – now, doesn't that lighten your load?”
“No. I mean – yes. That's to say..” Clive brought his hand to his forehead, looking a little distressed. “Oh Maurice. Has it come to this! I knew it would be digging up bones, seeing you, but in all good conscience.. I couldn't keep it to myself – what I know.”

“Know?” I said.

“No, indeed. Look..” Clive glanced about him furtively – the Cheshire chap was snoring into his chin on his chest – Clive beckoned me near and I tilted close to hear: “There's going to be a war.”

“Oh Clive! You silly thing. I bear no real animosity any more. It was but growing pains between us, after all. Let's call off any ill will,” I said.

“Not a war between us, you ass!! In Europe!!”

“Oh?” I was nonplussed; Europe was a long way away. Well, long enough.

“You alluded to it yourself earlier,” said Clive. “How the Archduke was assassinated in Serbia. It seems to have led to a chain of diplomatic disasters – everyone's starting to shift their shoulders out there.”

“Oh, out there on the Continent they've always been high-spirited – it's the music, it's too rip-roaring and loose,” I said airily.

Clive took a folder out of his bag and began shuffling through scraps of thickly-written papers – all the while looking all around – first over one shoulder, then the other – then the first again – skittish as a deer at a watering-hole.

“Well, now the Kaiser is offering Austrian encouragement, adding fuel to the fire,” he said. “If the Russians start reacting with flexed muscles we are royally – in it!”

“Conjecture, surely..?” I said.

Somewhat mad-eyed, Clive shook his head: “Looking increasingly likely.”

“Howay, man! How do you know all this?” said I.

“Intelligence,” said he.

“Parliament note-passing, eh? Ha! Ha! Wait – is that what all of this is?” And I looked down at the folder Clive was clutching – notes, graphs, clippings, a map!

“Minutes from the last session,” he said.

“Well Jesus Christmas – put them away, man!! Heck, you can't just go stuffing State Secrets into your school-bag and carting them all around London, particularly if you're going out and getting pissed to boot! Why the devil did you bring them?”

As he watched me shove the papers haphazardly back into the case, Clive said dolefully, “I wanted to show you.”

“Why?” said I.

“I wanted to – to warn you.”

“Again, why? Even if there's anything in it, there's ruddy little I can do against a war – even if forewarned. Did you tell anyone else?”
“No. Only you.”

Well. That was certainly a turn-up for the books. I sat back in my chair, threw my right leg over my left again and drummed my fingers on my knee; Clive was all in tense knots in his seat, bothering his fingernails with his teeth again.

Behind us, the sound of baritone and bass conversation, the distant string music, the clinking of crystal glasses. My fingers itched for my cigarette-box but my lungs begged relief.

I got up and moved to the tall window, and attempted to turn the latch and open the bottom-most panel so as to let in some fresh air. Clive came over, behind and then beside me, and wordlessly took over – clearly there was a knack to it.

As he pushed forward the pane, I stood with my back against the window-alcove and watched him, with my hands in my pants-pockets, my knee bent and one foot planted flat against the wall I was leant on. I was the only fellow in the large room dressed so casually, in my rolled shirt-sleeves, suspenders and high-waisted, loose-legged tan slacks – but then again, I was likely the only fellow in the room – a lot of things.

And there were a lot of things on Clive's mind too, and not international affairs, either, but ones – or maybe one – closer to home. And within him the war waged.

How did I know this? Because it was all too familiar to me. Mentally prepping for this evening, I had vowed to be Arctic. But now as I looked at Clive's tense form, as he stared out at the rain, my mind began to drift around the small islands of wisdom, seeking kindness, and I deliberately pictured Alec's lovely, intelligent young face.

Yet then a voice in my head said in quite a different tone to Alec's – but equal in sweetness - some nugget I remembered: “When one's happy oneself one wants the same happiness for others.” Wispy, wise words.

I felt something I had never felt before for Clive Durham: the warm swell of human sympathy. Always I had been so fixated on my emotions, and what he meant to me – but now I considered his perspective, his pain. Passion had soothed into compassion.

In not a little anguish, Clive said, “Sometimes it feels like the noose is tightening..”

I knew just what he meant, for I remembered: that struggle under the enormous weight of Life and all the great expectations that came along with every dashed day. Absolutely relentless, it had once felt – and I understood anguish, I understood him.

And I knew exactly what he needed – because we all do – everlasting devotion and moral support – but I couldn't give those to him: we didn't fit together any-more and my arms were full of another. Besides – wasn’t my place.

“Have you told this to Anne?” I said.

“Of course not!” said Clive. “You can't unburden your troubles on a woman! You have to appear always strong for them.”

That seemed a little silly to me now, to wear a mask in front of the very one you were closest to. Why only seem strong when you could generate genuine strength from confiding in a partner and accepting their help? It's illogical!

“Would you go whimpering to your mother with your problems?” said Clive. “It would terrify her!”
“But Anne isn't your mother,” I said. Clive had no reply to that; he sloped away to brood over the fire again.

I followed and stood beside him and said encouragingly, “She's your – oh, what's the word people keep using? - Helpmate.”

Try as I might to be reassuring and helpful and bolstering, still Clive was gloomy. Do you know, the idea of marriage between a man and a woman as the Ideal, the only Perfect State of Being is so pervasive that it took even me a while to realize what was amiss, what were Clive's woes – likely ones he couldn't even articulate.

After all – how could anything possibly be wrong with him? On paper, his life was tiptop. Anne was a lovely girl from a good family who loved him – where was there room for a problem? Society and the world Clive inhabited loved his marriage – patted it on the back, praised it to the Horse and Hound heavens – but still he didn't look all that happy.

And what could I do for him? Not that I felt I owed him anything, but if there are two people in an interaction, and one is so much more wretched than the other, then the more stable party will naturally fall into the comforting role, will wish to help. Simply human nature.

And yet somehow, I felt that Clive was unaccustomed to being the weaker component of any exchange; certainly he had always out-brained me!

Clive had no father to impart earthy advice on family matters, social dignities, career challenges – indeed issues of calamitous international import, apparently. I suppose his mother had him read 'If-' one too many times as a child, to fill the paternal gap – and now look at him.

I've no father either; only one man has ever taken a true and dedicated interest in me and my development, and he was the very one who had sent me to this opulent, thickly-carpeted club today – for my own good, and it was good: I not only felt great kindness but finally the freedom to show it.

My own motivations and demands and expectations had always run alongside my immature feelings for Clive. Alec taught me how to love unselfishly – leading by example.

Streets ahead of poor Clive, was my Alec. But it was hard not to feel for someone who struggled so. We sat back down.

Clive gazed at the flames. “Sometimes.. You'll hate me to say it, and I know full well I'm beastly, but.. I do wish you were still around. I wish I had you to talk to when I'm at odds with Anne. Not, with your limited experience, that your advice would be any good, but..”

“Hay!” I said.

“But,” Clive turned to me, the firelight moving on his tired face, “You're a comforting sort of a person. Always were.”

Now, oughtn't I feel delighted and validated and aptly revenged by this admission? Righteous and all the rest? But I didn't; I didn't interest me. Rather I saw a more pressing victim in the narrative.

“Do you often row with Anne?” I asked.

“No! Never! We simply don't argue,” said Clive quickly.

Well I was certainly glad to hear that, but somehow felt that the crux wasn't being broached, so I tried a different angle.
“Is she all settled properly now at Penge?” I said. “I do hope so! She's such a sparkly sort.”

“Well, it's... It's she and Mother at home now, and between them it's rather... Well, they're best friends of course! But it's rather because they have to be. It's hard to feel proper affection for someone because you ought to,” said Clive.

“Amen to that,” I said.

“I mean... Anne's said, not outright, but, by-the-by, that it's a little wearing, having to take tea together several times a day. And when they see to guests, Mother tends to dictate the conversations still, saying Anne isn't able, especially in her condition. And Mother will insist upon pouring the tea..”

Lord above. Anne really is a saint. If I had to put up with Mrs Durham, day in, day out, I believe I'd order a cab to come galloping up the long Penge driveway and promptly leap in front of it.

In a way – in many ways – women are ten times more caught then men. Even when they obey every societal rule they still end up losing. Hard to deny Kitty her spirit in that case!

“And what can I do to help Anne?” said Clive. “I can't be everywhere! I'm having enough trouble at work...” And he proceeded to go on a long, likely pent-up, rant about another MP up in the Offices, slightly senior and therefore thinking he is in charge, who habitually bossed the youngsters about. Again Clive was shot through with fervour; he stood, gestured, whirled.

“Maurice, you wouldn't believe how fledglings get spoken to. It's too shocking for words. Our youth and idealism offends the Elders – ah! And then when I'm in a session, with the proposal I've poured weeks of research into, this old filibuster-bastard takes up all the time and won't let anyone else get a word in! And the cack he comes out with! Repeal this and abolish that and reform is a naughty word.. He's so far Right he's out in the North Sea!”

“Sounds and absolute nightmare,” I said.

“But the worst.” Clive went to tug at his hair again and knocked his glasses that were still resting on his head; he took them distractedly and put them in his pocket, then waved his hand helplessly; I do rather like when he gets impassioned. And even better – this time I had practical advice to give.

“Well you know what you should do – you should tell the old codger to fuck-off.”

“WHAT!!” said Clive.

“Yes! What an insufferable shitheel. Tell him to ride himself right out the room.”

“I say!”

“Exactly – you can say whatever you like in the Commons, can't you? With impunity?”

“I really can't see how I'd make much traction with that combative attitude,” said Clive.

“Have you made much head-way thus far with the softly-softly?” I said. Clive considered this, then before I had the chance to deflect with my usual boxer's speed, (we were perhaps five bottles deep now), Clive grabbed my hand in both of his and spoke eagerly into my face.

“Oh this is what I mean, Morrie – you're so supportive a friend! You know it's not too late – you could come back – we'll conjure up a story for your absence – I could so do with you around.”

I would have extracted my hand coolly, with style, except he had somewhat a vice-grip, and so I had
to rather yank.

“See, this has always been your trouble, Clive. I, Me, Mine – that's all you think about. You need to realize that there are other people with their own perspectives and priorities. It's like as if you missed a crucial developmental stage in childhood – an awareness of the impassive external, the world that spins despite us.

“What about what I want – my own plans? Or those of Anne? Or Alec? For we all have them, and minds of our own – oh, you won't want to hear it, but you need to make a radical change – a complete turn-about in your self perception and attitude. Believe me, I know.”

If I had hoped to put Clive off, pushing him away with the brute-like honesty, well – I'd been wrong, it had quite the opposite effect. He was red-cheeked at my booming tones and not in a displeased way, gazing at me. Oh, it is to grimace! Clive and I were much too far away from each other now for need to mean anything.

Clive said: “If not for me, then -” - note the 'if' - “If not for me, then, forces ought be joined and heads put together for the greater good – the country entire shall have to prepare for the worst if it's to come to conflict.”


“This kind of a thing can be seen as a great opportunity if viewed from the astute angle: that's the feeling in Parliament anyway – unofficially of course,” said Clive politically.

“Of course. The wolves are circling,” I said.

“Oh, you cynic,” said Clive. “At any rate – could be a great campaign – even for defence – our Navy can’t be beat of course, but have they been challenged lately? They'd need an outing, a good stretch of the legs. And by gosh the Army's gone to absolute pot – I've been out at barracks on inspections – you ought to see the lack of lustre.”

Clive grumbled on: “Everything deteriorating, now, really, now that the bloody unions are rising and the uneducated are attempting to run the show.”

Another tipsy fellow came over and sat on the fourth armchair in our circle; he had centre-parted slicked-down brown hair and a thin moustache, gaberdine and black boots and ice clinking his drink. He hooked one leg over the arm of the chair and sat back. Clive paid him no mind but continued, heated.

“With the Labour louts trickling their way into Westminster – it's a joke when the industries they so revere are in dire need of a practical leg-up, not this workers'-rights namby-pambying – well, a little foreign disagreement would be helpful in terms of .”

“Munitions,” I said, as his point dawned upon me. “Oh gosh. That's it! Arms – that's what you're positing as the next age of glorious production!”

Clive lost some of the tobacco in his pipe in his excitement as he reached for one of my legs again and I was obliged to dodge his grip as one would the sword in a fencing-match. “Exactly, old man!!” said he. “A person – persons – could make a killing!”

“Killing?” said I. “Oh – but – really – steady on, old chap! I mean to say – dash-it-all, Durham! This isn't just nursery-room playing with toy soldiers: it's real lives you're considering throwing about, and two already gone in Europe. It would be completely wrong to capitalize upon institutionalized suffering. War is a bad thing.”
Clive gave me the pitying look that the informed bestow upon the ignorant. “And what's a good thing?” he said.

“Oh, trees, fields thick with swaying yellow wheat, warm sunshine, flowers, gently burbling rivers..” said I.

“Will you listen to yourself! Wordsworth resurrected,” said Clive. “I'm mortified for you.”

“Oh, you're just in a constant state of mortification – you'll make a great Christian, Clive and no mistake. Born all over again.”

“Oh – you – bitch!” said Clive.

Across the table, the newcomer hooted with laughor – Clive shot him a nervous, hot faced glance.

I nudged Clive's knee with my own. “Now, really. On the cusp of world destruction – so you claim – and all you can focus on is capital gains? Darling, you're a monster.”

“The old Maurice wouldn't have thought so,” said Clive.

“The old Maurice is dead! Visit his grave and toss him a flower.”

“HA! HA! HA!” said the fourth fellow. Clive went beet red.

“Who're you?” I said to the man.

In answer he leaned over to shake my hand because of course it was Clive's duty to do the introductions, which he did rather lukewarm: “This is Highsmith.. Representing Brompton.”

“And the owner of four textile plants and counting,” said the chap.

“Aces,” I said.

“I can hear the lack of love in your voice for me, Durham – ha!” Then to me, Highsmith said, “Rivals we – Lib-Lab myself – but we're all chaps here, aren't we?”

Clive denied this – with his face, his huffy air; he didn't actually say anything.

Highsmith did, though to get started he gestured towards my cigarette-box on the table and I gave him one and a light, and he began to cutting.

“I must say you'll want to argue a tad bit more forcefully in the House than you have been doing so far, Durham. And you a lawyer? Still, that's what happens when the hayseeds blow in from the sticks – big leagues now so you'd want to start putting down a foot-print.”

If ever Clive ought to display his great defensive verbosity and argumentative prowess, it was now. Thus, silence.

So I said, “What can you mean? Are you saying that British citizens from the countryside aren't entitled to political representation?”

“I'm saying that they are represented – badly.” Highsmith sat back, pleased. “Even that's a waste. The rural environment is sparse of people, and of intelligence. Of secondary importance – London is the juggernaut.”
“And where do you suppose all of the natural resources upon which everyone relies come from?” I said. “Food and dairy – meat and wheat – coal – timber – they just appear out of thin air, do they? One goes to a shop in the city and the produce is simply there as if my magic – grown – tended – prepared – presented – burst into being – by fairies, is it?”

“HA! Who's your friend, Durham? Union lobbyist? We've enough of them round our way, great determination, but so bloody single-issued,” said Highsmith.

Clive murmured, “A friend from school.”

“Oh yes? Another dratted Old Boy. I might have known. What's your name?” Highsmith said to me.

I intended to leave no footprints in the snow. “Basil.”

“Basil what?”

“Parsley,” I said.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” Beside me, Clive's shoulders shook, his eyes leaked and he sniggered and snickered and rocked. Highsmith smiled: “Well well. Old Durham. I had no idea he was so batty.”

I put my arm around Clive to prevent him falling out of his chair. “You don't know the half of it.”

“Still, he's making more sense than he did in Parliament last week.”


Turning to Clive, I clamped his shoulders and held him upright in his chair. “Clive – honestly! Do buck up – what a show. You have a very loud and embarrassing laugh. Really I ought to go get you about ten coffees – black.”

“Now that you mention it, I am rather parched.” Clive reached for the empty decanter. “I say! We've bally done for the bottle.” He waved it around. “Another!!”

I'd drank about four-fifths of the bottle of gin, and needed to pay a visit. I stood and said down to him: “I'm going to the lavatory.” Warningly: “Don't do anything silly while I'm gone.”

“Don't do anything silly while you're there!” Clive called to my departing back. Now isn't he a card?

In the lavish bathroom, I splashed my face with cold water and combed my hair back with my fingers and lingered my forehead a moment on the shiny wall tiles.. It really was most frightfully warm and what's more I was feeling the pressure.

Although I was well and truly over Clive, still the weight of our history could be felt on our shoulders and made conversation just that bit more loaded. Back when I used to be in love with him, for all I loved to be with him – still, he exhausted me, drained me, made me feel awkward disturbing the very air I moved through.

Quite exactly the opposite of how relaxed and right I always feel in Alec's company. With him, I never have to watch my tongue or wonder if I'm welcome; he doesn't control his affection but doles it out clumsily, unthinkingly..

Ah...

After this long, long evening with Clive, isn't it a relief, a treat, to think about Alec – a warmth, a
pleasant yearning? Doesn't his name light up this very page? I felt a kind of pleasurable desperation to see him, that wonderful feeling when you badly want something, and know you'll get it, like on Christmas Eve.

It was time to draw the line.

As I walked across the library back to our corner, I fell into step with the waiter heading in Clive's direction.

“Oh, please,” I said to him. “Whatever it is he called you over for – Mr Durham – no more alcohol. Just coffee.”

“Just coffee? Are you sure sir?” said the waiter.

“Yes, and if he acts up – on my head it'll be.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Thanks so much.”

Morose was the mood back at our table. Clive slumped in his chair, his head heavy on his hand, leafing listlessly through his Top Secret papers.

I pulled at my pants at the knees, as I do, to loosen them and sit down. “Well, I can barely see straight. I'll stay for the one coffee and then make tracks.”

“I was afraid you'd say that,” said Clive sadly. Flopped dolorously on the armchair, he put frustrated fingers to his temple and closed his eyes. “Damn and blast! This was supposed to be a purging of the past.”

“It was – of course it was! We've made peace, have we not? Water under the bridge? Don't you feel better?” I said.

Actually Clive looked rather worse than he had done at the start of the evening – but that could possibly be attributed to the booze. I likely looked a right dog's dinner myself.

When the coffee arrived, I poured some into a cup, added three sugars and a generous splash of milk, stirred it and handed it to Clive. “Thank you,” he said softly.

After a sip he looked bleakly ahead of him. “I suppose you hate me now.”

“Oh – get out the violins!” I reached over and ruffled his lovely hair. “Of course I don't hate you, darling! Who has time to hate? In fact I'm so pleased to see that, despite all, you are chugging along. It's all any of us can do.”

I looked at him and remembered: “It was a different time when we were.. what we were. I always admired you, Clive, but.. then again, we were so young. I suppose at that age, one tends to most of one's thinking with one's trousers.”

I leaned back thoughtfully in my armchair, a hand on my face, a finger in my mouth, and considered: “At this stage, I'd find it hard to regret us. I'm glad we met. At the time – we looked after one another. You need a mate in school.”

“Not just in school..” Clive sighed. “What'll I do now?”

“Now, now.” I whacked his knee bolsteringly – whoops, rather too hard – he winced - “You're a
Great Thinker, Clive. Can't you rationalize your path as usual? I would have thought, that to be a philosopher, a Platonist, one had to be an optimist – to reach for the Ideal State, and whatnot.”

“Unfortunately we live in the real world,” said Clive.

“And you can't bridge the gap?”

“No.”

“Little unrealistic so, then, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Still.” Encouragingly I handed him his notebook – his Speech. “We can but try.”

He looked at the notebook and slowly took it and put it in his pocket.

A glance at the carriage clock on the mantel, and I slapped my own knees as a foreword to standing up.

“Now I really must be off,” I said. “I've to be up at the crack of dawn tomorrow morning to go get some curtains at Romford Market.”

Clive stood too, more wearily. “I've an early start too. Got to attend an execution at the Ville..A murder case I worked a little research on last year has finally borne fruit and is to be concluded.”

“Oh,” I said. “We'll both of us be tending to a hanging of sorts, then, what!”

I do apologize if you found that a bit off-colour; I need hardly add that Clive certainly did, so you're in good company!

Once up, I felt the creaky effects of having been sat down so long. I stretched out my back and rubbed my neck and shoulder and looked around wondering where my coats had been disappeared to; Clive took my arm, even as he swayed, and came closer.

“Look Maurice, I didn't just invite you here to show you the error of your ways.. Or.. Or.. Moan on about mine.. I have something for you.”

“Oh yes? Some friendly advice, is it?” From one young idiot to another.

“Yes. Now look here. To get down to the bare-bones of it, if there is a war..”

“That's a big 'if'!” I said.

“But – IF – there is, then, here. I've.. There isn't much I can do for you – or for anyone – and me heading for the bloody back-bench – but if it all kicks off – I – couldn't bear to think of you thrown to the wolves. Take this.”

A folded paper was slipped into my hand.

“Oh – a helpless gift at this stage! But if ever you were to be called up – hypothetically – go here, mention me, I know a chap, a finer man than I am – they'll take care of you there – and your – little friend. It's a regiment, a Colonel I've heard tell of – well..”

Who would have taken Clive to be such a prophet of doom? And yet sentimental with it. Seemed awfully serious too.
“Well. Well... I – thank you, Clive.”

He still had a hold of my hand in both of his again where he'd passed me the paper, and Land if he wasn’t looking up at me, gazing rather, eyes bright and – whether intentional or not – asking. Demanding.

Gently this time, I removed my hand, but immediately patted his sagging shoulder.

“And if you want my further advice – likely not, but – if you want to stay safe – the pair of you – you'll train your boy to be useful to a war effort in some way other than waving a gun about, even if it's only pencil-pushing. Better odds cranking out statistics in an office than becoming on the battlefield..”

Can't say I wasn't somewhat surprised by tuppence-worth of Clive's; not so much this fantasy war of his but the fact that he was showing some protective instinct – likely enough he will make a good father. Bit of an about-turn – I cast my mind back over the years to see if I could remember Clive having ever done anything selfless – well, charity to the Poor, I suppose. And what was I now, compared to him, if not poor!

Naturally and of course I was – and I wasn't. We moved our final farewells outside, to the wide grey evenly-paved footpath at the bottom of the club steps, in the warm evening, under the swaying trees. Around us people strolled, no rush; women with bonnets and prams and brollies, men in three-pieces, bowlers, briefcases.

It was nowhere near dark yet – the long long length of July days – but the suggestion of drowsy night dimmed the vision hazily; you know it gets hotter and hotter the later it gets in the midsummer.

The earlier rain had left barely a sheen. I slipped on my jacket and greatcoat and hat because it was the handiest way to carry them. Clive wore his outer gear too because my word they were fashionable; he's fairly left the flannel far behind. Now he wore a suit of expensive material in the smallest brown and black plaid you can imagine, though buttoned up in his double-breasted he looked smaller than ever.

Smoke issued out form under his homburg as he looked down at the ground, moving his feet as if it were cold. Poor fellow was worn-out.

Whereas I, despite the whiskey and scotch and port and gin and heat was feeling more and more energized the later it got, the closer I was to going home. I reached my arms out and up like as if I was stretching before a race; Clive yawned.

“Oh God,” said he. “I think I may just be ever so slightly and oh so delightfully smashed.”

“Rather! You're not going home to Anne in that state, are you? Hardly fair – and quite the last thing she'd need. And I think even you with your great oratorical skills would have trouble convincing her that you were raising your wrist in the name of the Lord!”

“No, I'll be going to the flat,” said Clive.

“Jolly good.” I went to the edge of the road and hailed down a cab, and gave the address which I remembered easily. It was even a Saturday! Fancy that! How circumstances veer.

Still Clive dawdled on the spot. “Maybe we could meet up again sometime – just to talk? I do so
dreadfully miss – talking..”

Trust Clive to try and imply that talking was a mere innocent pastime – when in fact – with the right person – it’s about the most intimate thing two can do.

“We’ve already talked plenty.” I glanced at Big Ben, who was only over the way. “Gosh I've been here hours!”

“But -”

“I’m afraid this is it for us, Clive. This evening. I'm not going to hold your hand throughout your marriage,” I said.

Clive's mouth opened in mild surprise. No words.

“You ought to be holding Anne's,” I added. “There's every chance she's just as befuddled as you are.. As any of us.”

Here again Clive had no ready reply; that was alright, I took the thoughtful look on his face as promising. I took a last toke, before tossing my cigarette down on the ground and crushing it underfoot. “Well, I'll say toodle-pip. Got to be back in time for tea.”

I held out my hand for the old shake, and gave my lopsided smile – sad, sympathetic, benign; the one that Alec calls the 'knee-trembler'.

So I oughtn't have been too surprised when Clive looked at my face, then down at my extended hand, and then he more or less collapsed against me, his shoulders shaking. I pocketed my hands and planted my feet, taking his weight easily. “Ha! Ha! In his cups!” I called to passers-by.

Oh desperate Clive; I looked down at his crooked hat as he clung to my coat-lapels and rubbed his face on my chest, and I allowed him this: see, I can be charitable, too. How could I deny him a mere grain of male warmth when I have it galore at home, night and day, river deep mountain high?

Certainly I wasn't about to embrace Clive in return: that would be the last bloody word in impropriety. And anyway – I'd no wish to – I'm good and spoken-for, by a noisy little speaker.

Mind you, having Clive so close did bring up some old physical memories of yore, and I couldn't resist – I drew out my hands from my pockets and pulled old Clive into a delighted, playful headlock. Well – I was delighted!

“Ah – ah – Aiiiiii!!!! GET off!!” Clive struggled vainly.

“That doesn't sound to me like, 'I give','” I said cheerfully.

Clive pulled despairingly at my arms. “I give! I give! You dashed bastard!”

I released him and he stumbled away, straightening his hat and shaking out his sleeves.

“It really is too bad of you, Hall!” He looked around, panting. “There are people here who might know me by reputation!”

“Then they'll have gotten a right Daily Mail eyeful. Ha! Ha!” I said.

Red-faced, Clive scowled. “Really! You've gone to the absolute dogs.”

“Go on, Clive, tell me more about how I'm ruining your reputation. You know you're only egging
me on.”

Clive rubbed his temples. “God!!”

I picked up Clive's bag from the footpath and put it neatly back on his shoulder. “Here you are. I didn't really hurt you, did I?”


“People like you, maybe?”

“Me? N-no! Never! I m-mean to say!!”

“Your stammering is flattering,” I said drily. A small shared smile, and I said, “Well, goodbye then. Love to Anne.” I shook Clive's hand for the last time and said, meaning it: “Do take care of yourself too, my dear.”

I felt I could be heartfelt to him now, at last, because I didn't need him anymore – need does contort feelings. Now there was no desperation, no panic – just another human, struggling for footing in this wind-whipping world.

“Oh you know me.” Clive patted his chest. “Heart of stone.”

I walked him to his cab and hung back while the uniformed driver, who had been waiting dutifully thorough our scuffling – probably masking a laugh – held the door for Clive to climb in; then he closed it and hauled himself back up into the driving-seat.

On a sudden thinking, I jumped up onto the step of the cab and poked my head into the side window to the interior, where Clive was sat back on the cushions.

“Oh Clive.. Just one thing, about how you found me. Even before Kitty's visit, and even she was vague enough.. You said that you could glean from that newspaper-photograph that Alec was still in England, in London -”

Here Clive winced at the mention of the delinquent – and I said: “But, how did you figure out that I was still here too?”

Clive sighed, looked out of the other window, up at the ceiling, down at the plush floor of the cab, and finally back at me. “The look on his face.. It had to be you.”

As I absorbed that, Clive leaned forward and knocked the front panel of the hansom briskly; I hopped backwards off the step and onto the footpath as it drove away, along the wide road and wending away to disappear among the other cabs, cars and buses.

“...Maurice, shall we rewrite history?” No. We shan't. But we can pull out the pen and paper and compose our futures as we wish.

I popped my hands back into my pockets – now wasn't that strange, my crib-notes weren't there, nor had they been on the table when we left earlier; the waiter had it cleared of glasses when I took up my cigarettes.

And you'll realize in just a moment just what else wasn't in my pocket!

“Oh damnation. Oh shitty shit,” I berated myself. I looked around a little helplessly on the street,
before going back up the stone steps to the imposing entrance of the Clive's club, where stood the
doorman from before, with whom I'd had the slight embarrassment at the start of the evening.

I approached him for another one, with my hands on my face and then held out in appeal: “I'm sorry,
excuse me, oh gosh, please forgive me, I'm not being funny but I wonder terribly if I could borrow
the value of a bus fare? It's only – it's getting on and I could walk it but that would take hours and it's
a fair bit north, oh gosh I do hate to ask..”

Rooting in his pockets, the doorman said: “Not at all, not at all, just a minute..”

“I do apologize so, I just didn't realize.. I'm absolutely tapped out! And I'm just – quite – eager to get
home, I know it's so cheeky of me to ask..” I swept my hand at the formidable façade of the building.
“I don't belong here, you see..”

The doorman smiled. “I know that, mate. I could tell. Here you are -” He handed me half-a-crown.

“Oh dear me – that's too much – a shilling would be ample! It would get me plenty north,” I
flustered.

With a wave of his hand, he said, “Ah – take it – and go as near to home as you can.”

“Thanks ever so.” I shook his hand. “I'll get you back, I promise – send it over – thank you! Good
night!”

“Safe-home!” said the doorman.

And I went – alright, ran – to the thoroughfare, to the other side of the road, to catch the same bus
back to Shoreditch that I'd come on hours before – back north, away from the setting sun but into the
welcoming warmth of my darling friend – my Alec. With all of the hubbub and emotional turmoil of
dealing with Clive – how very wonderful and relieving it was to have him to come home to – Alec!

I stood on the bus holding the rail and dreamed of him – I'd see him very shortly thanks to the kind-
hearted doorman – and yet still I wanted to take out the newspaper-clipping picture of the railway
workers and gaze at my very favourite one.

Even as things stood, I did not feel as though I had beaten Clive at any sort of game – yet still I felt a
personal triumph that far surpassed any concepts of ‘winning’ and ‘besting’.

Simply: I wanted to hold Alec in my arms and nuzzle my face down into his hair. Is that an emotion?
It's my constant one.

As the bus trundled along, swinging wildly around corners and bends, I looked past bonnets and hats
and hair, where I was stood cheek-to-jowl with other Londoners, I remembered how truly awful I'd
felt when Clive and I effectively ended our relationship after his return from Greece. I could recall
well the distress and heartache and loneliness, however flip I was about it today.
Back then I felt an absolute rage with the world, at all that had been thrown at me, at all that had been ripped away. It was terrifying – how could I go on without Clive? Worse, how could the world dare to expect me to go on? Yet I had done, somehow. And now here we are. Funny old world.

Cambridge Clive and I – one could conceivably call our relationship then an over-investment – an unhealthy reliance. Ironic given that I would never have advised anyone to put all of their eggs – their nest-eggs – in one basket at the brokerage!

Alec would actually agree with this school of thought, and even in the midst of loving declarations, he'd plead: “Now, Maurice, you know you don't owe me anythin'. I know you ain't exactly been around the block at all, and if you ever get to feelin' like.. like circlin', like samplin', then – oh, how could I stop you. I don't want you to think it's either me or no-one. After all, I'm not the only man in the whole wide world.”

For all his worldly wisdom, Alec, the thing is, on this particular, he's wrong – dead wrong. He is the only man in the whole wide world – for me.

For all my own naivety – post-Clive and pre-Alec – somehow I think I always knew that if I wanted to go and have casual encounters – seek meaningless intercourse – I could have. No doubt old Risley would give a lend of his little black book. But that wasn't what I wanted in my soul.

For me – in my Ideal State – I want to love someone who loves me, and the bodily delights follow; they become an expression of this.

“Oh – well,” said Alec upon hearing this. “When you put it like that.” Exasperatedly: “In that case, then – it has to be me, then, hasn't it?” Yes Alec, yes it has, it has!

We drew near familiar streets, and I trembled with eagerness to go back to ground.

I was hungry now, aching for that contact. All of those times in the past when I'd been alone with Clive, and glad to be, and something about his face, his laugh, his demeanour, would be inviting to a kiss, and he was amenable – right up to the last second, when he would turn his head and show me his cheek, grace me with a morsel. It was frustrating and humiliating, always having to be the instigating party, and more often than not rejected.

Whereas old Alec – oh, a big fan of kissing, that lad. At breakfast, sneaked over lunch, in the hall after work, when climbing into the pyjamas at bedtime. Where there's time, there's kisses. Soft and sweet, deep and slow.

And that's where we harmonize – it really is just a question of matched preferences. Clive and I differed fundamentally, I could see it so clearly now. We wanted different things, even back in the old days when we wanted each other. And I had been all the more rough and rash because I had both physical and spiritual desire to grapple with, driving me despaired.

I'd loved Clive with deliberate desperation because I'd seen him as my only solace in a regimental world, my only salvation – I loved him because I didn't know or dared hope that Alec – or anyone like him – was waiting for me around the corner. How little I knew!

Alec is exactly the sort of fellow – the wonderful Friend – that I would have conjured up into being if I could. I didn't need to now. Or maybe I'd already done it!

Either way my steps hastened as I alighted from the bus, and gained the darkening footpath, doffing the hat here and there in the dusk, and within minutes I was at our building. As I looked up at our flat, I could tell even from this distance that the windows were closed behind the foliage, and there
was no flickering of light, candle or hearth.

So he wasn’t home – on an instinct I turned around and walked the few streets to the nearest pub – the ‘local’ – where I was fairly certain I’d find my own one.

And indeed. I opened the door to the dark, dingy, beer-scented, half-full tavern; I looked around and my eyes fell upon a certain seated figure holding court at a table of maybe six or seven listless listeners, hands holding up chins or idling pints.

As I approached, Alec waved his half-full tankard as if by explanation and I heard his voice: “... sort of a business, I can tell you. Well, we’re all of us flummoxed some-way. I falled in love with a toff – well wasn’t that the rock that I perished on!”

I stood behind him and touched his shoulder, and he looked around and up, startled: “Oh, here he is now. Speak of the devil!” Contradicting himself somewhat, even as he said this, he reached his arms up and open to me childishly, expectantly, clearly half-cut and full-lovely.

Maybe to his surprise – although he didn’t struggle or object – I bent down and scooped him up in my arms to hold him bridal-style. He was wearing a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, light brown pants rolled up to the knees, and black plimsolls – all mine.

“Did you just spend the evening sat here getting trollied? For shame. What’s to be done with you?” said I.

“I haven’t either! Not been knocking it!” Alec put his arms around my neck and clung to me.

“Although – actually – yeh – I am fair fluttered, come to it, you might have to see me home.” Blessed reciprocation – he wanted any excuse to be close, just as I did.

“Oh Morrie,” he said. “You’re early! You said you’d be back around ten and it’s -” He put his hand inside my coat and rooted around until he found and drew out my pocket-watch - “Half-nine! Oh, I’m just that grateful and glad to see you.”

“Not surprised, though, I hope.” I jogged him in my arms.

“We-ell... No.. Still, awful happy. How was it, love? You managed to fight him off? Or – well, you better fill me in back at the gaff. Hay -” Alec waved his hand down at his table-mates. “Where’s my cap, is it there?”

“You weren’t wearing one, son,” said one of the feather-bonneted girls languidly.

“What! Amn’t I some tramp! To be going about hatless?” He took the trilby from my head and popped it on his own. He pushed back the brim and grinned at me from under it. “Well – let's go then. Take us home.” An absolute show-pony.

I stepped out into the street again, this time nicely weighted down with precious cargo. It said: “My word, we must look comic. Folk'll think I'm fair sozzled! You don't have to carry me all the way home.” But he made no effort to actually disembark me.

“That’s alright Alec – it's no distance and you’re only a wee slip of a lad anyway!” I pretended to weight-lift him above my head like a barbel and he roared and kicked his legs in protest: “Now people really are staring, look!”

Back at the boarding-house, there were children belonging to various families and flats hanging around the entrance steps in their shorts and dresses and caps; playing jacks and cards and smoking and lolling around in the dying sun.
Alec hopped down out of my arms and gave a couple of the kids a shilling to go up to our rooms and set the fire; they raced off to do so while the two of us went round to Sally and Davey's flat, from which fast and frantic fiddle music was filling the fifth floor.

When we let ourselves into their cramped, flower-filled rooms, we saw quite a riot of activity - for so few people.

Davey was leaning on the wall by the bureau, sawing away at the violin; Sally's friends Violet and Tossie danced wildly and yet rhythmically around the kitchen, long skirts flying, smartly avoiding the furniture. Sally herself sat cross-legged on the footstool as usual, in her plus-fours, clapping her hands and cheering.

Spotting us, Davey said: “Oh thank the great good Lord! I'm about to drop dead from the weary, so I am. Alright, girls, let's take a break.”

Violet came over to the door, one hand still around Tossie's waist, and took me by the arm. “Yes, and you'll 'ave to tell us what 'appened, when you gone and seen your mate. Did you cross swords with'im? A fist-fight? Throw your drink in his face?”

It was likely Violet was set to be disappointed by the somewhat muted reality. “Mm.. Something like that,” I said.

She hooked my arm. “Tell all!”

“Yeh, Maurice, do spill. Old Durham laughing out of the other side of his face, now, is he?” said Sally.

“I wouldn't say he's laughing out of either of them,” said Davey.

“Alright, alright, you lot, let's just settle down and be civil – as much as we can do around here,” said Alec. He and Sally brought the kitchen table, that had been pushed back against the wall, to the middle of the room again and scrambled to assemble mismatched chairs, stools, tea-chests, and arms of sofas to sit on.

“Come here, sweetheart, don't hide away now, come and sit beside me where you're sure to be seen,” said Alec to Tossie; his natural disposition to taking the shy out of their shell. Tossie seemed always particularly quiet and retiring beside Violet, who none the less had taken something of a shine to the little one.

“That's right, Tozza, there's not much room – you might want to sit on my knees,” said Violet, slapping them.

Tossie groaned and laughed in embarrassment but quickly and readily agreed, and snuggled right down on Violet, who tucked her skirts and held her firm, and winked at Alec, who elbowed her in return. A veritable scene unfolding – non-verbally. It's right down in the small spaces between bodies that the true communication occurs.

“Thank Jaysus!” Davey sat down. “My fingers are fucked.” He showed us the white lines that the violin strings had left on his fingertips.

“Where'd you get the fiddle anyway? Lift it?” said Alec.

“No, fella down the pub passed it onto me – we all share it – and it's my turn this week.”

“A week! Of that! Oh joy!” Alec's tone was mocking, but his words, I'm sure, sincere; he loves a
knees-up, does our Alec.

Sally leaned over the table, took my hand, and squeezed it. “Come on and tell us a story.”

“You're so nosy, Sally!” said Alec.

“Ah, more like – inquisitive. Investigative,” said Sal.

“Insufferable,” said Violet, rocking Tossie.

“Oi!!”

“There's not much to tell,” I said. “What little there is I'll impart of course, but I might just get a cup of tea down me first, and is there anything for eats? All I had at the club were some tiny little sandwiches.”

“Ha! I've made many's the tiny little sandwich at Penge,” said Sally. “I think we have a porter cake in the larder...”

I got up. “I know where everything is. I'll dish it out.”

And dish I did. Not that it was to be all that juicy! Beginning the post-mortem, I explained how Clive had tracked me down, and how he mostly wanted to go on (and on, and on, as is his wont) about proper conduct, the rules of society, and such, and his silly paranoia over some sort of a war, and his attempts at teaching mathematics -

“'Old on, 'old on,” said Violet. “What's all this, then? A war?”

“Aw, we done told you already, Vi, the fella's addled. Likely just something they made up down Westminster to try and make 'em look busy. Distract the masses from their unemployment,” said Sally.

I went on with the tale, and outlined more or less everything that had transpired between Clive and I, omitting some of his more personal or barbed comments – he was in a bind, and under constant pressure, and didn't deserve to be judged on his weakest actions.

I remembered to them how Clive had tried to interest me in investment. (“I feckin' knew it! Penge is in the crapper!”)

“So really, it was all perfectly professional. He mostly wanted to see me for financial advice,” I said.

“Oh, pooh – that was all just an excuse to see you again – to 'partner up' as it were – wink wink nudge nudge! Rich people don't care about money,” said Sal.

“Is that it?” I said. “It never even occurred to me that that was what he was suggesting – that we get into bed together.”

Everyone groaned.

“So.. Ye got on alright, then, did ye? No fighting?” said Davey.

“Not even over the bill. It was rather jolly, come to that! A real relief,” I said.

“You didn't have a go at him?” said Violet.

“I think I kept the taunting to a minimum.”
“You mean you had – a good time?” said Sally.

I shrugged. “Would I go so far as to say that? I didn't mind it. As to Clive, well – he is having his difficulties, he's up and down, the poor fellow – I'm only glad if, for one evening, I could make him laugh – then again, I could always do that, just by showing him my end-of-term marks at college.”

“So you were nice to him?!” said Davey.

“I was I think perfectly cordial,” I said. “I acknowledged our old team-ship, yes, but confirmed that it was all in the past, and he had nothing to worry about, and the best of futures to we both. I was – of course – unrepentant.”

A silence.

Then through laughing, Sally said, “But, how did you bury it?”

“I don't know what you mean,” I said. “I simply gave Clive my last gift of honesty, and said-” For emphasis I took Violet's hand and looked at her sadly, sincerely: “I did love you once.” Violet's eyes filled with tears.

“ Stellar performance,” remarked Sally.

“I hope you didn't mean it!” whispered Tossie.

“'Once', mar yah! Tsk, tsk. How could you be so cruel, guv?” said Davey.

“What?” I said.

“I mean to say.. I know full well there's a mean streak a mile long through the upperclasses – they're not as human as the rest of us – but I thought you were different. Such a garotting I never thought I'd see!” said Davey.

“What in God's name are you talking about? I was as civil as could be to him! Maybe even more than that – warm, even! Empathetic!” I looked around at the table of disbelieving faces, raised brows, crossed arms, fingers tapping mouths, until I rested upon Alec beside me, who gave me a wan smile.

“In this instance,” explained Violet, “It was a case of you were kind to be cruel.”

“I was?” I was at sixes and sevens, is what I was.

“Aye! I can't believe how vindictive you were, Maurice,” said Davey. “I'm actually sort of impressed. You crushed him – old Durham'll be feeling lower than a snake's belly now.”

“But how? I tried to be kind!”

“That's just it, Captain! If you had been cranky or sulky or resentful, the squire would have thought, 'Ah, I've still got him over a barrel, he's not recovered, he's still in my thrall.' But you were friendly and benevolent and generous, like a ruddy visiting dignitary, to show that you're well shot – you've traded up -” Davey patted Alec's face - “You're better off without him.”

“Laid it on a bit thick, did I?” I said. “Certainly not my intent. I don't ever really think about my behaviour before I do it, or plan in advance.. I know I'm fairly reactionary, or, oh, what's a word..”

“Passive. And I don't think you are, darling. Not where it counts,” said Alec, and I was grateful for his input at last; he was rather reserved up until now. He laid his hand palm-up on the table and I took it, squeezed it back.
“This honestly wasn't a crusade of vengeance,” I said.

“Why not? From what you told us, Durham's been leading you around by the prick for years. Well, now he realize, not no more!” Davey took up the secret slip of paper Clive had given me from where I'd left it by the teapot on the table. “Feck sake! You even accepted his help! If you’d refused it all high-and-mighty, he'd think you were still bitter. But you met him head on, and – and -”

Davey stood up tall, bowed ceremoniously and extended the note to Sally, who adjusted the cuffs of her worn grey blazer, squared her shoulders, cocked her chin and said grandly: “Oh, I say! Why, my dear! For me? Oh how kind! How most awfully generous of you, old bean, old boy! Clive dear, Clive dear, thanks ever so!”

“HAY!!” I said.

Hearty laughs all round, except Alec, who fought his smile and looked at the ceiling. Funny how people were much more interested in any barbs that might have passed between Clive and I than in the idea of an actual looming war! I suppose it's easy to dismiss something so frightfully unwelcome, a coping mechanism. Whether it's wise to..

Sally slapped the tabletop. “Well, you needn't regret nowt, Morrie. You killed the squire stone dead, sure as if you ran him through with a sword.”

“Which you could still do – leave now and you'd still catch him,” said Davey encouragingly.

Alec rose from his stool and stood behind me in my chair, and leaned down to put his arms around my shoulders from behind. “I'm glad you lot can all be so cavalier! About other people's feelings. Ye ain't as invested.”

“What are you whingeing on about now?” said Davey. “You've got your man. To the victor the spoils!”

“Aye, Alec, you've got Maurice wrapped around your little'un,” said Sally.

“Less o'the little!” said Alec.

“You're sorted! You're getting married after all, aren't you?” said Sally.

“That ye better be – or all my hard work's been in vain.” Davey took down his battered brown Bible, with its handwritten notes and book-marks sticking out all the way through. (Had not a Master Durham tried this very testament-trawling as a school-boy – and come up short – too reasonable a mind for religion.)

“'At's right, and don't take on so, sonny.” Violet patted Alec's hip. “When you're about to commit forever – only natural a little temptation will come creeping along.”

“Where's temptation? No-one's tempted!” said Alec.

“Certainly not!” said I.

Flicking through the book in his hand, Davey said, “We-ell...”

Alec drew back so he could look at me seriously. “Maurice, the truth is, I don't care if you went to visit Clive Durham or a Turkish Bath filled wall-to-wall with hot spunkers. The point is, I trust you.”

“Oo-er.” Violet leaned her elbow on my shoulder and winked at me. “However could you resist!”
“Too right,” said Sally. “Clive Durham may be a twat but he's got a nice arse.”

“Sssshhhh... But let's all pretend he doesn't,” said Alec.

“Is he a looker then?” said Violet to me. “Did you want to sleep with him?”

“No!” I said.

“Ever?”

I hemmed and hawed.

“Why not? All things being equal – I would, given half,” said Sally.

“Clearly, you don't have a 'type',” said Alec, a little ironically, as he tugged a lock of Davey's hair.

“Of course I do now.” Sally bestowed a smile upon her beloved. “But back in the day, I'd take to anyone at all as long as there was something attractive about them. And that's about everyone. Old Clive might be twit-of-the-year but he's not without his charms.”

“What in the honour of God are you spouting,” said Davey. “Now Sal, there's a lass, you're not yourself just at the moment, put down the hookah..”

Sally replaced the carved pipe in its cradle – she'd taken to experimenting somewhat with what she grew in the allotment, and as such was always testing her own produce – still she didn't divert from her topic.

“Alright – you've me pinned. I'll admit it – when I first come to Penge, I did have a soft-spot for the young master – young Durham – well, all the maids did, when he came home from college proper grown, like. Well, and who could blame us? He looks like a film star!”


“Oh, what do the kind-of matter – films are just for folk who can't read. Anyway, let's be fair – girls – and boys – old Clive – he's just good-featured! Smooth skin.. Clear blue eyes.. Fine bone-structure.. Oh, and that big, beautiful smile!”

“Now I know you've lost it,” said Davey. “I'm all for fantastical embellishments, but Sally, pet, you got eyes, and you know and I know that Durham's got teeth like a levelled building.”

“In fairness, we all do,” remarked Alec.

“Oh, it's those little imperfections that really appeal to a person.” Sally beat her chest. “Look – be kind! This is a confession here. Maurice, I don't blame you a whit. Old Durham is the sort of a fellow you'd fancy – despite yourself. You'd almost be fooled into it. That accent – that hair!! Face it, he's every bit the quintessential little bit of posh English totty.”

“Davey, you want to worry? For her sanity,” said Alec.

Davey just laughed and said, “So what set you right on him?”

“Oh well,” said Sally. “Sorry to speak frank of a distance, but he's so deadly dull. As dishwater. Can't see how that'd translate well in the bedroom. It's a shame and a waste when behind beauty beats a lousy personality. I mean – pretty, but not a lot going on, upstairs..”

“There weren't a thing going on upstairs, that's why someone else had to step in and do his duty for
him.” Alec patted my shoulder.

“Looks like it's not so hard to get good help these days – get them into the sack, that is.” Davey said that, which you might have guessed already!

Alec stuck out his tongue, then wandered over to the hearth armchair where he collapsed and crossed his arms and legs; Sal perched like a gargoyle on the arm of it and puffed away again.

“This poor old Durham seems to have had the rug pulled out from under him on all fronts, eh?” said Violet.

“If he has, he doesn't think so – so there's no harm done, is there? He's got this unshakable superiority complex. He's welcome to it,” I said. I went to the sideboard to pour a whiskey.

Violet followed and held out her empty teacup, which I set to rights with a splash. “You look the part, but can you really be so angelic, Maurice? You must know that you can kill a man much more thoroughly and painfully with a pair of lips than a gun.”

“I.. Sorry? How so?” said I.

“Hm, maybe you wouldn't know,” said Violet. “Especially since such a plan would take the kind of resourcefulness and cunning you'd normally find in a woman – the subtle power of innocent suggestion. Death by a thousand cuts.”

“Must everything be discussed in metaphor? What do you mean, Violet?” I said.

“Right – it's as they said. Your being lovely and handsome and strong and so clearly loved-up today will have caused much more damage to this Clive cove – to his ego, and his world-view – than if the two of you had fought.

“Now that he's been confronted with the perfect specimen of what he's lost he'll be likely devastated. As SOMEONE will have known full-well when they sent you to see him.” And she turned around to slide her eyes to Alec, and I looked at him too, sat right down in the worn green armchair by the fire, his chin in his hand. He looked right back at us impassively, casually nibbling a stray nail.

“Now see, squire, Oi've got summat whot you don't no more. All mine now, 'ee is, so yah boo sucks to thee’,” twanged Violet in her best Wilderness Wiltshire. Davey hooted with laughter.

Alec raised his eyebrows and smiled as Violet went on: “Am I warm? It's rare that a servant gets the chance to exact such a magnificent and merciless revenge, and thumb the nose to his old hated Master.”

“Now Maurice,” said Alec, “Don’t let the old girl pour poison in your ear. Your little country choirboy would never be so calculating.”

As I advanced upon him, he hopped out of his chair and crept around it, clinging to it: “Your – munchkin would never be so manipulative..”

I drew nearer, and scrambling, he began to back away towards the wall, eyes on mine: “Your darling never so duplicitous!”

Now he was pressed into the corner of the room, back to the wall, by the bookcase, his blushing face watching me approach, and I leaned over him, and placed my hands flat on the wallpaper either side of his head, and looked down at him. He met my gaze, and panted with excitement, or nerves, his eyes huge.
“Well, I would never begrudge my little Iago the intelligence to pull it off,” I said.

And he laughed, and grabbed my shirt, and nuzzled his face into my chest: the second time a man had done this to me this evening, but this time I wrapped my arms around him and held him closely. He who had risked everything for me, and now I was to spend my life slowly and steadily giving him everything back.

When we decided that it was time enough for us to go back to our own flat (“Ah, Jaysus, old Penge, what a pit, but I s'pose it wasn't all bad.. Sal, you wouldn't happen to still have your maid's uniform, would ye?”), Alec and I said our goodbyes and returned to our familiar surroundings. The bed was made neatly, the window now open an inch, the fire crackling. The chill of summer nights that draws you together.

After such a wearying day, I was so glad to finally have Alec all to myself to help me make sense of it all; now that we were alone I knew he'd talk to me properly, and not act the clown as he tended to in mixed company.

I loosened my cuffs and collar again while Alec tucked the 'commission' into our sheath of treasured papers.

“No harm to hang onto she,” he said. “Say what you will about Clive – and Christ knows we've said plenty – he's a wily lad, when it comes to practical matters. Smart cove.”

“Jumping the gun a bit, though, is he not?” I said as I hung up my good gear and climbed into a pair of patched corduroys. “Presuming Britain will get dragged into some faraway European upset.”

“Well, we don't know the details. Sometimes one thing is as likely to happen as the next.”

“That's true.”

Alec set to lighting the lamps while I filled the kettle and hooked it, and started doing the pots that we'd lazily left earlier.

“Do you feel sad about Clive?” Of course Alec's first instinct was to check my feelings.

“No, just a little embarrassed and disgruntled over my part in our inglorious ending.. Rather like looking back over all the races you didn't win on Sports Day at school. Smarts at the time, but.. Now, you know, what of it?”

Alec filled the coal-scuttle nosily from the big bag in the corner, brought it to the fire-side, then came over to me and my soapy basin on the side to wash his hands.

“Today, with Clive, were you a little bit flirty?” he said.

I considered. “Maybe just a little. A smidge.”

“Ha! I knowed it!” He splashed a little water on my face with his fingers. “You're too charming by half, you are. You oughn't be allowed out, dangerous thing.”

“You don't mind? It wasn't intentional – to lead anywhere.”

“O'course I don't mind.. You're preaching to the choir here, love! I mean.. It's just another kind of
confidence, isn't it? Flirting. Takes bravery and a sense o'humour, and how could I begrudge thee using and showing two traits I like so much in thee?"

Sometimes I wonder if Alec is in fact quite calculating. After all he seems determined to do everything in his power to keep me yearning after him forever.

I thought of Violet's take. “So you really bear Clive no ill-will?”

“Well I won't be sendin' him a Christmas card! And – it's up to him if he learned him a hard lesson today. But.. oh, no, fighting and enemies and grudges, I can't be doing with. Life's too short and my memory is bad. There's enough trouble in the world without makin' it. Besides..”

Alec looked at me sidelong; he'd finished drying his hands on the tea-towel but still played with it, bundling and folding. “It makes no difference, does it? If Clive is around – in London, some of the time, readin' his books or sat in Parliament, or what-have-you – still – he's no threat to us – no temptation to you.”

Though he said this so definitively, still he eyes sparkled with – asked for – hope.

“No indeed. I might not be the brightest crayon in the box but I know well enough when I've won.” I patted his bottom.

Perhaps with relief, he laughed, and covered his face, then threw out his hands: “Oh, I just didn't want the idea of Durham hauntin' us! Me and all. I know ye were close once, and if he weren't s'daft as to get married so sudden he could've growed up a bit and deserved you proper. I know his misgivings though.. I know he's scared. He's not the Big Bad Wolf.. Just an ordinary fellow like you and me.”

Alec rested his rump on the edge of the counter, ankles crossed, facing the room, picked up a cup I had just dried, and examined it.

“And to be honest, it do play on me a bit,” he said to the cup. “Alla those comforts Clive could give you.. Money, status, security, nice things to eat and wear and do. The possibility of establishing yourself in your career, albeit behind a cloak.. You deserve all that.”

He turned and grinned at me. “But all the same I just don't know if I'd trust you going off on your own to try.. I dunno if you'd fare so well without me.”

I tossed my own tea-towel over my shoulder. “Not half! I'd be dreadfully bored and unhappy without you – to say nothing of the worry it would cause me to be apart from you, to wonder if you were alright, were you taking care of yourself. When that's my job.”

Alec nodded slowly, then took a breath. “Seein' you striding off so fine to meet Durham this afternoon.. I won't say I weren't scared. It were a risk.” He swallowed. “The two of ye could've – could've -”

I turned to him.

“And ye'd have every perfect right -”

I sought his eyes.

“I just wanted you to have the chance, the choice,” he whispered.

I took his hands and held them securely and looked into his eyes and said: “You're right, what you
said before – it makes no difference. There's no contest, no choice to make.. And you know if there were, you'd be it.

“And if Clive had decided today that he was in love with me, then it would have been something of a folly on him. Because he wouldn't have just been in love with me – but with you too. There's no me without you. I've absorbed so much of you in the past year.. You're everything in a person I strive towards, and God help me, I'm some-way on the road to achieving it!”

Alec blushed, but handled it: he looked away, then back up at me, put his arms around my neck, and said exactly what everyone wants to hear from their hero: “I'm dead proud o'you.”

We didn't make love that night; Alec didn't make a move to, because he wanted a different kind of affirmation, I think.. How shall I put it. Clive wouldn't sleep with me, whereas Alec would; however, Alec didn't like to think that this was the only advantage he had over Clive, the primary reason I was with him. Because of course it wasn't.

I do love sex but I love Alec more; if he copped some terribly injury I'd still stick with him forever... I really do think I've come full circle. That boy has taught me more about life and myself than any prestigious educational institute I've ever set foot in. And it's ongoing. We just keep striding further and further, towards the ideal, towards love.

Muggy, post-rain summer air outside the window turned the night sharp; stars twinkled through the two windows we'd left undraped. (Soon to be replaced.) Candles slowly dripped their wax on the mantelpiece and bookcase; tea leaves steeped in the pot and the coal glowed just enough to warm the room to a restful atmosphere.

Alec sat on the armchair pulled up in front of the fireplace, and I sat on the rug by his feet.

“Alec, I was wondering..”

“You can ask me anything, pet.”

My legs were crossed, my back against the arm of the chair, my head resting on his knee, and I looked into the fire. I said: “How old were you when you first realized you liked boys, as well as girls?”

“Hm.. Cain't ever remember not feelin' that way towards lads and lasses, you know.. That churnin' stomach when you set eyes on a particular one. Not that there were only one! My land! It were exhausting! Couldn't get no peace! When there didn't happen to be girls around – there were fellows. I'd no time off.. So much talent all round – and not enough hours in the day!” He reached down and patted my hair.

“And when did you first.. Um.. Go with a fellow? I mean – in terms of – romantically? If you'd rather not say -”

“Course I'll say, it's fine by me – I'll tell you if you like, I liked it. I guess you mean when'd I first kiss with a fella, and do a little roving with the hands? Well – that'd be – late summer, when I were about fourteen. Aye, that'd be right.

“A gang of us was workin' in the fields a few mile' away from our village, and there were lads from a few neighbouring areas too. Great fun – well, lousy pay – hard work – we'd to take turns scythin'
the hay or rakin' hillocks – still when we was done we'd go down the river to bathe and fish and scrap and romp and all the rest of it.”

All the while Alec slowly petted my hair; I unfolded my legs and twitched my toes near to the fire.

Alec continued: “One o'the fellows from a neighbouring farm – Colin were his name, my age, he had a shock o'dark red hair – a bit chubby he was, and taller than me – but ain't everyone? And once he'd actually been to the coast and seen a real-live fishing trawler. Well he told me all abou' that – the huge nets and lobster pots and all – and then he asked if I'd like to go for a walk.

“So I said Aye and off we went, and soon's we was out of eye-shot o'the others he took my hand and we ran, till we come to a woods, and we didn't exactly discuss it, but kissed, fast, wi'the arms all around, and loosed a few bits o'clothing and fed in the fingers.. Sort of thing. You know.”

I did now, thanks to him. I nodded at the fire and smiled when I felt him walk those fingers over the crown of my head.

“After, we went back to join the other lads, and played conkers and I lost. All grand and as-per-usual. Never spoke on it.”

I twisted round to look up at him. “You didn't feel guilty?”

“No, not as such, not on a personal.. Like I say, I liked it very much. I liked him very much – Colin – but he weren't too keen to repeat the experience over the course o'the harvest. Just treated me like normal, like t'other lads.. S'pose that were his way of chuckin' us.. That were alright though – I got over it. It's just.”

“Yes?” I said.

“Well, I keep on sayin' don't I, that it don't matter if you love a girl or a boy, it's all one and grand and don't make no difference. But, it's not actually as simple as that, is it?” said Alec.

I was a little surprised at this observation – heavily true as it was – and I shuffled round on the rug properly so I could rest my head and arm on his knee in order to look up at him.

Alec swirled his tea but didn't sip it. “See it'd have been roundabout that time that I first went with a girl too – not all the way, I weren't ready for that, but – a little more than kissin' – touchin' and pressin' sort of a way. Pettin'. It were after the evening bonfire at the village fête, and me and this girl from my class – Tilly were her name, she'd dark hair her Ma curled and put in ribbons, and she were really pretty, with her red cheeks, and chatty and nice..

“We danced a bit and had some cider and all and then we wandered off to the meadow on t'other side of the village green – to a haystack actually, ain't hay the love-totem! - And well! She were just as keen to get into my britches as I were to explore her bloomers!

“We just – kissed and touched and tickled a bit, and she laughed throughout the whole thing, but I think she enjoyed herself – she told her friends as much anyroad – I know because they reported it back to me in the school-yard Monday – and what's more I'd done just the same!

“See that were the difference with this session – soon's Tilly and me'd finished, and brushed off each other's hair and neated each other's clothes, we both of us raced off to celebrate, tell us friends, spread it all around – she hooked arms with her giggling girl-gang and I went to me mates and boasted and blew and bragged that I'd copped off wi'Tilly. Think I'd do the same wi'Colin? Not on your life.
“Somehow, I were dead proud o’makin’ it with a girl, and wanted everyone to know; whereas I were a bit afraid of Colin, and how we’d been all silent after, and I were paranoid folk’d discover. Even though I’d been so happy when I were with him and liked him heaps – as much as Tilly.

“It wrenched at me, but I knew enough to be cautious. Folk – blokes just don't talk on fancyin' fellas. I s'pose it were all just done in the dark.”

I was absolutely blown away. All along I'd considered Alec as so very freewheeling, sexually confident, doing what- and whomever he pleased. Yet I seized upon those words he said that could so very easily have been applied to my own boyhood: “afraid”... “paranoid”... “in the dark”...

Alec I had always seen as my strong, sanguine saviour. Now, all of a sudden, he was a fellow Lost Boy, a compatriot, a comrade, a human-equal friend, and I crashed down several more floors in love with him.

My breath held, I looked up at him as he smiled down at me a little sheepishly. “I know full-well I'm an awful braggart.. And I know you think I had an easy time of it because I had girl-friends. But they didn't always hang around long and they didn't cure me o'the longing for the lads.. Still ran to lonely that easy..”

Alec stands on no pedestal. Rather, he belongs down on solid ground with me, below on the tiles of the British Museum, huddling through the displays and statue and antiquities, casting them glances but then grinning at me.

Yes – he loved women too – he had a long list of ex-lovers – but that quality of his makeup hadn't nullified all others, hadn't been the fix-all. Women had accounted for fifty percent of his potential happiness; as luck would have it, I intersected with the other half and now he gave me his all.

I clutched his knees. “I wish I'd known you then. At fourteen.”

He laughed. “We'd have made some pair.”

“I'd have been madly in love with you.”

“Me wi'you an’ all.” Again he stroked my fringe to the side of my face; again, and each time, it fell back into my forehead.

“I'm serious,” he said. “Gosh, I were so bewildered back then. With all the lads and lasses all around, I were fallin' in love all over the place – but no-one were that interested back.”

He leaned down to embrace my shoulders and clutch my head, and said into my neck: “Thank God you come along and saved us, Maurice.”

This was such a loaded statement that I couldn't speak. I sat kneeling at his feet, a position of subservience, but I knew had I stood I'd have been ten foot tall.

Alec tugged at my arms: “C'mere big fella,” and he pulled me up into his lap, where I sat gingerly, because I do dwarf him rather. Alec didn't mind; he seemed to like being pressed down into the cushions and having so much of me to hold on to.

I eased and shifted until I could put my arms around him too, his face rubbing my chest and I rested my head on the crown of his curls. A kiss, of course.

“You'll make a very fine husband. It won't be long now. I can't bloody wait!”

Guess which one of us said that?
Guess what?

It doesn't matter!

Chapter End Notes

Update 4/3/18 Hello, just dropping a line here on the off-chance that anyone is still reading this, or happens to wonder what the story is, just to say that it will be continuing, I am working on it and will finish it, am just wrapping up some other writing and then will get cracking on this fic again.
Hello! Please forgive the lateness of this update. I put the fic aside just for a little to work on some other writing, and it's bloody hard as I'm sure as you all know to even write one story, never mind juggle two!

I want to thank eyeslikera for their recent commentary and indeed their wonderful fic, for really re-igniting my interest in Maurice the novel and film; in particular your insights into the use of music, and light and darkness imagery were very illuminating (!) and helped with the writing of this chapter.

Also would like to thank keyboardclicks for this comment from way back when; some things set off a spark, that, YEARS later, finally flame!

Thanks heaps to everyone who has commented, kudosed, or read this story.
One chapter to go after this, please God!

Very strange, the old rooms above the theatre in the middle of the night! The brown walls, the old posters, costumes and props spilling out of the wardrobe. Quiet sounds different when you've lots of room in the bed. I'd not spent the night alone in about a year, nearly.

Nor was I spending them quite alone now; Frank the draper was sharing his room with me as Summer Stock season was in full swing, so there was a packed house at all hours – in terms of actors and audience.

Top or bottom bunk, Frank had asked me; bottom, I said, because I was so agitated and excited in those days that I couldn't sleep and kept getting up in the wee small hours to go down the creaky stairs to the kitchen, to brew tea and smoke the pipe and pull books off the shelf and leaf through them.

Romance stories mostly, plays, poetry, novels, and each time I thought, Yes, they're writing about me. Not that I'm interesting enough to ever appear in a book!
Strange too it was to take the 'old way' to work, from Covet Garden; Alec had it easier because he had only moved two doors down, to Sally and Davey's.

It was all Alec's idea – he said it would be fun and romantic for us to move out of the flat for the week before the wedding, and make-believe we were leaving our old houses to start afresh at our new homestead – just like usual newly-weds - oh, just to play with tradition.

"Whatever you like, darling," I said. "If it makes it amusing for you – we'll adhere to whichever wedding practices you like. Wear a white dress if you want to!"

"Now we both know that'd be a lie," he said.

So we each went to stay with our respective Best Men; I with Philip and Alec with Sally. A bunk-bed and a sofa; a worthy penance! Although, I must say, the change of scenery did help the nerves, and being away from Alec, even for just a week, did so add to the fever.

Of course there were no rules to say we couldn't visit!

Past the high black brick walls and through the small door on the gate, I entered Alec's work-place – the tea-depot and storage facility on the docks. 'Nangles' was printed in faded paint on the archway.

It was half-five, time for clocking-off and punching-out and the final whistle, and the men and women workers were in good spirits as they donned hats and pulled on gloves to go forth to freedom in the city, to make the most of the long sunny hours yet left of the day.

I nodded in greeting to the departing labourers and made my way past the crates and sacks to the stables, where Alec stroked the muzzle of the great cart-horse and whispered to her as he removed the bridle. I hung back to watch as he patted her cheek and she nodded once, twice, three times, her fetlocks whipping, and he laughed.

He spotted me approaching. "Hay, handsome."

Would that I could say the same. Alec wore his air-force goggles and hat with ear-flaps, scarf and jacket with wool trim – though it was hot evening and the air almost shimmered.
“You look like a Martian,” I said. “Protection for when you're going so fast, I suppose?”

Alec patted the horse's flank. “She can fair fly when she's let!”

“You look a total berk, Alec.” Robbey passed by with his empty lunch-pail.

“Take a look in the mirror sometime! You want to see a berk!” Alec pulled his goggles to his forehead, and turned to me. “Bakin', ent it? Still, you're prepared for anything, as ever.” He indicated my umbrella.

“Force of habit,” I said.

“How's things at the theatre? They lookin' after you? To my standards, I mean.”

“Oh yes. And you?”

“Oh, we're packed in there like sardines.. Them two are as loud, talkin' away night and day.. Good though, keeps me occupied. I'm like a cat on a hot tin roof, waitin'..” A significant look exchanged.

The horse nuzzled at him. “Ah, hello there Missus! My lovey! Hay – Maurice, look at this. Look what I learned her. Here, Bonnie, there's a girl, let's do the..”

And he came round to stand in front of Bonnie and face her, and he bowed low, and the horse did too, brought her head down near the ground.

“Maurice, are you watching? Look – now -” Alec lay on the horse's enormous head, clung to her with his chest to her white forehead, and she carefully lifted him off the ground and brought him around to her own back, where he slid off to sit behind her shoulders.

“Brava, Bonnie,” I said.

“Now you,” said Alec.
“Oh – no, but I'm a stranger. She doesn't know me.”

“Of course she does! I've told her all about you. Go on!”

So of course I had to put down my bag and umbrella, approach Bonnie, rub her nose, bow to her lowering head and clamber onto it – she raised me over to her back as I hung on for dear life – Alec helped me to disembark and sit beside him, side by side on Bonnie's back. We leaned against the shed wall behind us, feet dangling. In the evening sun she drank her water and nibbled her oats.

Workmates waved to Alec on their way out. From high up on the horse he waved back and took my hand.

Of course those were the delicious anticipatory days. But Alec insisted we have our eyes open.

“A week away. I can't wait!” I said.

“Now Maurice, I hope you've thought really carefully about the consequences of marryin' me.”

“Not this again!”

“Now, for grave.. There's angles. What if you got a great boost at work? And had to take your guv'nor home to the family, or asked to play golf while the wives natter? If you were ever on the way to distinguish yourself at anything, achieve any renown or prestige – I'd hold you back. Pervert your reputation.”

“Could not the same be said for you and your potential? Besides, I've nothing to strive for. I'm already as high as I can be. I care for no career – I'm for you, full stop. If ever a job came between you and I – that's it.” I snapped my fingers - “I'd chuck it, find another. The world must bend compromise to you, dearest. I'd scrub latrines to put bread on your table.”

“I think you would, too.” Alec smiled, and saluted a few more people good-bye-ing.

“And as to great achievement.. I'm already on track. I couldn't do anything more fulfilling and worthwhile with my life than love you, and look after you. Don't you see Alec? You're the jackpot!”
“I always rather hoped someone would think so.”

Alec was the one, the very one. Not just out of every potential lover, but out of everything this life has to offer. One of God's children, that's got to be it. Kind as a being, not as a doing.

Once, last winter, in the woods, for example, I'd accidentally sneezed on his face. I was mortified and apologized profusely – if it were me on the receiving end I'd have had a stroke! But Alec didn't mind, he only carried on as if he did.

“Holy Christ! God almighty – you've me blinded.” A grope for a hanky. “My word if these are the manners they teach you at your fee-paying – how you'll behave the next time I take you out to dinner I dread to think.”

Do you see? A big heart. Is one born with one? Can it be developed through exercise?

A couple of days after Bonnie – the countdown was still on – and I was at our sweltering Shoreditch flat after work, sat on the carpet sorting out bunches of flowers. Every surface was covered in buckets of carnations, gardenias, nasturtiums, gladioli, marigolds. I was snipping and de-thorning with a knife and wrapping set arrangements in ribbon. Every window was open but still it was roasting.

Alec came in the door about the same time he usually would, six o'clock; he wore his good business suit and long coat and trilby hat, his briefcase in one hand and a bunch of crumpled papers in the other.
“Delivery dockets and invoices for the last month.” He waved them. “I'm glad you're here, you can help me match them. After you're done with all this, of course.” He looked around at the flowers.

“Sally has to have fifty bunches made up by tomorrow afternoon, for a Deb ball,” I said. “She called me up at work to ask for a hand. This is only maybe a third of the blooming things!”

“Oh yeh, she were on about that yesterday. Got the contract, then, well, gear for her!”

“How was your meeting?” I snipped a leaf.

“Oh, it were alright, just hung about at the back, really..” Alec took off his coat and tossed it onto a chair; I pulled at the neck of my sweaty white shirt; I wore only this and a pair of shorts and a cap to keep my hair out of my face while I worked. It was like a sauna.

Alec stood with his hands in the pockets of his swells, and looked down at me, as I looked up at him. Heady smell of flowers, sweat glistened on lips.. Alec's cheeks flushed already as we surveyed each other, wordless.

Even at that stage, I was a little nervous still about being in the position of servitude – the offering up of control; yet the arousal pumped through me, powerful enough to quell any doubts. I just – hadn't been sure of my abilities, capacity for satisfaction.

All the things we did, were doing, constant additions to the repertoire, the variety act.. I wanted to be to him what he was to me. Spiritually and every way.

I liked to taste Alec intimately, fulfil him orally, but when I first ventured to try properly, some months back, I had my reservations – and they are something you cannot hide from someone who loves you.

Someone who loves you will always want to help. In some instances it helps them too!

“Alright, Maurice, just take maybe half into your mouth – nice and gentle – yeh – and, stop there, ease back off, that's it, now on again.. Slow.. Mm..”

A sigh. “Oh yes.. See.. Folk try and use their mouths hard and fast like they do with hands, a fierce
fucking. But a blowie is a different thing altogether. Don't want to interfere with your breathing. Doin' alright?"

“...Mhm. Yes..”

“I'll say. I like a blowie to be – long and slow and gentle.. And drawn out – not frantic. Just soft and lazy.. That goes on and on..”

“Like this?”

“Mm.. Oh yes.. Just so.. Oh..”

So sweet in practice: and the strength came from knowing the theory, the beliefs; Alec taught me patiently. And he didn't just guide me when it was heating up in the bedroom; he was willing to discuss it any time, you were just as likely to find us chatting about it in the pub.

Object was not to orgasm – it's to relax your partner, and make them feel like the centre of the universe. Less like a handy, more like a caress or a massage – more intimate, of course. Don't speed up – or don't feel obliged to – just keep going, just use your mouth a little, here more, there less, and your fingers..

“Well, it's like with a girl.” Alec put his pint on the worn table and folded his arms. “When you're dinin' on her, you go over and around alright at first, but when you settle down to concentrate, you focus only on one small soft area, above her alcove, under the hair.”

I took a swig of my own beer; Alec is a trove. Even if it's information I'll never exactly use!

“You don't traverse the whole geography once she's warmed. Well, it's the same with a fellow. With you and me. Say, you go up and down, all around outside on my balls, like you do. But when you engage on, only take a few inches in, like, if you like. You wouldn't eat a plateful of dinner in one fell swoop, would you? Suck away only as much as you'd like in your mouth, for as long a time, as you want. It's your generosity – however much you give is entirely up to you.”

I'll admit relief. Because when I had initially tried sucking him off properly, I took in as much as I could, nearly all of Alec, and when it hit my throat or restricted my breathing, well, I rather stopped enjoying it. I told Alec as much, and that's when he told me that a blowie is a treat, not a job, despite the name, and not a one-lane means to get someone off, but to bring them mellow pleasure.
“Alright, if you suck it that gentle and little, I admit – won't quite get me off, it'd take me hours to come. But it isn't all about come.. It's about being lavished, adored, intimate. Use your hand, and then suck again, I'll writhe all over, I swear..”

Alec leaned closer to me, the better for me to hear him over the din of music and bottles clinking and other people talking. “Then to finish me off – oh, climb up and kiss me, and show me your body, and use your hand – that'll do it. I'll go off like a Roman Candle. Oral is a preamble, right? Not a contract to an end. Just summat beautiful to do.”

That changed everything: Alec removed all of the pressure and fear of discomfort, and I loved to go down on him after that.

“So it's not principally for getting off?”

“Not necessarily, no.”

“Alec, but you've sucked me to orgasm loads of times.”

“'Loads' – ha! Ha!”

“Well, but you have.”

“Oh, you know me – I'm a show-off. And tha'rt a fresher still in a lot of ways.” A stroke on my arm. “I'm not the international expert. Just telling you how I likes it, since you ask, so interested.”

“Sounds as if what you like is to put my needs first.”

“That'd be top of the list.”

“Oh, there's a list.”
And so.. In our steaming, torrid and tropical apartment, three days before our wedding, Alec leaned his bottom on the window-sill, arms-crossed, as was his habit. Our eyes were locked as I unfolded my legs and crawled to him on the carpet, without a word, and knelt in front of him and loosened his suspenders and undid his trousers.

He clung to the sill-edge and looked down as I eased down his pants and underwear, and exposed his pretty nest of hair, and his prick, half-hard.

My hands on his hips, I closed my eyes and did as he had taught me – licked all over, nosed and brushed my face, then took in the tip, then a little more..

Oh, how I love it now – I to perform – and Alec the audience, the merry-maker. On and on I could go, on my knees, on the dirty, soil-smeared floor, pleasing him as he struggled for his footing – feet sliding and trousers around his knees.

Fully engorged now – what a man – yet his body twitched for stability and his head tipped back and hit the window; his hat fell off, his breath hard and fast up his nose.

I paused and patted his leg. “Come on, pet, over to the bed, where you can relax altogether.”

Because there was no need to rush, was there? We were for keeps. Whatever time I had on this earth was for attending to his happiness. I rearranged and bunched pillows and blankets so Alec could sit across the bed, with his legs dangling over the edge, with his upper body propped up so he could watch.

I fetched a cushion from the couch to put on the floor so I could kneel on it and my knees wouldn't get sore and distract me.

Alec watched all of my folding and placing and just-so-ing silently; loose flower petals and leaves everywhere and faint sounds of traffic from the street, church bells miles away, music from the other flats. I removed his shoes, pulled his trousers off completely and set them aside.

“Nice socks,” I said, for they were black, and soft, all the way up his curvy calves, held with garters. I slid my fingers on the material. “Quality, that.”

“Oh – well – they – came wi'the suit.”
“Well, they suit *you* – you're too gorgeous for words.”

Alec gave his nervous smile.

Bowing, I applied my mouth to his prick again – oh the taste of him, so salty and meaty and warm! The sweaty smell mingled with the roses. The folds of loose skin all around, moving under my tongue; the curly hair tickled my nose.

What a *man* – and yet, the little noises he made – desperate and high – and the impossible softness of the skin on his hips under my hands.

His intermittent, growing groans, and the bed moving slightly beneath him, and the gentle wet noises of my mouth on him – otherwise sacred silence between us, patient and giving. His pulse raced – my heart was normal, controlled. I knew what I was doing.

Broke away every so often to whisper and laugh and ask.. Alec moaned his assurances. Heady flowered fragrance.. Air hazed and waved and soothed out the sharp lines of the furniture, and sweat trickled from our skin onto one another.

“Shuffle back a bit, love, and spread your legs more – I want to see everything. Taste it, too.”

“Oh..” Alec wriggled weakly to obey, sinking ever more into the sensual. Words could hardly keep up with his feelings.

I could try, and use them to inflame further. “You wanton hussy.. With your legs wide open and everything -” I gave a lick - “- wet.”

“But what about you?” he said. “Look what you're doing?”

“And what am I doing? Hay? Don't you even want to say it?”

Alec shook his head. Ah, he gets so embarrassed sometimes, in this mood! In the palm of my hand. My delicious little darling.
I gently tongued his balls, his bottom, inner thighs, back to his prick, even more slow and tantalizing, if possible.

Alec flopped right back on the pillows, his arms thrown, smile on his face, eyes closed, all tension melted. Sweet contented sigh – this is what he says is the correct result of a blowie.

Of course he did mention preamble.. Prologue..

My hand rested on his thick, hairy thigh; he found it and gripped my fingers with his own, and his toes curled either side of me, and I looked up to see his head on the pillow face left, then shift right, and left again, tentative thrashing, and his breathing began to puff in drawing earnest out of his half-open mouth.

Every inch of his body was gathering energy, beginning to circle and swirl to his core, sending out tickling tendrils of begging and demand to his limbs, fingers, nipples, prick -

I surged up to lay beside him on the bed and he cuddled into me, head on my neck as I used my hand and he finally allowed his hips to buck and thrust like they wanted to; his groans came free and his own hands white-knuckling the bed-covers.

Throbbing against one another, Alec's face glistened wet with sweat, our hair tangled as we rubbed heads. His body was still bound up in his shirt, waistcoat and tie, now all patchy and wrinkled; starch scratched and buttons strained, he smelled of respectable clean laundry.

In this state, I found that his professional attire, battling with his desire, just as exciting as his naked body – his feet in those dress-socks kicked helplessly.

Alec twisted and turned, and even as he parted with the rational realm, careering madly into the carnal, his advice rang true – a hand was a lot more suited to this kind of thrashing action than a mouth.

What he'd said: “I can't get off if it's on the back of your discomfiture. You gotta be right there with me.”
So I wanked him freely – kissed his neck -

“Oooo! Oh! Oh! Gonna blow!”

“Oh, are you? Right, but let me – hang on a tick, wait -”

“WAIT?? Holy shit man, this is it!”

I scrambled back to the floor all of a flurry. “I just want to give you the finishing touch with my mouth.”

“Then hurry!!”

I rushed to envelop him, even then he tempered his movements at that crucial stage, and I felt his thighs shake, tendons twang like guitar strings around my shoulders, his hand on top of my head loosely, then he gripped and groaned and pulled off my cap – final – desperate whine of relief.

And oh for me – the rush of getting him off, and the height of care and control – knowing that I was the one doing this, that he would always be protected and worshipped, he would always be made love to by someone who appreciated and adored him.

Abstract thoughts, those, of course.. What was real was in my mouth. Warm and close and the trust he had in me.. So holy, and yet primal and essential.

Taste of it, sharp, savoury, and the earthy smell, the warm, encompassing feel on my tongue, slowly down my throat.. My own pulse in my ears and the pants coming down from up on the bed.. Only one sense was missing.

I opened my eyes, looked up to his drunk, heavy-lidded expression. I kissed his softening cock and stroked it.

Alec collapsed back on the bed, muscles like jelly. To the ceiling he said, “Ooo... Where'd ye learn it, laddie?”
“Where else?” I patted his leg.

He sat back up. “Quick – while I've still got the bit of energy – me heart's beatin' that fast – I know you got a stiffer, could feel it just now -” He licked his palm and lunged.

“How could I but be excited, with your lovely – ah – oh -” He took me in hand – drew me out expertly from my shorts and started stroking, just exactly the right grip and speed and angle and ooooo...

As he worked, he leaned on one knee; I sat on the floor-cushion with my back to the bed and my head tipped back over the mattress.

Alec pressed closer to me, wrapped his left arm firm around my waist to grab my hip, and he pushed and pumped my body into his hand, over and over, kissing and encouraging. “Maurice, that's right, fuck, you're doing so well, that's it, that's it, come off for us..”

And he nuzzled my neck until my blood raced fire and reason broke and I could think of no call for control, for holding back, hiding away, and with a cry-out – his name – hear it - “Ah, Alec!” I erupted, and trickled warm and fast, thick and viscous, down his knuckles and fingers to his wrist.

At the kitchen table, we slumped over strong tea, wrecked, weary, recovery mode.

“What's left for us to do on our wedding night?” wondered Alec.

“Hm. Everything we've done thus far, we'll do all over again in chronological order.”

“Mm.. Keep talkin'. You and your big words gettin' us all of a tiz.”

Hands gripping his cup, his socked foot rubbed my leg under the table. “I think I'm gonna like bein' married.”
Centuries later – alright, three days – and it was the bright sunny morning of July twenty-eighth. A run-of-the-mill Tuesday for some. But for others, for us..

Our Wedding Day! My wedding day – how I had dreamt of it, and yet, back before, I'd dreaded it too, to think of the wedding, the marriage I might have had if I had stayed safely to my burrow, my mole-hole – oh, what a disaster, should a poor woman have ended up shackled to me, and never really know her husband – the professional safeguard of his secrets.

But now, in real-life, I was to marry and have forever my soul-mate, my best friend, believer in all of my dreams and laughter at all my idiocies. A man of strong, stocky, muscled body, and warm wisdom and understanding.

I would never again be lonely and what was more – a higher calling – I would expel the loneliness of another. Simply by being myself. A thing can be both fantastic and true!

Sunbeams streamed in the windows of the theatre building; noises and readying, it was all of a clatter. Everyone there was invited to the wedding, so it was likely I’d have to be quick to nab some hot water for my own dressage.

Philip came to my room to see that I was awake and active.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” I said.

“Plenty of time for me to assemble my outfit.”

“I mean, why aren’t you wearing anything?!”
Philip laughed and pulled a dressing-gown off a hook on the door.

“A bit of civility wouldn't go amiss,” I said.

“Civility is for the public arena, darling. In our castles we can do whatever we please.”

Philip helped me into my clothes, the thick green fine-patterned Donegal tweed three-piece. It fit beautifully; Frank had done the measurements to a fault. Philip corrected my braces and tucked in my shirt, pressed creases, plucked off fluff, put in cuff-links and folded in the handkerchief.

As he knotted my tie, he looked up at me. “Nervous?”

“No.”

He smiled, and brought me downstairs to the kitchen. Everyone there kissed me on the cheek, even strangers who happened to be present, even Frank, whom I thanked abundantly for the outfit.

“Oh, t'weren't nothing.”

“Looks that well on you.. You better hurry to that church or I'll haul you off to Gretna Green myself!” Kate pinched my cheek.

“Does become you something keen.” Jens stroked my head. “Your hair looks lighter even. Almost blonde!”

I sipped my tea. “Yes, that happens in high summer.”
As a present, Philip hired a car especially. All of us piled into it with some difficulty; the girls all wore huge bonnets about the size of bicycle wheels, with flowers and feathers and trains and all the rest of it.

Jens sat on my lap as Philip sped through the bright bustling London streets, swerving and swearing at corners and junctions – here speeding along the sparkling Thames, then veering to pass markets and business districts, town-houses, suburban trees..

Finally Philip came to a stop and parked up on a footpath. He came round to open the door, in his top-coat and cravat, and helped Jens out, then me. I looked up at our mystery venue.

Green was the overall impression – high, glistening trees, and blossoming shrubs, steps leading from the worn entrance pillars that curved gently upwards, covered in grass.

At the top of the steps, almost hidden by the ancient sycamores, was a church – or rather the memory of one, now. Its walls crawled with moss and ivy and the roof was no more, all open-air; treetops poked out from within.

Plant-life curled in thickets: birds flew in and out. No stained glass here; the Gothic windows were open and allowed the sun and the air free reign.

“Medieval.” Philip pulled back some long weeds that grew in front of the right pillar. It said: 'Mother of Mary help the Glorious Exultation of the Tormented Christians.'

“Poor Mary,” I remarked. “She has her work cut out for her.”

“Don’t worry.” Philip slotted my arm into his and led me up the steps. “It’s de-consecrated since the Reformation, when the Act of Supremacy declared that anyone caught worshipping here would have his head lopped off.”

“Who’s worried?” It was painfully hot already. I tilted my brown tweed trilby more over my eyes and took in the fresh, morning air. Either side of the shallow steps there were the trunks of huge trees and old, mottled, cracked gravestones.
No wonder pedestrians on the footpath – walking dogs or umbrellas or pushing prams – gave it not a second glance. The sort of ancient, overgrown place from by-gone times that didn't sit comfortably beside industry: something slipped into disrepair no longer worthy of care.

People in dark clothes nodded at us from certain vantage points – at corners, behind trees and columns, from windows – the roof! They gave each other subtle hand signals.

“Who..?”

“Our lookout,” said Philip. “We don’t want any unexpected visitors, now do we?”

In the ante-room – what remained of it – stood Violet and Tossie, all done up in long flowing dresses, puffy sleeves, long sashes to the floor, and, as ever, vast hats. One in pink, the other purple, they rather complimented each other.

Violet left the book she was holding on a plinth beside a huge vase of flowers and smiled. “Here comes the bride!”

“Oh, you look – just – you just!” supplied Tossie.

“Darlings.” I took both of them by the hands and kissed their cheeks. “Isn't this some hideaway!”

“It sure is,” said Violet. “Safe as houses. We're your body-guards – door-women. So just you relax ducky, alright? Let it all hang out.”

“Oh. Righteyoh!”

“And don’t worry – we have it all planned out. If we get busted, we'll pretend it's a double wedding, and Tossie is marrying Alec, and I'm marrying you. Oh!” Violet took my arm and fanned herself. “Gosh! Lawks-a-mercy! Even the very idea gives me the vapours. Men like you just don't happen to girls like me.”

How often had Alec expressed that very sentiment?
“I’m sorry to hear that. I wish I could help,” I said.

“Got any brothers?”

“Fraid not. Only sisters.”

“Are they handsome?”

“What? Well, yes, they're very lovely..”

Kitty and Ada! God almighty, if they could only see me now. And Mother, and Aunt Ida.. They wouldn’t recognize me. Their minds would refuse to.

Trouble is – if they could see me – really see me – soul to soul, then I think, all things considered, and all being equal, they would be happy for me, and relieved on my behalf.

A flush on my face now from health and excitement, rather than embarrassment or fear. My dears, I feel closer to you now than ever, though physically apart – with Alec's help I have pushed through the thicket of the privet hedge maze, reached beyond the suburban bluster to reach warm humanity.

“Ladies, will you give me a hand? Want to make sure all are in their places, and the scene is set,” said Philip. Why did I get the feeling most of the guests were his, and were attending as one would a spirited matinee?

All of them entered the main knave, leaving me alone to wait, as instructed. A low buzz of a crowd came from the other side of the wooden door.

A movement in the main entranceway behind me, a rustle past the vines and I turned. “Well upon my word. Eleanor! How nice to see you!”

“Maurice, darling.” She took my hands and kissed my cheek. It was strange to see her here, and yet she didn’t merely represent the office to me any-more: she was a smiling, sincere woman in a smart grey and black dress, her brown hair piled high like a Gibson Girl, her soft eyes behind her glasses.
Everyone that day struck me as a Romantic, a bounty of warmth, a potential Lover to the world. Oh, everyone ought get married! If only it were possible for all!

“Gosh, well. This is – well, I'm sorry I didn't – well, you can maybe understand my misgivings, I hope,” said I.

“Of course. Circumspection is paramount!” said she. “But I wouldn't miss this for the world!”

“How did you -”

“Wotcher! Not late am I? Hope not! God, but I got a right frisking by the Royal Guard out there. Alright, Maurice?”

“Brian. Well I'm dashed! What are you doing here?”

He tucked his hat under his arm and we shook hands. “Oh, to give my regards, you know.”

“But, how did you know about it?”

“Ha-ha, your Alec.. He come by the gym, didn't he, said he wondered if I'd want to share in your big day.. Oh, don't worry, I've kept schtum. And he fairly sounded me out before he let on fully – fairly put me through the mangle, didn't he!”

“Me and all, I got a right drilling too – goodness, that man could talk for England.” Eleanor leaned closer and added, sotto voce, “Are you sure about this, Maurice? Ever boats at harbour, you know..”

“Now don't you stir, Missus.” Brian offered her his arm. “Let's take a pew.” A slap on my shoulder and away they went to the inner sanctum.

How thoughtful of Alec! Mind you, maybe he invited them most particularly so they could witness him definitively staking his claim.

Violet, Tossie and Philip returned from the main hall and deemed me presentable.
“Here we go! You're about to take the plunge!” said Violet.

“Well, it won't be legally binding,” I said. “More's the pity.”

“Oh, never mind all of that 'official' twaddle, bureaucracy and paperwork,” said Philip. “It's what you do that's important, not whether there's a rubber stamp on it. I went to Oxford for exactly one term, and they still gave me my degree three years later, in... something.”

“Yes, that happened a lot,” I said.

“Oh yes! I'm there in the Graduating Honours class photo, front-row-centre. Goodness knows, they needed me to brighten it up. Daddy paid for a library wing or chemistry lab or botanic garden or some such. It's all poppycock.”

“What, so you never even sat your college exams and you could still go off and argue in court, or fiddle round in someone's underwear, claiming to be a doctor?” said Violet.

“Quite right. Just so.” Philip put his arm around me, head to mine confidentially. “Arguing, fiddling.. About the sum of my days as it stands!”

“What a tart,” said Violet.

“Now, Vi, let she who is without sin.. Stay in on a Saturday night. Now.” Philip adjusted my carnation and offered me his arm. “Let's go make a miracle.”

Through the door, and to organ music, we gained the interior of the ruined church and the congregation all stood up. Well, it was breathtaking! Simply every spare space packed with flowers – carnations, roses, orchids, daffodils – the smell was heavenly. There were drapes pinned all around the windows like pulled curtains, candles on every surface, and the interior tree branches were all over with white ribbons.

In the pews I recognized Philip's crew, Violet's friends, some people from our boarding-house..
Well-wishers all. Curiosity and excitement – ladies' hats, men in their best suits, despite the heat. Kate sat at the organ and Philip led me up a purple carpet to the altar.

And there he was! Alec, stood to the left, in a dark blue tartan fitted lambswool coat, with loose navy slacks, and Philip's ridiculous big floppy cavalier hat.

I burst out laughing at the sight of him, and he couldn't help joining in.

“Come on! Keep moving! Steady pace,” said Philip.

Alec turned around fully to me, hands in his pants pockets, eyes dancing, all of his teeth on display, red cheeks, dimple in his chin.. Feather in his hat. Radiant.

Beside him stood Sally, in her long black coat, grey breeches and boots and topper. Her hands joined behind her back – she winked at me.

Davey leaned with his back to the altar on his elbows smoking a fag. He wore black billowing robes that were too short, and a diamond-shaped red felt cardinal hat perched on his head.

Unable to keep the huge smile off my face, I gazed at Alec, and he at me.. Joy all over him too, but also gratitude, relief.. Thank God you've come, Maurice, good man, that's the way, I knew you wouldn't keep a lad waitin'...

Sal took his hat and Alec and I faced each other.

“Didn't drink at all last night,” he said, a little wild eyed. “I know you're meant to, and I expect you think I were there chuggin' ale out of a welly, but I were terrified of gettin' pie-eyed and doin' summat stupid, gettin' lost or sleepin' in.. Wanted to be sure I'd be here. Not going to fall at the last hurdle.”

He smoothed the lapel of my jacket. “Wanted to see it through. In just a few minutes you'll be Mr Scudder.”

“And you'll be Mr Hall.”
Candles flickered on the altar and dotted around on the broken columns. Kate played 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair', right up into the open air.

“You're shaking a bit,” I whispered. “Should I kiss you, despite that?”

“Kiss me, despite everything.”

So I leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, couldn't help it, anyone would, and gently brushed my face on his. “I know we're going to kiss later, and everyone's watching. But – today's not the day for restraint, is it?”

Alec shook his head slowly.

“Nor any day to come,” I added.

Alec looked down and bit his lip; Sally patted his arm and he stood up good and tall and grinned at me.

Music rustled the leaves. There was no-one else around. All else was a haze.

Alec Scudder. Five foot eight, such a tidy, stocky lad, wouldn't bowl you over with his size, but he drags every eye in the room to him, eventually. My little fellow. The small form he occupies is the most important space in all the world.

The soft body, every bone and organ, skin, hair, strong limbs, his head and mind and all his intellect and memories, and his soul and gushing warmth, and all of the rich delight he has yet to experience.

All of that I vowed to cover and protect with my own body. Yes.

And as to his soul. Well, any pluck or gumption or strength or kindness I had I'd use to see him through anything: war, peace, wind, calm, chaos and quiet. Whatever his mood, I'd adjust the world. This is marriage. I was to live for him now.
When the music evaporated, Davey flicked away his fag. “Lovely bit of tinkling there, to be sure! Thanks very much, I must say I enjoyed that. Now!”

He came to stand in front of the altar, Alec and I either side of him.

“Kids, do ye want to sit down there? No? Stay standing? Grand so, t'won't be long anyway – I swear. I won't go on and on and on and bore ye to tears; if I talk too much I'll get parched, and need a drink, and you know well – Alec-lad – if I get one or ten down me I'm liable to ramble on forever and a day.”

Davey adjusted his hat. “Now, ye are Proddies, so I'm not sure how ye do things. You'll forgive me if I get a few things wrong. And if you don't – the Lord will. I'll give Him your regards.

“Right! So! First of all, some house-rules. Each and every one of you here today is privileged to be here, to bear witness and celebrate what we'll call a ceremony of True Love. And if any of you speak of what you saw today, if you snitch, grass or whisper, be in no doubt – you will be taken to a woods, your mouth filled with clay, subjected to one decade of the Rosary, before being relieved of your kneecaps from behind. Clear?”

Crystal, I should think.

“Just to be certain,” said Davey, “If any of you here are from the Met? Vice Squad? Knights Templar? MI5? Interpol? Speak now or forever hold your peace. No? We're all friends? Good. Now. Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to see to the joining together of two friends. Two very very good friends, if you follow me. Uncommon good. I don't think I need to spell it out."

“No, but you need to spit it out!” said Alec. “Oh with the hints and asides, Davey! Get a move on!”

“And please do spell it out,” I said. “No need for a subterfuge here – just for one day we throw caution.”

“Right, well.. In that spirit.” Davey began to pace up and down in front of the altar like a university lecturer. “Well gang, I'm sure ye are all aware of the irony – maybe even the blasphemy – of having this here ceremony in a church – albeit the leavings of one. But when you think about it logical, is it right that we unquestioningly bow down and give observance to an institution – or any kind of sovereign rule – just because they assumed bullish authority centuries ago, and kept power through
the use of any number of crimes against the civil liberties of millions?

“Such as – oh, say – the complete disenfranchisement of a native people on their own soil, religious persecution, the mass genocide of man, woman and child during a time of agricultural crisis.. Not so many moons ago..”

“Ahem,” said Sally.

“Ahm – but – er – that's not for here!” said Davey.

“Too right it isn't,” said Alec. “Gordon Bennett. Give this man a soapbox and he thinks he's one of your Greeks, Maurice.”

“So, a pinch of salt with authority. But let's not write a thing off entirely.” Davey paused in his walking, and flicked the pages of his Bible. “Happen there's wisdom in it that could apply to anyone, any of us rambling humans.”

He opened the Bible and recited: “‘No-one lights a lamp and then hides it and puts it under a bowl; instead, he puts it on the lamp-stand so that people can see the light as they come in.’ Well, that's fair, isn't it? I think that there can be no doubt that this is what our lads are doing today, lighting their lamp, and giving all of us a show of what they feel for one another, and we all get the benefit of the warmth of it, are richer for seeing them here gleaming. And it's only right that when you score yourself a victory, you'll want to show-off.

“And as we on earth are all ploughing the same row, slogging alongside, we ought to rejoice in any of our brothers or sisters who gain the ultimate honour on earth – that is love – because that's what anyone wants, c'mon now.

“Yea, for Jesus said unto John.. Um – hang on, where is it – Ah. 'Whoever is not against you is for you.' Now, allow me to pull ye out into the general, when I interpret that as to say, that anyone who is against what is happening here today – really, in front of our very eyes in such beauty – is against love. Not that they'd ever admit it.”

Davey tapped his chin thoughtfully. “But let's not dwell in the dungeons. Let's walk in the light. Lads, I didn't start trawling through this here tome looking for justifications, but for your representations.” He shook the Bible. “Because if this is the Good Book, and you two are good – and even better for each other – well, then ye have to be in it, don't ye? Stands to reason.”
Alec and I just looked at him in surprise.

Davey moved to stand between and behind us, on his step of the altar. He opened the Bible, cleared his throat and began to speak.

“I hear my lover's voice
He comes running over the
mountains,
racing across the hills to me.
My lover is like a gazelle
like a young stag.
There he stands beside the wall
He looks in through the window
and glances through the lattice.
My lover speaks to me.'

Now, I think a certain someone did more than 'look' or 'glance' in a window to get this ball rolling, but however..

Alec laughed behind his fist, shoulders shaking.

Davey continued.

“Come then, my love;
my darling, come with me.
The winter is over, the rains have stopped;
in the countryside the flowers are in bloom.
This is the time for singing,
the song of doves is heard in the fields.

Figs are beginning to ripen;
the air is fragrant with blossoming vines.

Come then, my love;
my darling, come with me.

You are like the dove that hides in the crevice of a rock.
Let me see your lovely face and hear your enchanting voice."

That enchanting voice was now heaving with laughter – oh you know the sort – it went up past the eaves and into the sky – pure delight. “Davey, you soft old thing, thee. Oo! But ent it beautiful!”

It was, beautiful, so beautiful, he was: oh to have those whirling, rushing feelings and pat your throat – no voice! For I couldn't speak, nor think, only feel; words and sensations reached me, but even they weren't enough to describe!

Birds sang and fluttered from branch to branch above. I looked at Davey, and Sally, and the crowd, the flowers, it was almost too much to look at Alec, the sun behind him and his face beet red and his body almost vibrating with excitement! Couldn't keep still, he rocked on his heels. He stiffened and dropped his shoulders, he looked at the pews and smiled at someone, then his eyes roved around to raise his brows at me.

To think, a year ago. To think, then, I was a shattered man, broken into shards. My greatest pride and achievement in those days was that I just about managed to keep on keeping on. I had no idea what awaited me in the future – couldn't have envisioned this – yet an intangible part of my soul – the childish part that still quickened in the dark – yearned for it. For him.

Alec! My dream come true, my long ago dream of a Friend; the misty lilac clouds of imagination and longing rolled concentrate, swirled circle and solid into the form of a warm man. Just one. I'm not greedy; I just want everything that's darling to the world and that's him.
I'd spent the past year worshipping him: so grateful he had come into my life but.. The softness of his face, the curls down over his ears. Maybe mutuality. Maybe it was I who had come along into his life, the last-minute unlikely hero of his story. His Prince Charming.

Alec Scudder. Well, well. Born some twenty-four years ago, he'd had his gambolling childhood and young adulthood of work and wonder, had known his joys and his pains, made the best of it until he found himself in a pickle, bound to emigrate, not really wanting to, only knowing that he ought, and, panicked – cornered – caught – then I happened to him, unexpected and casual as you please, and rescued him. He was lost – needed to fall in love – as did I. Perfect solution to any trouble, any side of the tracks. I think we two are not so different after all.

Davey held court again. “Hear ye, hear ye, all glory and honour is yours unto the Mighty Father, who lives and reigns with all of the Apostles, seated at the right hand of the Kingdom of Heaven.. And some on the left, too, for balance, like..”

“Vows, darling.”

“Oh aye. Yeh. Thanks, Sal.” Davey tucked the Bible under his elbow and held his palms outward. “Well, now our lads here will say their vows to one another, and we'll all listen, just to make sure they sound it out very sincere, and true-blue like.” He pretended to glare at me and I laughed. “Go ahead.”

“Alright, I'll go first.” I dug into the inside pocket of my jacket and drew out some cards I had prepared the night before, after many revisions, copied out in my neatest handwriting.

A glance at Kate at the piano; she gave me a wave, and I returned to Alec, who looked at the cards, then up at my face hopefully.

“Alec. Before I knew you, I was wandering about in the dark. Glancing off walls, stepping into puddles. I thought I sought a light, a beacon, a strict and definite direction in which to go. A finish line. A terminus.

“Only when you – oh, Alec, you – came along, did I realize that I didn't want a guide, a leader: I wanted a comrade, a fellow, a friend to wander the dark with, no matter where.

“And darling. You fell into step with me, and took my hand, and made me believe in love and in others, and in myself. And though I'm just one man, I feel as though I can face the world now, I'm
finally enough, can forge on even through the dim. Rely upon myself to feel the way, rather than see clearly.

“No that I intend on going away from you – ever! But I do hope, should something ever happen to me, that there are people here who would look after you for me.”

Davey tilted his head fondly, and Sally patted Alec's shoulder – his eyes were huge, near the point of overflow – and I knew – hoped – that if the world was good, it would look after him. The pearl in the shell.

“Because you really are the most important thing in the world,” I said. “Ironic for me to say, because in committing yourself to me, Alec, you're putting yourself at risk, open to a danger you wouldn't otherwise face. But – to compensate – I vow to do my best to protect you always, keep you from harm. I'd lay down my life for you in a heartbeat.”

“Oh, me too. Oh, you know..” Alec whispered.

“Alec. 'With you, we're Knights together,
We share the shield and sword.
'My husband is on earth
My faith in heaven' – restored.”

“Argh!! You can just never let us forget that you went to a fancy college, can you? You and your airs! Deliverin' your great orations from up in a tower! Showin' me up no end!” But Alec almost cried with these words, and laughed too, red faced, and he poked me on the chest as he spoke, before he leaned forward fully against me, and I held his shaking form.

After a moment he wiped his face and stood upright. “Oh, I dunno what to say.. I don't have any cards or notes or nowt. No fancy way of comin' on. Only..”

He looked up at me. “Oh you know it – everyone does – first I saw you I wanted you. Only, for more than a quick how's-your-father. For one thing, in some of my fantasies you still had your clothes on!

“I wanted you so much, but I tried to stop myself doin' so, tried to claw me way back up the slope. Tried to love you and leave you, didn't I, but that all went pear-shaped. Sudden, I knew what I were missin' this whole time. I knew that if I were to leave, to sail away, go on alone, there'd always be a
gap beside me, a breeze where there ought to be you.”

Crying properly now, but laughing too, he put a hand over his eyes, shaking his head. “Maurice, Maurice.. It wasn't supposed to be like this. You and me. No wonder I'm so bewildered. I were supposed to keep to my place, stay in my station, have a modest house, mind the Big One: not want more. Only serve, and observe, and keep to the background, tilling and toiling. But – damn-it – dash-it – I wanted my own Great Romance!”

He laid his hands on my chest and gazed up at me, so earnest, so ardent. “I wanted my own ever-love-affair! I wanted my own man!”

I wiped his wet cheeks with my thumbs; he sniffled and sighed. “Whole plan ahead o'me – and you had it the same – a life-time of work, with only the odd fleeting distraction. But I wandered off that road and into a dream – the longest one I've ever, goin' on nearly a year.”

A pause, whereby he stepped back to appraise me. “Just shy of a year.. Mebbes at one stage I half-thought we'd grow out of each other. Then I were afraid you might. And then I – I were certain we wouldn't. We grew alongside each other. We'll keep doing. Swear I'll be good.”

“You couldn't be better,” I whispered.

We looked, simply looked at one another – still taken aback rather, as one would be when confronted with a ghost! Were these such shocking declarations as we had just made? Or had we been vowing and pledging and promising to each other, every day, for months and months – with every peck on the cheek, every distracted endearment, every passing of the tea-time biscuit-plate, every march home to the other in the rain, every apology after an argument, every tender touch in the post-coital bedsheets.

Wedding, marriage, nuptials.. This wasn't the beginning of a new journey. We were together – that could be neither broken nor bolstered. Simply the case. Just so.

This was just a reaffirmation between us, to repeat, among friends, among flowers, something that he and I both privately, wordlessly knew. If there were ever a physical manifestation of pure love – this would do for an example. This man in front of me, hair in his eyes, blowing his nose, and putting away his hanky, and looking up at me with his wide smile, crooked canines.

“Well! I dunno about everyone else but I surely can feel the intense!” Davey tugged at the collar of his robes. “Thank God this is open-air, hay gang? Lookit – I'll rush though the end of it, will I? Won't pontificate, so we can all go have some fun. And, this is a quiet street and all, but there is a beat so we better wrap this up while we're golden. Right! Maurice Christopher Hall – hold hands
there now, good lads, that's the way -”

“Oh – sorry – of course.” I took both of Alec's hands in mine – his fingers wriggled.

“Maurice, do you take Alexander George Scudder to be your awfully wedded, and promise and swear to love, honour and cherish him forever and always, for all of your earthly days until death do you part – briefly, and then in Heaven you'll be stuck minding him all over again for eternity? Think carefully now before you answer, it's a fierce long time – take your time and consider, I'll wait -”

“DAVEY!” said Alec.

“I do,” I said.

“Good man. And Alexander, do you take Maurice – to do all of them same things? Devote yourself to him completely, no half-arsing it.”

“Oh I wouldn't!” said Alec.

“No idle promises, small measures?”

“Never!”

“Then you do – do you?”

“Yes! I do!”

A sob rang out – I thought initially from the pews, or was it from beside Alec..

“Mighty!” said Davey. “Well – what else can I say? What God puts together in the holy sacrament of matrimony let no human hand separate. I now declare ye man and husband – ye can sort out who's who later. You may now kiss the groom.” And the Bible slammed shut.

“Well.. You heard the man,“ said Alec.
“Far be it for we,” I said.

And Alec reached for my face and brought my mouth to his for a warm, soft, eager kiss – measured and then moving, I had my hands on his hips; when I felt his tongue I forgot everything and everyone and wrapped my arms around his upper body, and he clung his arms around my neck, the desperate pressing, fingers in hair.

Oh the relief of it, such a personal happiness because he is me now and I am he.

Around us, dimly over the crashing waves of our little world of lip-smacking and tottering balance and flailing arms came applause and whoops and laughter and wolf-whistles. We looked around – all of the collective joy and tears.

Never occurred to me that marrying Alec might be a political act; I just love his smile.

A voice rang out. “Mayday, mayday! Split the speakeasy!!”

All looked around: it was the look-out from one of the upper windows in the west-facing wall, crouched among the leaves.

“What is it? The fuzz?” said Davey.

“No – but it’s about to start bucketing.”

And so it did – a roll of thunder and the heavens opened – hadn’t even noticed the clouds gathering and darkening – all of the guests squealed and jumped up and opened their fans over their heads and put on their hats and ran and climbed for the doors, the windows, the holes in the wall, the slippery stairs – and it rained down white and glistening, the fresh smell of it on the trees, the smattering drops, the cold damp in our clothes and hair and faces.

Alec and I stood in front of the altar and kept kissing; it was warm in his mouth and safe in his arms. When the water ran into our eyes and down our noses, we broke apart and shook our heads like dogs, and I grabbed my coat and Alec his hat and put them over each other as umbrellas as we dashed out, the rain now pouring.
Sally waited at the mossy back-steps, her arm outstretched to us, and she pointed down a stone archway. “This way! This way! Follow the others.”

And we went around stone corners and through gates and in-and-out of stopped traffic and down winding back alleys, slipping on the wet, wonky, uneven cobblestones, squinting through the sun that broke through the heavenly elevated back-streets of London, puddles splashing, our steps pounding definite. A clean getaway.

Somewhat sodden – but no damp on the spirits – we arrived at the hotel that had been booked for our reception.

“We just told them it was a regular party, general do – as long as we don’t destroy the place, the staff won’t give a hoot. Business is secular,” said Sally.

“But it rests upon reputation,” I said, even as I crossed the foyer with my arm around Alec’s shoulders and his around my waist – we couldn't let go.

“No rest for any of us today – you know why!” said Sal.

“Because it's a celebration!” said Alec.

Inside the main reception room, the tables were all clothed in white and bore vases of flowers, and on the pink walls there hung paintings of gardens and ballerinas and colourful boating parties. The many French windows had rich cream drapes pulled back either side to see the garden, and up on a corner platform the band the band assembled, Violet among them, tuning up their strings.

To the left of the musicians was a roaring fire where we left our things to dry, Sally helping Davey struggle out of his robes.

On a table in the middle with a big vase of lilies stood two framed photos, each depicting a black-and-white picture of a boy of around fourteen – one with a big grin, in shirt, shorts and long socks, a cap on his dark curls, kneeling on the floor with one hand on his knee and the other arm around a sheepdog.
The other picture – oh how I startled even more – showed a blonde boy, with neatly brushed hair under a straw boater, red cheeks and a small smile. White shirt with a very stiff detachable butterfly-wing collar – could recall so well the starchy itch of it – the grey pinstripe pants, the waistcoat that needed changing twice a term that year, to Mother's despair.

The long tail-coat with the flaps that hit your legs and caught in doors. He was – I was – sat very stiffly in an antique chair, affecting to read a book. But my eyes had wandered off-camera. What had I been thinking? Dreaming of?

This very day?

A husband?! Surely not. But perhaps a vague but intense longing to be loved.

Alec cackled over his own photo, so young and carefree.

My own portrait, trapped behind the cool glass.. I stroked the frame.

“Well in all my born days. Oh, look at you, Maurice, you look so lovely. Always were quite the little man, weren't you! All you're shy of is a beagle by your feet,” said Alec.

I couldn't speak. I took Alec's picture and so held both, one in each hand.

“Where in the honour of God did these come out of?” said Alec.

“Simple when the solution presents itself.” Sally came up to us.

“I might have known,” said Alec.

“What? It was dead easy. Why complicate things? I wrote to Milly back home, see, and asked her to call round to your house, Alec, to the butchers', and fetch us a photograph. So away she went, and your ma brung her in, gave her tea, and Mill said, Here, you wouldn't have a photo of Alec that I could borrow and have you back next week? And Mrs S said Sure, here you are. So Mill sent it on
and I had copies made and posted it back. Easy as.

“As to you,” Sally looked at me. “That was no bother neither. If your school was anything like mine, you'll have had to pose for very naff photos, for parents and posterity and adverts and circulars and that. So I wrote to the Administrative Office at Sunnington, and requested could I borrow a yearbook for such-and-such a year, as my cousin were in it, and his mother wanted a photo – see, mothers again, who could say no – and I didn't mention no names, pet, you're clean as a whistle.

“So the secretary sent it me on, and I found this picture of you – oh how I laughed – but it's you alright! And I went to the studio, had it copied and blown up a bit – they did a good job, didn't they?”

“Sure and they did – bang-up,” said Alec.

Sal put her hand on my shoulder and looked at the photos. “I knew ye two are a pair of staunch and vehement non-conformists, but – if a tradition is a nice one – why should ye miss out? You fellows ought have anything that a regular wedding would have.”

“Thank you so.. So much. That you'd go to such pains..” I trailed.

“Aw! T'weren't nothing. No bother at all,” said Sally as Davey came over and ruffled her hair.

“Them pictures?” he said. “I tell you, she could run the country, this one, she ever took a notion.”

“Imagine that! A woman in charge,” said Alec. “I tell you – the day we get a lady Prime Minister – they're so kind and compassionate – it will solve everything. A fair and decent wage for all workers: a car in every garage and steak three times a week. A concern for public health and a marked respect for the vulnerable position and limited resources of the proletariat... Ireland will be free!” Alec patted Davey's chest. “We'll be best friends in bureaucracy as well as on the ground.”

“You're a raving fantasist, Alec,” said Davey.

Alec looked at me. “How could I be otherwise?”
To a tinkling piano, we mingled around the room while the hotel staff set the tables. We shook lots of hands, drank Champagne, met all of our guests, from acquaintances to the curious.

Didn't get a word alone with Alec until we sat down to the soup. “Wasn't the ceremony lovely? Like getting married in a sunlit forest. Bodes reflective of our future – what? The Greenwood. If you're still up for it.”

“Assume I'm up for anything, darlin’,” said Alec.

Dinner was divine – never had I such an appetite. Roast beef, yorkshires, mashed potato, honey-glazed parsnips, gravy, all followed by Alec's favourite bread-and-butter pudding. Almost a relief to lose myself in the food – I tried not to think of it – I'm married I'm married I'm married – because it was too much yet, too fresh, didn't want to burst into tears or laugh manically or faint and slump down in my seat in front of everyone.

Still I couldn't forget it, forget him, the dark, laughing boy beside me – always beside me, now – did custard ever before taste so particularly sweet, and thick and creamy warming the throat, worked the tongue and tilted up the lips?

After dinner, as pint glasses were nudged aside to make room for teapots, came the speeches. Some customs one can't wriggle out of. Some ones didn't want to: they'd wriggle into them if need be!

Philip stood and tapped his wine glass with his fork. “Now, folks, folks, while you're good and sweet from pudding! Can I say what an honour it is to have been asked to be Best Man – it is a title and role I am well used to, whatever the endeavour – but if you'll indulge me – I'll indulge you – with just a little something I cobbled together recently in the Lake District.”

He hopped on a chair, unfurled a parchment in one hand, a feather quill held in the other; and began to read aloud.

“Ode to a Shattered Statue, Which a Summer Tempest did Rent Asunder, in the Corner of an
Unkempt Garden.

Once mansion rang with sterling and with guinea,
Music soared, the Mistress bored on gin. The
Antic lawns, saw fauns and satyrs frolic;
Now: grass long, lost song of alcoholic.

Twice millionaires. Life did not care. They're gone.
But their Big House, now squirrel and mouse, grows on,
Lies in waste. Until – new taste! Stirs stagnant!
Nouveau send for men to fix the fragments.

'Thrice now I've found a broken shard int' grass'
'Me too. A hand. A face. Look 'ere! It's gas'
Sculpture past; re-build the plast, fair-jesting;
'Must 'ave dust 'is 'ead at final-resting!'

Assembled! Tremble: lo, no David, loned;
For artists' kin: two men, gods-twin, love honed.”

Something of a pause.. Applause rang throughout the room; Philip bowed several times, sweeping his huge hat off every time.

“Lovely!” I said. “Rather like a happy conclusion to Humpty-Dumpty.”

Philip slung his arm around my shoulders. “It's so nice to have someone who appreciates true literature.”

Sally stood now. “Well, I'll never top Philip.”
“Not if you don't try, darling!”

“So I'm going to keep this speech like Alec – short and sweet.”

“Hay!!”

Sally climbed up to stand on the table in her breeches and long socks, one hand in her pocket and with the other she held up her glass of Champagne.

“To Alec. Who looked at something that many would consider to be too far above him – star-gazing – and said: Why not me?

“And to Maurice. The man who had everything and realized there was more. To Love, ladies and gentlemen!”

All toasted and chugged. Sally made to step back down onto Davey's lap but stumbled and landed on him heavily; his chair rocked backwards and their drinks went splashing. This might have given the hotel management some inkling as to what kind of party they had let themselves in for!

Dinner was cleared away, the tables were pushed back to clear the dance-floor, and the band started off with some fast ragtime for people to work off the food.

After we had cut the cake and doled it all out, Sally sat cross-legged on the piano-bench beside Kate who gave some jaunty sea-side background melody, and Sally read out what she purported to be cards and wires from regretting non-attendees.

“The King sends his deepest regards; he would like to have come but he trod on the paw of a corgi and is in disgrace. The corgi extends its best wishes.

“The Right Honourable Archbishop of Canterbury says heartiest congratulations, and that he is indebted for the invitation! Would the young couple be free in August for tea and a lively discussion of a modern – very modern – interpretation of the Bible?

“The Prime Minister said he'd love to he here, but he's a bit busy playing nursemaid to them silly
buggers out in Europe. 'Here I am offering my cordial assistance and they turn and tell me 'Nein!' Well I never! Fellows, can you only imagine!"

“Trouble with Europe! Well, whatever next.” Philip stood between Alec and I, an arm around both of our shoulders. “I must say this is an absolute tip-top party.Alright, not the ritziest of venues, but by Jove, if there only were a chandelier – why I'd swing from it. But! Need I! When the ground troops are so rousing.”

He squeezed us to him. “Chaps, the impossible has happened. I find myself inspired by you boys. I'm now determined to sleep with as many men as possible in order to find my True Love.”

“Mathematically sound,” said I.

“Worked for me,” said Alec. “But you'd want to watch out, or you'll get yourself a reputation.”

“What!” said Philip. “The bloody cheek of you to say that! You little back-ally slapper who'll shag anything!”

“But I'm nobody,” said Alec. “I'll slip below the radar. I'm not famous like you, wi'your title n'what.”


“It sounds like count..” said Alec.

“Oo – you!! Maurice, you want to turn him upside-down and slap some manners into him. And you -” Philip pointed at Alec. “Owe me a dance for that.”

“Oh – alright.”

Sometime later came sandwiches and more tea, which the revellers fell upon ravenously. Gosh, my head was spinning with the bubbly at this stage, and I was grateful to switch to tea, and I sipped at a table strewn with crumbs and empty plates and glasses and napkins and gloves and carnations.

My elbow on the table, and chin in hand, I watched him lazily. Alec, talking to some dancers, trying
to smoke a cigar and coughing throughout.

A fresh drought of tea and I thought about consequences, responsibilities, the weight of our actions. Well, I was a husband now! We have to think of such profound matters.

The turning-points in our lives, when we take the reins and gallop off-track. Alec climbed into my room and touched me. Some two weeks later I said, 'Stay with me.'

Momentous, in hindsight. Those moments, those actions of pure impulse and emotional desire had led us to this spot, exactly where we were now. Alec had made the first move, the push. But I added my shoulder and together we shoved the great stone of Society out of our way.

Alec ran over. “Just gonna have another fox-trot – would you hold this for us? Ta.”

I took the cigar and puffed it properly, while Alec tripped off to the dance-floor with a girl on each arm. Not unlike the very first time I ever saw him!

Sally came by and leaned on the table. She watched Alec carousing. “You'll be chasing him round yet with the lasso, Maurice.”

I stood and opened my arms wide; she laughed and stepped into my embrace. “Old thing!” she said.

“Thank you so much! Wonderful!” I said. “I don't know how to begin to describe how happy I am, how grateful to you and Davey.. We'll do the same for you when you get married.”

“Oh yes.. Ha-ha.. Of course..”
Some natural light still shone through the windows as a gentleman entered with bags and cases and lamps, and his two assistants began to set up a frame and drape a green sheet about ten foot high and wide. They arranged bunches of flowers here and there, vases of ostrich feathers. A 'specially-brought chaise-lounge. Masks.

“Alec, you hired an erotic photographer to take our wedding snaps?!”

“Well – we can be assured he'll keep it hush-hush, can't we? Criminal code, like. And you should see his body of work – the things that man can do with shadows! Creepin' and curvin' into every crevice.”

“Alright, alright,” I said. “We better go take them before we get any more dishevelled.”

Alec and I combed our hair and tided each other's cuffs and ties and dusted off confetti and posed for our portraits. Side by side, facing each other, Alec sat on my knee, or stood gazing down at me, or wrapped his arms around my shoulders and stuck his tongue out.

The flashing light blinded us every time and the boom jumped us into laughing; the smell of the film mixed in with the flowers and cake and alcohol and cigarette smoke.

“Alright – let's call the others in for some group pictures – not too many, he charges by the snap. Hay you lot! Let's have one we can have on public display on the mantel, Maurice – even if the vicar come a-callin' – come here to me – here, we better have us a lass each and all – yes, I will have another Champers, ta -”

A charade of course – but we'll call it compromise, if that's what it takes to retain heaven.

Something of a taffeta and lace brawl broke out – all of the women wanted to be our 'wives' – and so another compromise – we all squeezed together so as to fit into the frame – the rectangle the photographer made with his fingers and thumbs.

Alec and I pressed against each other (Oh dear! But if we must!) in the middle, grinning to burst, with our arms around one another's shoulders and Violet and Kate either side. Eleanor stood on the chaise-lounge to wrap her arms around my neck from behind, and rest her chin on my head, with Philip beside her affecting to kiss her on the cheek, and Sally hooking his arm, her other elbow on Alec's shoulder. Davey and Brian rushed to crouch in front of us, each wearing one of the girls' bonnets and VOTES FOR WOMEN sashes.
This photograph appeared in The Daily Telegraph a week later; Violet posted it to them with the caption, 'Annual Summer Mixer of the East-End Branch of the London Rotary Club.'

Things got out of hand, as you might imagine, as the evening drew in and the Dionysian revelry continued: people danced – even the waiters and waitresses – and sang and play-acted and set up parlour-games. As I made my way around the edge of the pink-papered room there began a chaotic round of drunken musical chairs.

Yes it was terrifically noisy and fun – and yet, not so much as it could be.

I went out to the hallway and found him sitting on the steps leading up to a little ante-chamber, with Tossie sat beside him patting his hand; it didn't surprise me to see him in the company of the quietest member of our court.

I sat on his other side and drew him to me; his head rested on my shoulder with all the natural impulse of water trickling down sunlit rocks.

“You're feeling a little sad about your family,” I said.

Mutely he nodded.

“That they're not here.”

He shook his head, but shrugged too.
“I understand, Alec,” said Tossie. “I wouldn't like my family involved in anything I'm doing, neither. Because they love me but they don't respect me. Anything I do is only amusing. Prizes at school, piano pieces I can master. A job at last with the flowers. Dear and darling, they call it.

“Anything akin to individual ambition, that doesn't keep to their platform, they don't want to know. Gosh, God only knows what they'd make of Violet! Well, she'll be looking for me.”

Grinned at us both and ran off in a flurry of skirts.

I stroked his head. “Alec, I know it plagues you still, being cut off from your family.”

“The old pair.. What if they was ever to get sick, or die? And I didn't even know?”

“You'd know, we'll get in contact, we'll visit. And if they reject you – we'll back away but keep trying, keep playing envoy. Even just with correspondence and assurance. You can support them from afar. I find it very hard to imagine anyone resisting your charms for long.”

“Yeh, well, you would do, wouldn't you? Maurice, how'd you get on with your mother? You don't really talk about her much. How were your relationship?”

“Fractious. My fault entirely – I was a dreadful crosspatch, no doubt about it. Mind you, I've done the right thing – moving out of the house – no-one was benefiting from my living there – unlike your situation. How we all bickered and fussied and got on each other's nerves!

“For example, if I was feeling miserable of an evening after work, as I often was, I'd go out for a long walk. Mother would say, 'You're not going out, are you – it looks like rain!' To which I would reply, 'I don't mind rain.' And she'd say, 'You'll get wet! At least take an umbrella!' 'No need of it!' I'd say (just to be awkward, of course). And Kitty would chime in, 'Oh, Mother, let him go – and get soaked to the skin. It's your look-out, Maurice.' I used to fantasize like mad that if I lived on my own, or with other adults like me, I'd just go.”

“But, there have been times when you were headin' outside, and I took a look at the clouds out the window, and insisted a brolly upon you,” said Alec.

“Oh, that's different. I'm happy to accept your help.”
Alec raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, I don't know!” I said. “I told you I'm prickly, didn't I? Of course I took no heed of them at home – I was very cutting I'm sure but.. As you imply, suppose there was no struggle over power dynamics – Mother simply didn't want me to catch a chill.”

“It might just be as simple as that.”

I sighed. “Alright, I know I'm ridiculous. In many ways I was a terrible disappointment to Mother. I had failed adulthood. Still sulky as a teen-ager. So she still felt she had to look after me. And – you'll see for yourself if you ever meet her – she's a very small woman – so it was very crushing to my self-esteem. At my age.”

“Well, you're always a kid to your mother.”

“You're so very sympathetic by nature, Alec. You'd make a great doctor or teacher or psychologist.”

“I'll be your personal three.” He stood. “Come on, or we'll be missed. We are the guests of honour after all.”

He tucked his arm into mine as we walked towards the muffled but booming music of the reception room.

“You always speak with such sense, Maurice, and make me feel better. I think it's your rich, deep voice, those clever, cut-glass tones.. I still remember the first time you spoke to me.”

And his plummy. “'Oh Scudder, where are you off to? The Argentine, is it not?' 'No-where without you, sir. You stone fox you.' 'WHAT!! How very dare you! Insubordination! OFF with his head!!'”

“Alec, it wasn't a bit like that!”

“Haha! It was a bit. Oo – come on and let's have a dance.”
Night is for dancing, the mystical movement. Back in the heat of the ballroom, couples whirled around to the beautiful string arrangement, gentle, light-hearted steps and circles, Alec and I wending our tendrilling path in among them, in our loosened collars and rolled shirtsleeves and braces.

Alec laughed at the up-beat music. “I know this tune – well it sounds fair familiar. 'Ent it jolly!”

“It's Tchaikovsky – Waltz of the Flowers,” I said.

“Appropriate then so – Sal fair has this place packed to the brim wi'bloomers. It's like the Chelsea Flower Show in here.”

“And all of the candles! Like Midnight Mass.”

Through the high windows the sun still gentled down upon us, the light was dim and hazy as we danced, danced, danced, our movements quivering the small candle flames as we passed. The air felt old-fashioned, timeless, brown and yellow, of a long garden dusk. But our day was prologue, the best yet to come.

“That were a right nice speech Philip done,” said Alec. “The poem. I mean I didn't understand a word of it but sounded fair grandly.”

“Haven't heard you use that term in a while.”

“Dusted it off just for you. But I liked Sally's speech too. Short and to the point – she's got our number, and no mistake. One look at you and I thought – 'Aye. He'll do.’”

“As I felt on you – oh be quiet, I did! I'll say it to anyone! In fact there was so much more I wanted
to say to you at the altar, though I didn't want to embarrass everyone. Rather mushy and personal, way I'd go on.”

“Tell me now. I'm all ears.”

I spun Alec round to the melody. “What I want to vow to you. I want you to know that this isn't just about today, or the last year, but that I have given long and serious thought to all of the decades to come.”

He waited, and I went on. “Throughout your life, Alec, you will have many ups and downs. You may hate a job, and leave it, or you may excel and ascend. You'll make friends that will drift on or stay forever. You'll go places. You'll get things and lose them. You may be depressed or on top of the world.

“Your life may change rapidly, or there'll be periods of stagnation. If you'll let me, I'll help you through all of it. You need never face anything alone. I'll bear your troubles and celebrate your joys. You are the cornerstone of my life. And I'll be a rock for you, if you'll have me.”

A change in direction, musical tempo, and we followed each other, leaning to the stream.

“A lifelong chum and companion. That what you're offering?” said Alec.

“Yes it is.”

“Then I accept. Most assiduously.”

“What a way with words!”

“More than words, now! You said it yourself. Today were only symbolic for the rest of our life.”

Light met our eyes and bursts of warmth soothed our limbs as we danced past the fireplace.

“Oh Alec..”

He must have felt my hand tremble in his. “Don't you dare cry, Maurice, or you'll set me off! I
wanted to bawl at that altar. Still might an' all. Maybe we could sort out all of this tension another way.”

Music mellowed now to a slow pulse; his cheeks were red and rosy and when I nudged them I could smell his aftershave, delicious masculine scent of sandalwood and cedar. I clung to him.

“Maurice, later – will you do it for me?”

“Do what?”

“Fuck me.”

“Oh – yes.”

Alec leaned his head on mine, his chin on my shoulder. “I love it when you do.. Makes everything else disappear. You lyin’ on top o’m, pressin’ me down and givin’ it to me so slow and deep.. And you tellin’ me, ’Alec you're gorgeous, Alec you're a wonder.. The love of my life, the answer to all my prayers’.”

“Yes, yes..”

He took his head off my shoulder to face me. “And I'll look up at you and stroke your strong shoulders and think to myself: Alec, you lucky dog. The most handsome man you've ever laid eyes on and he's all yours!”

Other people met each other on the dance-floor, and greeted and swapped partners, and circled round us; no-one asked to cut in on us, we were our own palace. I could have danced all night and into forever with him, as the sky finally began to darken into Midsummer-dusk, the dark beguiling night just waiting its turn to spread warm blankets.

“Alec, what you said just now about being taken over. Fucked. If you had fallen in love with a woman, and married her, how would you reconcile those desires within that union – sexually? Would you just sort of.. Not wish to do that anymore? Or – quash the urge?”

None of my business, perhaps? But Alec constantly tells me – if tha'rt ever wonderin' alone about summat – ask me, ask away, I'll try and help you. And now that he is mine, entirely, and part of me, perhaps the full breadth of his sexuality is my business. For me to help him.
Alec nodded. “I see what you're askin' – am I sacrificin' one to hook up permanent wi'the other?”

Was that what I was asking? Must be.

“See, thing is – I never feel like I'm missin' out on summat – as long as I have someone to go with. How do I. There are things that attract me about both fellows and girls, that are not especial' exclusive to both.

“You, for example, Maurice – you're beautiful, and well-mannered, and a little haughty, and gentle, and sometimes a little shy – features you'd normally associate with a woman. But I think they're dead sexy in you.

“And if you turn it around – women can be fair manly too, main bold, if they want to. It isn't so much – who's bigger, but, agreein' upon a dynamic.”

Alec took the lead in the new waltz and I let him. “You asked me just now what I'd do if I had a lady-wife and I wanted to be – taken over. Hopefully, she'd be as nice and thoughtful a lover as you – just happened to be a girl. So she'd agree to have fun, be up for all sorts. Well, in my experience, it ain't so much that a woman would set-to haulin' me around the bed, but that she'd take responsibility for the session.

“I'd lie down on my back, like, and she'll say, 'Alec, don't you worry 'bout havin' to do anythin', like, you just let me at it', and so I just has to relax while she uses her hand, her fingers, her mouth, kiss me deep or get up on top and ride me..

“And o'course I'm there countin' me blessings and runnin' out o'fingers and toes. It ain't that she's overpowering, it's that she's the one giving, and I'm in receipt. Just as I would be the giver if I were the one on top and she amenable.”

“Just as we've done,” I said. “I mean – we've done that, where one takes the lead and likes to spoil the other.”

“The other likes it lovely. See – it don't matter if it's a boy or a girl. As long as there's understanding.”

“Well, it matters to me. I only like men in that way.”
“I know. And as long as you know that, and you know what you like to do and have done to you, and by who, well, you're laughin', ain't you?”

I did laugh, had to, into his hair. “I think you answered my question!”

“Oo.. Well, you asked about women and I do my best without the old kiss and tell. It's only – things ain't always how they seem, how we were told 'em to be. Take our Sally – she's only half Davey's size but I'd say she fair bosses him around the bedroom.”

“You know this?”

“I like to think it.”

Ah, how could I begrudge Alec any of his past adventures. One of life's Great Lovers.

Swirling now in a slow circle, getting inch by inch closer, if possible. It was getting to the stage where I. I might actually start thinking about it, what we'd done today, so absolutely earth-shaking and significant. I felt like a philosopher who suddenly sees his answer; a shepherd, relief-weakened, who has found his lost sheep, and can finally sleep.

Round and round we went and I did my best not to dissolve. I clung to him for anchor and he did so right back to me. Every so often it was so overcoming that we couldn't even talk.

But had to.. When Alec is in your arms, there's only one thing to want for – more.

I stroked the smooth linen of the back of his shirt, his warm skin underneath so familiar to me. We now reached perfection. Which was quite an achievement; we'd come from so far down.
It wasn't that I wanted to clear the air – it was already bright and cloudless. It was more that I wanted to relish that I could walk through it, no thorns.

“I do feel dreadful for how I was before, Alec, how I treated you. At Penge, before we, and after. And at the museum.”

“Well, I didn't exactly cover myself in glory, neither. Tryin' to blackmail you and all – after our lovely night together. Too lovely I suppose – interfered with my reason.”

“But you would never have made good on your threats.”

“Aye, but that's easily said now, isn't it? Now you know what a daisy I am. But at the time, you wasn't to know that, was you? Oh, I was so pissed-off back then when you dug in your heels – why you couldn't just trust me – still, you didn't know me then. Nor I you, really.”

He rolled his head a little to ease his neck, then laid it back on my shoulder. “Rocky start we had to be sure, but we clambered over it, and it's been pretty fun ever since, ain't it?”

“Oh yes. I... just have a little trouble recognizing myself. When I look at you now...” And I did, took his face in my hands, his sparkling eyes and sweet smile. “God, how could I ever have been so cruel? To the dearest person in the world to me.”

“Oh, it's human nature to lash out sometimes. And even deeper'n that. I've seen the panic in many's the trapped animal. We can reach for too much ammo when we oughtn't, sometimes. Once I were arguin' wi'my sister, and I called her a narky cow, and I regretted it. Because she socked me one and I had a black eye for school picture day. Me ma went ape.”

I sighed.

“Oh Maurice, pet.” He leaned back to look at me, his hands on my shoulders. “I'm always tryin' to brush away your troubles with jokes, amn't I? I'm sorry. Alright, truth: you were mean to me, yeh, but you weren't at your best. You were scared and lonely and confused and it come out as anger. Water under the bridge now. You've more than made up for it, I need hardly say!”

More music – it changed again – from a lively number, to a more thoughtful piece: Kate exercised her fingers with some Liszt. The circularity, flowing, sent us round and round to a swaying but fast frenzy, so I started to lose awareness of the room, only the music and the solid body pressed to mine.
The cream-coloured curtains on the walls seemed to flutter and flap like ship-sails, the dance-floor was moving, other people only swirling colours around us..

Was this what hypnotism felt like? It hadn't worked for me with the doctor. Maybe this was more like falling under a spell, a glittering enchantment, something white and golden – a highlight – yet that one that would go on and on -

Careering – around a carousel – to a crescendo – I crashed through the music to reach its reason, its muse – such an effort to stay human as you touch the divine.

A whisper, almost to myself. “I thought I'd grow up an old man all alone. I just didn't think happiness was for me.”

With difficulty – such was my almost terrified grip on him – Alec moved his head, his lips at my ear. “It would have happened, Maurice.. No chance of someone like you dying on the vine. You had your heart in the right place: in your outstretched hands, ready to give away.. I'm thankful it's into my hands you fell.”

I gathered him tighter, if possible, and he laughed and wriggled about in my arms, because we hardly danced now, only stumbled around in circles, but the wooden floor always caught us and sent us on again, and the way was uncluttered, the air warm and spiced with flowers and candles and perfume, and we two, drunk on one another, unbottled; I led and he listed – he shifted and I followed.

I spoke in words how my life wanted to be lived. “Alec, I'll always do what's best for you. Anything, even if it were to hurt me.”

“No, no.. Grant me my agency. We're a team now. Whatever we do will be for the happiness of we both. What's main important is that we're together – everything else is backdrop is all.. Don't let me down, Maurice. Don't be noble. Just be my man.”

“Alec..”

“Maurice.. Oh, Maurice..”

“You'll never have to worry, ever again.”
“I know, I..”

“I promise and I swear to you.”

“Oh..”

“You know those really lovely days you get every so often, when you have such fun, it's bright and sunny and outdoors and fresh and you connect with the world and with someone, with everyone, and when you go to bed, young as you'll ever be, you think you'll never see the like of it again. Slipped away like a boat on a river.. Well, every day will be like that for you, Alec.. Strange.. Ethereal.. Magical..”

“Keep talkin'. I'm awake..”

Though he had gotten rather heavier and I hauled him up in my arms, still stepping round and round to the whimsical music.

I spoke on; I knew I was repeating myself rather, saying the same sentiments over and over like an incantation, but that's because our life entire was going to be like this, as happy as this, through every hill and valley to eternity.

“Alec, I want you to know that you'll never want for anything, the important stuff, alright? You'll never have to come home to an empty house after a bad day. You'll never lack a friendly ear for your problems. There will always be someone to take care of you when you're sick, or low, and by turns celebrate your victories, join forces, hold hands. My life's mission is to see to you.”

Alec didn't reply; weary little thing. His fingers still dug into my shoulders like a cat on its blanket.

Last year, I was so lonely, I wanted more than anything to be saved. Now I wanted to do the saving. Keep him far above me.

Can class be smashed? Is it all an illusion, a big swizzle? Because, on logic, technically, socially, Alec and I were on different sides of the Iron Grate – on the interior doorway of the Titanic, water gushing in as we reached helplessly – me downward, he up - through the cruel bars.
Bars be blowed. He was here, real and true and warm in my arms, and there he would stay, as I protected him from the onslaughts, from a world that didn't – couldn't possibly – know his value.

I'm no fool. I know that on that very ship, Alec would have been caged in steerage, the cold Atlantic making its way up his body and to his chin and beyond, his splashing hands fumbling desperately – that's what Society thinks of him.

Society was wrong. I'd defy it. Alec had rummaged around within my being and dug out my soul.

I'd love with it.

Time kept going – strange, as it seemed for a bit that it ceased to exist. Stars now sparkled through the open, curtain-flapping windows; the fire burned low and the guests sat where they had danced and smoked through their slow night-gulps of whiskey.

Alec wasn't yet prepared to call it a night; after a swift one he sat cross-legged on top of the upright piano and sang 'On Ilka Moor Baht 'At', conducting the others while Kate tinkled the ivories.

Two Englishmen we, and yet sometimes it feels like Alec is not only from another country, but another planet!

Most certainly, the wonderful day was winding down, though, caressing to a close; only to start anew on the morrow. By maybe three o'clock in the morning, we were worn weary.

“Well, is it any wonder ye are tired?” said Davey. “The pair of ye were dancing and nattering for about three hours non-stop. Didn't you realize? The band started to play slow deliberate just to go easy on ye.”
“I’m fuckin’ wrecked!” Alec slumped on the edge of the stage. “I were up at six AM this morn chewin' me nails up to the elbow wi'nerves.”

“Aww,” I said.

Davey was as kind as to carry me upstairs; I was too tired and hammered to object. Brian carried Alec and we were brought into a hotel room lit all around with lamps and flowers and a suitcase on the carpet.

We were left on the bed and I was dimly aware of Sally and Eleanor loosening our braces and removing our shoes.

“Boys, now don't worry,” said Eleanor. “This is a suite, with two rooms.. So no questions will be asked.” She drew the bed-covers up over Alec and I. It was so comfortable, the feather-down pillow, I could have easily sank down into the mattress, sleep, the glorious reward for all of our travails.

“Thanks so much.. We're all friends, ain't we?” said Alec from the confusion of blankets.

“We are that, Alec-lad! Good-night!” said Sally.

Floorboards squeaked and carpet crept over as they all made their way to the door, talking quietly.

“Lovely ceremony, wasn't it?” said Eleanor. “I'm quite moved!”

“Well, you got to squeeze out every drop that you can while you can, ain't you?” said Sal. “Did you see the newspaper today? One of the chambermaids showed it to me, hang on, here it is -“ - paper rustling - “Austria's only gone and declared war on this here Serbia.”

“Good Gracious! War?” said Eleanor. “Surely not. I won't believe it. Never.. Let's have a dekko at that paper?”

“Well, they've sure got the hump, anyway,” said Sal.
“No need for us to get involved though – hay?” said Brian. “Calm minds tried to prevail, innit, and they wasn't having any. Crikey, it'd be a right how'd-ye-do if Britain were ever to get caught up in alla that European palaver! It'd bring the country to its knees! It'd do for the Military, the Treasury, National Security.. Davey, why are you laughing?”

“He! He! Ho! Ho! Oh, no reason at all..”

The door closed.

Now it was just us again, the soft glow of the lamps, and the street lights outside; the scent of carnations and fresh night air from the open window, the heavy woolly bedsheets.

So drowsy and satisfied.. Like there wasn't a thing left to achieve in the world – yet so many wonderful things still to do.

“I think we're supposed to have sex,” I said. “You know. Consummate the marriage.”

“You and me aren't so great for doin' what we're supposed to,” mumbled Alec. “We'll do it tomorrow after a hearty hot breakfast. Right now, just want to..”

Silence, sliding, we clung to each other with the last of our energy, under the blankets. “...Hold onto me,” he said.

I already was. “I will.”

His chest rose and fell evenly, slowly, his eyes closed, his rosy cheeks.
I stroked his face. “I'll look after you always, Alec. I'll be your keeper.”

Only a light snore in response. Not sure he heard. But – the point isn't in the saying, but in the doing, each and every day and night that lay ahead.

Shafts of moonlight came in softly under the curtain-pelmet and alighted onto the foot of the bed. Outside there was the sound of the odd car engine and hoof-beats on cobblestones.. Pigeons gathering in eaves and trees..

Storeys below us, the hotel kitchen staff would be setting the fires, cleaning out grates, smoking and waiting in the yard to collect first deliveries.

Here in our roost, the air was warm, and I felt myself dropping, drooping.. His arms slid around me more, and we breathed at last as one.

Chapter End Notes

Fan-art for this chapter to be found here
Once upon a time, I said I thought I never should marry. You remember! Knee high to a grasshopper I was then; likely not one single fully-formed thought in my head, at fourteen. It’s been a tumultuous ten years. A very long coming-of-age. But I’ve come at last! Happy am I now to eat my words.

We arrived back tired from our honeymoon – a four day walking-holiday in the Cotswolds – to the paint-battered door of our flat. Inside, the cups on the dresser, the curtains bustling the windows, the chairs pulled out in haste from the table all called: Come in! Come in and get started! Welcome to your safe harbour, this hive, this homestead – family, tumble in.

So we did, and dropped suitcases and popped on the kettle to settle – he and I. My husband. I his.

“Isn’t it wonderful to be back! Feels just the same.” I fingered some dust fondly.

“Yeh,” said Alec.

“And yet better somehow, wouldn’t you say?”

He put his arms around me. “You say. You with your words..”

“Better because now – this state of heaven is permanent. Stamped and approved. Always. The outside world might change – but the rich picture of this flat and my love for you won’t. I swear to it.”

Alec hung on to me, shifted his balance to lean on my body. The heady infatuation we’d indulged in at the forest dells and rocky hills remained. He still smelled of wet grass.
What could be the hardest part of marriage? The parting. Monday. Wrench of separation, the agony of the end of the morning commute and the pining desolate day without each other. So ridiculous but – the yearning heart needs an outlet – we scribbled each other poems and notes and drawings; snuck away to phone each other up and just sigh down the line; raced out for long lunches if only to wave at each other across the river.

Friday – oh what bliss to re-attach firmly like opposite magnets! As Alec climbed – gradually – the corporate ladder, his hours standardized somewhat, as he spent more time in sales meetings and product development. Another delivery boy was rostered to do the Saturday morning round with Robbie, while Alec snuggled in bed with me.

One evening and two whole delicious days together – the weekend was almost overwhelming. All we could do at first was grab for each other and bask, and breathe in, drink like the other was life-saving elixir, a soul-warming drug. We woke up early and talked into the night.

Married! I kissed his congratulations.

A well that could not be filled in this life – flowing, flowing, needing, constant.

Alec sat on the window-sill, arms folded, one knee drawn up, and smoked and watched me as I sat on the floor with the tyre of the bicycle and the puncture-repair kit, glue and scissors and blowing over the rubber patch.

He stubbed out his fag. “Get over here.”

“Ha! What are you up to.”

“Asserting my authority.”

“Oh? Authority is it?” I came to embrace him on the window, nuzzle into him. “So if I start doing
“I kissed his neck – he squirmed and whispered and clutched – “And then stop –” I drew back – “You’re in charge?”

“No! Maurice, get back here!”

“Well, is that an order?”

Alec nodded, and so I carried out my orders, carried him to bed.

That wasn’t the last order: Alec and his list of demands. Conjugal obligations.

“You have to kiss me to sleep,” said he, “Every night. Tongues and everything – the works. Want it to be the very last thing I remember before I fall asleep. You.. Your..”

Alec, I am you. Yours.

And yet in the honey haze he was brightly wise. “Hasty? Hm, some might say we married too fast. But that’s the nature of it. Ye can’t sit around waitin’ for the stars to align when it’s a fellow you’re after.

“No-one’ll nudge you into it – your mate won’t say, ‘Here, Alec, did you see that bloke at the bar there? Right tasty, ain’t he? Why don’t you go over and buy him a drink – go on, he’s fair makin’ eyes at you!’ – No. It’s not like with a girl. You get a lot more pack support, there.

“When you want a lad you’re on your own – can’t confide in no-one, and you’ve to take that chance all alone – but the payoff. Oh, the payoff!!”

A touch on my knee. “Morrie, there weren’t no way it weren’t happenin’ betwixt we. I know I dithered over pursuing you, and then when I won you, I tried to toss you over triumphant – act like I didn’t need you, wouldn’t love you – Pah! What a load of twaddle. Mebbes a stronger man could’ve walked away from you – not I.”

Sometimes I look at Alec and have to pinch myself – or him. How can he be real! He saved me so swiftly – a spin around, a one-eighty. I was drowning, all chaos under calm seas, and a hand sought
me under the water and pulled me to the surface.

Because of my difference, my distinction, at one time I thought I was disgusting. Against the grain of Nature. A monster. But Alec turned up – out of Nature – and said, “You’re a man who loves men – you’re not wrong, you’re just rare. Your desires aren’t strange. They’re beautiful and heavenly strong.. I have them too. Oh Maurice show them to me.. Teach them to me with your body. Comrade..”

We made love mostly in the evenings; oh and in the mornings, and in the afternoons if we could snatch a moment; and if we were moved to – and generally we were – in the dead of night, several times, mouths and hands seeking in the dark, bare limbs warm under the shuffle of blankets, and the shiver, the intake of a breath to start all over again.

Could never ever have our fill: sex, like air, is for living.

And yet – we were soul-connected deeper than the touch of a warm hand. I knew how to read him and he me. More than lovers – friends. Sometimes I would go to Alec, and kiss him, and naturally he’d respond, but he might break the kiss with a pat on my face or a stroke on my arm, and I knew that at this moment he was tired or distracted, or rathered just to talk. Or eat! God we devoured the pantry daily in those dancer days, only to wear it all off again plunging, racing into our lives together.

Other times, Alec would wait eagerly, meet me coming home, clinging to the door-frame with such longing in this eyes that, wordless, I took him in my arms, kissed him deeply, and led him to the bed to undo his clothes and feed my hand over and into every warm curve.

No obligation and every indication.

How wonderful the wedding had been! Couldn't even describe how long the fresh memories sparkled. All around the flat were tea-services, vases, ornaments, towels, linen, baskets.. All the necessary to start on our dream. I sat at the kitchen table to write out Thank-You notes for all the gifts and well-wishes, and signed every gold-trimmed card, 'With Love, from Maurice and Alec Scudder-Hall’ – this my own formation. I liked the idea of Alec housed snugly between my names, like a constant embrace. I practised doodling it on a scrap of paper – Maurice and Alec Scudder-Hall – before I committed it to the messages with a fountain-pen flourish.
We got to the first B and B Friday in this little clearing just outside the village, and we left our things and walked ten miles across the heath and moorlands, and we saw the wild ponies and then we joined this walking-group in the afternoon, real casual like, a ramble up a mountain – up, up, up, hiking away, we'd ropes and everything, and us work-boots we'd packed especial – and Ooo! The view from the top! Miles around! And it were as cold up there – fresh cold, that cleans your lungs; there wasn't snow on our mountain but – 'member that purple one in the distance, Maurice? It were snow-capped and I pointed at it with my flag – just so – are you watching – like this and I said: 'Tomorrow.' Only, well, we'd moved on the next day, it were lakes next, so we went that night to the Meadowbrook Farm, and they let us herd the sheep – actually, they kind of made us, and gather eggs or there'd be no breakfast -”

“For an Unspeakable, you never bloody shut up,” said Davey.

“What? You come round to hear our adventures, didn't you?”

“Alec, you're at our flat,” said Sally. “Have been for the last four hours.”

“Oh yeh.”

Davey took a drink of the brandy we'd brought back to them as a present. “I'm surprised to see you looking so spry, Captain. Four days alone with this wind-up toy.”

“I am a little creaky, come to that.” I smiled at Alec. “Still, a little roughing it never hurt anybody.”

“Little?” said Davey. “Alec is rough around the edges and all the way to the core. You've saddled yourself with the lowliest worker at Penge, Mr Hall.”

“Scudder-Hall,” said Alec.

“Now, now,” said Sally. “In any Stately Home, the best position of all is under-gamekeeper. Hay, Maurice?”

“I guess I can attest – I've been there often enough!”
And riotous. Surely there was barely a moment’s peace – somehow the fizz of excitement was always active, there was a hum of animation always – summer. A gong of a church-bell rang outside the window and Davey immediately blessed himself: “The Angel of God declared unto Mary and she conceived of the Holy Spirit -”

“Any old iron, any old iron, any any any old iron,” sang Alec.


“Don't interfere with his faith!” said Sally.

“What faith? He's only reciting his times-tables. How's your practising going?”

“Oh God. Not great!” Sally was trying to learn how to sing, taking instructions from Violet, and from hope – a blatant effort to try and impress Davey, who had a beautiful singing-voice. Alec couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, which was rather a shock and a surprise – because he’s so perfect otherwise. Well very very near to it!

Although for his part, Alec would argue that Violet was hardly the ideal candidate to teach sweetness and delicacy in timbre and pitch.

“Oh that Cockney shrill o’ hers.. Goes right through me head like a switchblade!”

“What about your accent?” said Davey. “Thick as workhouse porridge!”

“I'll have you know that anything said in the melodious tones of the West Country is the poetry of the people,” said Alec.

“Blarney! Who told you that?”

“Just some fellow in a pub.”
“Was he trying to get you into bed?”

“Well… Yes.”

“Did it work?”

“Well… Yes.”

Davey got up to go to work. “I’ll leave you to your thoughts.”

Alec looked at the door as it closed, then turned his embarrassed smile to me. “Ha.. I was taken in!”

“Who wouldn’t be?” I said. “Smooth line like that.”

It has to be said that the teasing that had ever existed between Alec and Davey was reaching fever pitch, becoming more frequent and the little teeth sharper with every passing day.

“Here comes the Missing Link!” said Alec upon Davey’s entry.

Whereupon Davey would consult an imaginary pocket-watch – of course he didn’t have a real one – and declare, “Oh! Is that the time? Isn’t it time for your shift down on your knees at the public lavs?”

“Oh you – awful – arsehole!!”

“HA HA HA HA HA!!!”

“Don’t mind them,” advised Sally elsetime, as we sat in a tea-shop. “Only play-acting. Davey still has a bit of a soft spot for Alec, though they never got around to anything romantic.. I know this because I share his feelings. Dear Alec. I always rather doted over him in my heart.”
“You did?” I said.

“Yes. And now that he’s married, and we all know each other, the corollary is that I’m a little bit in love with you too – as a friend.” And her warm smile.

“Well, then, allow me to return those sentiments heartily – as a friend.” I patted her hand, and she toasted us with her teacup. Would that Alec and Davey could be so dignified about their feelings!

“I mean it Sally,” I said. “I trust you – as I must do someone externally. Remember what I said at the wedding?”

“Of course! Well – remind me.”

“I went on and on – and on – about how I would take care of Alec to the last murmur of my living cells. But I also hoped that, should anything ever impede this, befall me, his friends would look after him – oh, I’m only one man, and he is the most important one.”

“Oh yeh. I remember now. In fact Alec said the same thing to Davey and I – took us aside, he did, and said, ‘Fellows, if ever I were to get into bother – fall foul of some daredevil accident – promise me ye’ll take Maurice in and keep him, treat him as fond as I do in all but the physical intimacies.’ Of course we agreed – a done thing – ‘course we would. Good as God-parents.”

“Oh thank you! And – and we’ll extend the same assurance – should anything happen to you or Davey, we – Alec and I – we’d take in and protect – the – er – remaining party. No-one will ever be alone.”

“Now isn’t this a morbid line of thought of a bright sunny evening? Sure we’ll all live forever!”

She’s in love, do you see.
Some attempt at practical matters shuffled papers around the kitchen table after supper. Due to his promotion, I was at great pains to help Alec with his Sales paperwork: invoices, credit notes, balance-sheets; there was such a lot in it and it was dashed difficult to concentrate on carefully posting figures to the sounds of his whining.

“This is dire! I’m a game-keeper. You’re the book-keeper. Games are more fun than books.”

“Depends upon the book.” I winked at him.

At first, I did all of his accounting for him – oh those saucer eyes! But then I thought it would be more beneficial that he be taught – develop the skill himself. Help him grow.

“Oh, grow. Amn’t I perfect the way I am?”

“In your ageless soul, yes,” said I. “But the world is out there for us to make the most of. Challenge ourselves. When we get to the Greenwood, am I to rely on you entirely? Will you jack all the lumber?”

“I’ll say not! You lazy beast!”
But – oh, but. A cloud loometh over, one that was so large and grey and lead-heavy that one couldn’t possibly just dismiss it with distance – I don’t know where you were that summer, but you might remember that soon it was everywhere.

“Typical!” said Alec. “A person can’t have anything, can they? A winning streak got to hit a wall. You find the love of your life – he agrees to marry you – and war breaks out! I tell you, it’s enough to sour milk! This bloody country –!”

With each new day, the papers brought – likely highly downplayed – communications of damnation, destruction and despair. Soil exploding in faces, men blown to traces! As we sipped our tea. Grenades and cannons and walking – marching – running into the firing line – soldiers ignorant as babies! The French took their hammerings; the Russians mad as wildfire. Germany a relentless machine. The British hand shook as it hovered over the lever.

“Oh God – what’ll happen? What if something does happen?” I was cold all over at the thought.

“Now look here.” Alec flung his leg up on a chair, and loomed over me, his elbow on his bent knee, the other hand on hip, like a brave and jaunty expedition-leader. “If anything ever bothers or harms you, if you’re ever scared or un-nerved – you just come right along to me and I’ll sort it – any time. That’s what I’m to do.”

I whispered, still had to ask, “Why – why?”

“Because I love you – oh, I understand your confusion – bizarre, ain’t it? I’d do anything in all the world for you. All that were asleep in me has burst into blooming – don’t ask me why, I don’t know. But I fair can reap the rewards.”

He showed me them. Afterwards he held my hand, kissed my fingers, up my bare arm to my elbow, my shoulder. “We’ll be alright. I got long, long term plans on you, pet.”

Was anyone else thinking frankly of the future? The powers that be? For very shortly, the frenzy whirled – the storm-smoke of war expanded over Europe and touched and breached English shores – the media machine clanked ceaselessly.
Repercussions to daily life were minimal as yet, thought there were bursts of reaction all over London. Good-minded marchers rallied for peace; when the Stock-Exchange crashed we stood in the crowded street of the business district and watched the ticker-tape fly as brokers hung out of windows, clung to guttering, and gestured wildly to buyers and sellers with the familiar hand-signals. I made a coin or two that day – not very patriotic – but how could I cash in if the trade relations were to collapse between the UK and other countries, who are in any case shovelling all their finances into the furnace of combat? Money dies with it – meadow to Savannah in mere days.

Suddenly – a flash of lightenings, a dunking in a bath – and all was real, really real; the stories in the papers grew, the printed stories gaining weight, as anecdotal evidence of the battles began to filter through from people one actually knew. Small snippets huge in their human magnitude. Un-ignorable.

Mobilization. Theoretically, doesn’t it sound better than stagnation? To march off to help one’s fellows, fight the great Enemy, come home a hero or die a martyr? In the national mien there was no room for another outcome – the speeches in the streets, letters to the paper, lines of grinning, pimply lads queuing to sign up to the army, leap for the navy, clamour for the cavalry – cold, nameless death was the last thing on their undeveloped minds.

War fever trickled and travelled and took over every place and person, just about; Sally studied a map on the wall with arrows and pins that she adjusted daily; Alec, face serious, fingers tented, moved tin soldiers around the table. Davey conspicuously in absentia.

Excitement and heat with no practical place to go – Summer nineteen-fourteen. Almost seems a natural development, war: the steam released in bursts, outbreaks – brass bands played jauntily on the pavilions; strangers shook hands and proclaimed ‘God Save the King!’ to one another in the streets; Union Jacks fluttered outside shop fronts, public buildings and homes, including those of some of our neighbours in the flats. Alec stopped just short of this, if only because Davey would have ripped the flag down and shoved it down Alec’s throat. Alec was a little afraid of Davey, I think, which only made him all the more alluring in Alec’s eyes.

One balmy evening, there were only wisps of clouds up above in the pink sky and the merest caress of a breeze. We were up on the rooftop of the boarding-house, on top of all five floors, making the most of the soft evening, warm air.

Alec played around with his football while I reclined in the deckchair, in shorts and sunglasses and safari hat – my skin is so terribly pale and prone to burning in this weather, one has to be careful. I stopped just short of the mosquito netting from Alec’s trunk; I’d worn it to the park on occasion to ward off midges, to Alec’s mortification.

Davey was away somewhere shaking a tin for ‘Home Rule.’ Violet sat nearby on the roof on a rug
giving Sal her singing lesson. To demonstrate, Vi warbled about how she dreamt she dwelt in marble halls.. Very sweetly. That and the heat, and the spritzer to hand, how relaxing.

“I’m going to kick the ball all the way to Robbey over there on the other building,” said Alec. “See him waving? Hullo there! Maurice, are you watching?”

I looked up briefly from the sun-reflector. “Yes, yes..”

“I had riches too great to count, and could boast of a – HIGH ancestral name..” wailed Sal.


“BUGGERY!” said Sally. “I want to sound sweet and soft and symphonious.”

“That’ll be the day,” said Alec. “Why you bothering with all of this guff, anyroad? You’ve got Davey’s essentials neat in your grip already.”

Sally studied a carnation. “I think one should never stop courting – even in an established relationship.”

Alec smiled at me and stuck out his tongue.

“And at any rate, I’m not even sure I’m forefront to his thoughts these days,” Sally added, gazing at the flower.

“Oh, nonsense, ducky. He’s loopy over you.” Violet squeezed Sally’s leg.

Sally seized the bloom with determination. “I’ll re-capture his attention.. Surprise him at one of his pubs and get up on the table and sing, ‘The Minstrel Boy to war has gone! In the ranks of death you’ll find him..’”

“Very uplifting,” said I.
“I’d pay to see that,” said Alec.

Sally smoothed her skirt on her crossed legs. “Converting Catholic for him too.”

“You’re WHAT?!’ said Alec.

“It’s no odds to me: I don’t care for one false idolatry over another. All the same to me.”

“You’re right about that love – piffle and it, all of it.” Vi blew out smoke from her long black cigarette.

“Well, but, to go messing around with strange things like that.. And, how’d you go about it?” said Alec. “Blood sacrifice?”

“A friend of Davey’s – Peggy – she has a sister in the nuns so she knows all the do. She said you’ve to accumulate so many kneeling-hours – I’ve seventeen so far – and master a round ten dozen rosaries – consecutive; and then mortification and exams.”

“The two usually go hand in hand,” said I.

“Couldn’t Davey just join up to the C of E?” said Alec. “Less bother, they’ll have anyone. And you don’t even have to believe or owt.”

“I think he’d rather give up every pound of flesh in his body.” Sally sighed. “And it is such very lovely flesh. I tell you, when I’ve made it big – when the flowers take off truly and I’ve a stall in every market and the most sought-after bloomers in town – and I’m rolling in riches – Davey can leave that lousy factory; his only job will be to drape himself naked around our plush velvet penthouse while I sketch him.”

“Aim high, that’s my motto,” said Alec.

And how would Davey react in reality to the idea of being a ‘kept man’? Hard to say – he was a
mysterious figure in those days. Normal procedure certainly was fraying around the edges.

One Thursday evening, as Alec and I climbed the stairs to our flat after work, we emerged up to the landing to be confronted with two stubbled, dusty, flat-capped men in shirtsleeves; they were heaving a heavy wooden box of something into Sally and Davey’s flat and leaving it there.

“You didn’t see nathin’, sir,” said one of them to Alec. “If you like your face the way ‘tis.” Alec just stared at their departure, open-mouthed.

As you can see, it was all getting frightfully out-of-hand and ridiculous. These crazy ideals. All of this blatant criminal activity spiralling unchecked. The law is an ass, of course, but some things are crimes and ought to be, if they threaten peace, endanger love.

I decided to take matters. “Davey, about this heading back to Ireland business and liberating your country-folk from the chains of colonial tyranny – I wonder if you’d reconsider, and stay here. You see, Alec is very fond of you, and it’s my job to keep him happy, you know. As you can see, my hands are tied.”

“Spare me the matrimonial details,” said Davey. I smiled sadly at him and he sighed. “Not above emotional blackmail, are you?”

“I’m not above anything,” I said.

Surely Davey was internally conflicted himself? His feelings for Sally – his only love sprung from his only hate, as it were. Though one couldn’t imagine any discord to see the pair of them together – he was quite clearly off his oats over her.

Alec was another wildcard element. Isn’t he always! As if the news seeping in about this war wasn’t enough disorder to digest. I wondered vaguely, if I could intuit that far, whether there was some parallel between Alec’s attitude to Davey and the glorious but frightening prospect of real war.

Alternately insulting and clingy to his friend; when Davey came in the door – late – Alec grumbled and folded his arms to the window, before he strode to Davey and leaned into him.

“What’s all this?” Davey patted Alec’s head.
“He doesn’t want you to go join the Volunteer skirmishes in Fermanagh and get gunned down,” said Tossie from her seat on the worktop, bunching flowers.

“What? That’s ridiculous.” Davey put a reassuring arm around Alec’s shoulders. “I’ll be the one with the gun, son.”

I’m not entirely certain as to whether Alec really likes guns or not. Rabbits are one thing, people another.

Desperate, perhaps, and scrabbling for control, Alec aimed for abstraction. “Don’t you realize and see? Big things are brewing! They’re planting their feet over in Europe and raising their fists for war!”

“Feels like I’m supposed to care.. But I don’t,” said Davey.

“England could come under attack!”

“Good!”

“The rapid rise of über-Socialism may well batter a ram against our accepted social mores and principles!”

“Where can I buy a front-row ticket?”

“Idiot! Look around - don’t you see it’ll affect you too?”

“Not for long -”

“Idiot!! Don’t you know that even if your precious Ireland gets its independence, ye’ve nothing to call your own! Ye’ll still be sucking on the King’s teat!”
Slowly Davey stood. “Maybe we’re owed, boy. Maybe all those lifetimes of torment and deprivation and disrespect were intended to weaken, to dehumanize, to stamp down. Break. And yet all it’s done is band us all together, a mighty unified sky-warrior that will put paid to the godless imperial PIGS that you call master! Well our day’s come at last and there isn’t a thing you can do about it! So there isn’t!” Out the door he slammed, for a change.

Quite a spectacle in a sitting-room! Such national passion! If only it could be more properly channelled. Say, physically. It was hot in the flat now: Tossie squirmed in her seat, Alec’s red cheeks panted; he strode to pick up Tossie’s glass of water and splash it in my face.

Panic on the streets of London, now, as disastrous July closed and August opened its great uneasy oaken doors into the dark. Civilian chaos rang as resonantly as the machine militia miles away – men signing up like a fashion craze, factories commissioned to ready their workings for weaponry, songs of patriotism, glorious (vainglorious?) stories; politicians and journalists all fought to advertise their own brand of truth. Bragging and brawling, copious drinking in the street; as if there were something to celebrate!

On the day that Germany finally – and looking back, inevitably – broke protocol, bricked the glasshouse of peace and invaded Belgium, we were jostled by the thousands in Trafalgar Square, shouting and rallying and singing:

“And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?”

Oh, do leave some pleasant pastures for the rest of us, please!

Despite all of this enthusiasm – albeit for different movements – at Rain Lane, truth be told, I believe we were all secretly quite happy with things the way they were, but change rolled near like an undercurrent, hidden and unknown and murderous.
A bright and bristling August Bank Holiday dawned – a gift to the crowds at the orchestra-concerts and cricket-tests. No doubt the sunshine made bobbing golden plates of the Thames as people leaned out their riverside windows to watch the Windsor and Eton regattas, hankies waving. How carefree and innocent, the pursuit of sport, music; benign distractions!

But we were none of us the children we wished to be; ignorance is bliss and alas a thing of the past in this modern age of four post-deliveries a day and newspapers flying off the shelves.

All four of us huddled thoughtfully on the bed, legs stretched, backs against the wall; none of us lovers were willing to admit that our wonderful world could change or end; that the cloudy floors of Heaven could weaken underfoot and us fall, flailing, fall.

“We’re like the Children of Lir,” said Davey.

“Who’re they?” said Sally.

“Four kids: three lads and a girl, and oh what they suffered – turned into swans and rent by stormy winds and persecuted far from home.. Me mam, she told us these stories, they’re not written down or anything. Yet! Just lately, the ancient Irish stories are being typed down proper, recorded and resurrected rightly – by the likes of Mr Yeats and Mr Pearse and Miss Speranza.”

“You’re cracked. Open.” But were Alec a dog, his ears would be peaked.

“It’s the artists who are agitating back home,” said Davey. “There’s a movement, a conscious endeavour to create a proud national identity and culture.”

“How very German of you,” said Alec.

“Are you saying you’re not patriotic?” Davey pointed a finger in my face. “Look at where you’re sticking it! Whereas in Ireland..” He blew his cigarette smoke. “We’re on our way up, notice. A rebirth. The writing, religion, sport..”

“Oh yes. Your invented kickabout,” said Alec.
“The Gaelic Games have been around for centuries – and make your soccer look pathetic in comparison.”

Uh oh! War. Alec stood up on a chair. “Say that again.”

Davey stood too and put an arm around Alec’s waist. “Now, Alec, I went to watch your match last week and there wasn’t a single goal, either side.”

“What do you want me to do about it?! I’m the goalie!” Alec jumped on the floor with a thud and stormed out the door.

“DAVEY!” said Sally.

“He started it.”

“Must you ever finish it? Be nice to him. You great galoot.”

“Oh for God’s sake.” Davey went to kneel on the bed and lean out the fuchsia window-sill to call down to the cobblestones, where Alec smoked and sulked. “Alec – hay! You know I love you really. In fact, I can’t sleep for the thinking and longing on you.. Tell me dear.. Darling.. Do your hourly rates double after dark?”

“FUCK RIGHT OFF!!!” came up from the street.

“That’s your being nice?!” said Sal.

“Yes, there’s no need for that. Don’t tease so,” I said.

“But he’s allowed to play on my insecurities?” said Davey.

I laughed. “Insecurities? You?”
Davey sneered a lip. “You wouldn’t understand, John Bull.”

Only then, perhaps, did I properly consider the insurmountable wedges between mankind, the irreconcilable differences.

A tremor – the ground shifted askew and stayed in that new way.

“HAY! You lot!” We went to look out and down from the window. Even from up here Alec’s face was jubilant, mad. “It’s just been announced on the radio! We’re at war with Germany! Finally! Now the adults can intervene and put an end to all this jig-acting.”

“Who’re the adults?” I wondered. Davey leaped up and ran for the door – Sally followed and grabbed his hand, and they were away, their foot-beats down the stairs like drum-rolls. In the distance out the window – chanting, cheering, music.

“Come on Maurice!” called Alec. “Word is everyone’s heading to the centre of town, outside Buck House, to celebrate! Come and bring a hat!”

“Which hat?”

“Every hat in the flat! Hurry! Come head!”

What option? When someone tells you to run, you run – and ask questions later. If you can. I hurried down all the stairs, with other boarders whooping and rushing around me. When I gained the heady air of dusk and the beginning street-lights, I looked around: Alec racing away South, to the riverside; and I could just make out, disappearing down a winding alley, Davey and Sally’s madcap forms, long coats flying, quite at another angle, due West, towards Kentish Town, Cricklewood, comrades.

Alec doubled back to me. “Are you coming?” His warm hand took mine and we ran, ran alongside man, woman and child, towards a crowd with no centre, a plan with no focus, only fire.

Towards war. Which is a very vague term indeed, I’m sure you’ll agree if you think on it; oh, of course, it conjures up all sorts of glorious imagery and epic stories and illustrious heroes, but who is really going to lay down their life for it, throw their lot in with a magnificent but deadly ideology?
Alec paced the flat, one arm bent behind his back, the other holding a folded Daily Mail. He slapped it on the table. “Britain needs us. Us regular folks is the very backbone of the nation, though we get no credit. Mebbes we’re about to.”

A boy learns one little thing about the power of strength in numbers at a Trade Union rally, and now applies it willy-nilly everywhere. Gumption without guidance. Though Lord knows, where to channel the mounting pressure.. Change was afoot, no doubt about it, and no point hiding in the wardrobe.

“We have the power to win it, to end it.” Alec stood firm. “A defensive war is run on romance.”

“And strategy, and training, discipline, organisation, maps, and intelligence and arms and insane amounts of money,” said I.

“Mm. That too. But – it’s our duty now! If all them other boys go over – and we stay here – Cripes, I couldn’t look at meself in the mirror! Couldn’t eat me food, nor sleep, couldn’t get it up – all the functions’d fail me. Cowerin’ here – what kind of a man would I be?”

“Or a woman would I be?” said Sally. “We all have to band together to protect our kith and kin.”

“Exactly!” Alec pointed at her. “Or – well, who knows what could occur? Belgium’s been took over, Russia’s got the prongs and even France poked into.” He looked at the map on the wall, tapped his chin. “Davey, how does it feel to be colonized, subjugated, dominated?”

“Feels bloody awful!”

“Well then. We can’t let that happen here.” Alec preened in front of the mirror. “How could we possibly lose with battalion after battalion of English soldiers like –” And he stood tall for his reflection, and saluted, and mimicked rifle manoeuvres.

“Alec, don’t you think that right at this very moment, far away, a German is looking in his mirror and saying exactly the same thing?” said Sally. “Except he’s bigger, broader, blonder..”

“Well.. Well, we has history on our side! Look at how the Empire stretches to all the four corners, near and far! And it’s thriving!”
Davey snorted.

“Chaps, there are three tools to winning a war.” All Alec was short of was a blackboard and a pointing stick. “First, we must obey orders and do away with our own opinion. Second: he is our enemy who insults the King. And third, we must hate the Frenchman as we do the devil!”

“Alec, if you were to join the Allied forces, you would be fighting *alongside* the French,” said Sally.

“Oh, yeh. Right! Of course! The Jerrys, then.”

Can you guess? Alec had, would you believe, finished the good old *Swiss Family* and plunged straight into another book – this one a bit more dense and thus only a third of a page consumed per day. Still he was fairly absorbing the biography *Lord Nelson: Fulsome, Victorious*. It could be argued that he wasn’t interpreting the story too deeply; then again, it was a bestseller, and therefore unlikely to be replete with historical accuracy and nuance.

“All of this big talk from a one who more than once got his foot caught in his own snare,” said Davey.

“They were very skilfully hidden!”

“Oh for the love of God Alec. Would you ever simmer down. You’re staying where you are, so you are. You’ve no call to die. You’re not going to war.”

Witness Alec passionately dispense with Nelson’s first proviso. “Says you! I’ll show you! Then you’ll see!”

“I don’t want to see,” said Davey.

No more did I. But it was happening all around us, even if you closed your eyes; the hum, then the clatter, then the march and earth-shattering gunfire. Call to arms.
Much as I love my darling Alec, he has – well, a tendency towards stubbornness. He’ll wriggle away from reason like a fish. And of course I don’t want him hooked on a line, or trapped in a net or a bucket. But to be free to swim in calm waters.

Again I appealed to Davey, whom I saw as the catalyst in the matter. In our flat, he sat down comfortably and reached for the whisky bottle.

I slapped his hand.

He reached again.

I slapped his hand, again.

“Owie!”

“Stoppit!”

Davey rubbed his fingers. “Not very hospitable.”

“Now see here! You can have your whisky if you talk some sense into Alec. I’ll chance to wonder that he’s really gung-ho about going to war in order to keep up with you and your paramilitary antics.”

“With my what – don’t know what you’re talking about, Captain.” He glared at me and a finger to his lips.

“There’s no-one else here,” I said. “Only me and I’m begging – dissuade Alec. Calm the fires. He’s
only war-hungry to impress you.”

“No, he wants to impress you.”

“Me?! I’m not a bit interested in war! The very last thing I want to see is Alec marching off to his gravesite! No cause is worth it.”

“Oh LOOK!!” Davey yanked me to him bodily by the front of my shirt, his red face in mine. “Would you – can’t you see this is all your doing?”

“It’s what? How?” My heart thuddered – his grip was very strong.

Davey’s eyes grew bigger, softer; he released his hold and patted my shoulder instead. “You and him. This great love o’yours. Alec thinks it’s elevated ye. Made ye immune to the corporal dangers of this earth.”

“What’ll we do?” I said.

“We?!”

“Yes, we! He may adore me, but he admires you, and Sally, and Violet and Tossie. He still is liable to swagger about in front of women. Were they to beg him not to go, he’d likely feel all the more fired and inspired.”

“Sal would be more likely to join him in the khaki trundle to the front than wave a handkerchief. Maurice.. You can’t actually stop him.”

Wasn’t that what rubbed my skin raw. How I hated those words, hated the war.. The world that gifted me such love would then conspire to its removal, its banishment. Giveth and taketh away.

Davey cracked open the whisky.
Over the course of our relationship, in bed and out, amongst green vales and hills and castles in the distance, and huddled in rainy stone doorways, and beside huge mucky pits, Alec and I had indulged in such loving declarations, passionate promises, poetic panting, longing pauses, flowery vows. This sharing of words, the delight and assurance of mutual adoration – as wonderful to the body and soul as lovemaking itself.

Made us a strong couple: but could words – persuasion – actually do things? Achieve? Bear fruit? I’m inclined to think so; Alec’s words drew me to him initially, despite myself. His low smoky voice the morning after.. His impatient, impassioned letters.

And I fancy my implorations from the hotel bed – though how he sneered at the time – went some way to winning him over, to carry him as if by magic away from the Normannia and into my arms.


Late evening, the flat, the fire, soft boiled eggs, toast soldiers. Over the second pot of tea, I started on him again. “Alec, when we got married, I had hoped that it would lead to a marriage that lasted more than a few weeks or months. I envisioned decades! I like you alive, hear me? And I like being alive myself – at long last.”

“I know – I feel just the same way. I got a responsibility to you above all – to keep you safe – and the country you live in.”

I tipped my head back and groaned in frustration. Tried again. “Can’t you only appreciate that, exciting as the prospect is, in real life, the battlefield is terribly dangerous! I simply can’t agree to support you in something that puts you in such jeopardy.”

“Heck jeopardy! Won’t I be grand with you to look after me?”
“With all due respect, darling, have you lost your marbles? It’s entirely different in a war situation! I’m no more able to protect you from shell or grenade or gunfire than the next man, just because I love you. I’m no super-man.”

But there was no use in saying this – his love-struck face, half-smile; he didn’t believe me.

Mid-August and already the fire was a fixture. Cold waited until the evening and then sent you jumper-seeking. The dark loomed outside; we closed the curtains on it. We drew the couch up to the hearth and huddled close on it – the honeymoon period, you see. Everything a mutual effort, and all efforts, if possible, in close proximity.

I pulled off Alec’s shoes and socks and took his feet onto my lap to resume our argument. “Are you really so intent on joining up? Why? For Davey? Sally?”

“No – for you. Mmm…” As I rubbed his arches he wriggled his toes. “I mean for us – lads like us. I don’t care a whit about the bigwigs, but our fellow fellows. The workers, the lots out there. Our country’s good, but that ain’t inherent, like. It’s only as good as the people here. Not based on the trees and mountains and railway tracks. It’s doings what matter – the men and women what mind it. Good and brave and strong.”

All of this good-hearted logic! I began to panic – really panic. Dear lord, it’s really going to happen, isn’t it? Quicksand slowly drawing.

“Well I’m dead set against it,” I said. A flash of inspiration: “As your husband – I forbid it.”

“Cobblers! As your husband, couldn’t I turn around and say the very same thing to you, and insist you go?”

“Drat!!”
And still I couldn’t let up. Let up, let him. Couldn’t shake the gloomy fear that this was a life or death matter. One can’t have both. If it was a war Alec wanted—!

“Alec, I just cannot agree or concede. Damn it— I was so long in finding you— tracking you down—and now I have you— whole— wedded— we must risk separation, death? No!” I rattled the railings of the park as we passed through. “It’s just too unfair! Why can’t I have what I longed so hard for? Why am I immediately tested? Perhaps that’s it. I wanted happiness but I never earned it, I never deserved you. And now you’re going to be snatched away like a snippet of a dream.”

“Oh, rot, Maurice!” Alec linked my arm firmly. “You and your dramatics. Nothing could come between us, it’s not possible. Didn’t I say we’d never be parted? Even if we’re de-parted. Ha! Ha!”

“Alec, PLEASE. I’m already in a state of nervous collapse. Any more of your jokes and you’ll have to carry me home.”

“Alright, alright— but hearken: we’re a pair, and that’s square. That’s to say— we’re a single solid entity now. An institution. We signed the marriage docket, didn’t we? The one Sally wrote us. And we meant it. Now, I know you know that too. Don’t lie to us. Don’t pretend with me. There’s no point.”

I leaned my head to his as we walked on. “I admit it— I’m fearful of change. We have a charmed life. And I just want it to go on being so.”

“It will, as long as we’re together, no matter what we get up to. Darling… You’d light up the dreariest shed or shack or barracks into the Palace of Versailles. You take it everywhere with you, like. Is it any wonder I follow in your wake?”

“You’re the illumination, Alec.. The guiding light.” Through the gaps in the high buildings the sun shone down on us, though there was no need.

“Can’t you see so..” said Alec. “We’re the Best of British, you and me, England’s sons. Her solid, standing, stomping pride. We must go out to bat for those who haven’t our strength.”
“But we’re not especially physically armoured – just because we’re enamoured. We’re just as susceptible to bullet-holes as those not in love.”

“Old Davey would say we’re in a State of Grace. Not that the worst will happen. Death? Nay. Swore, didn’t I? I’d see you through anything.”

Nice to believe it. I wanted so badly to, so I let myself do so for a bit; I pushed out thoughts of characters from the Classical era, or the Bible, or fabled tales, figures who had stood tall and then crashed terrifically for their Pride.

Alec was different however. Not a selfish bone in his body: he fed all of his ambition into me and making me happy.

I tightened my grip on his arm. “Smug git. I bet you’ll do it, too.”

Oh how I wanted to believe him – join him on the ledge of his convictions. Really I did. I wished I could accept his boasts as truths, that he could take on anything – but he’s only human, even if he is the exemplary one. As Alec bounced around with his war-magazines and broomstick-bayonet – if he’d a bugle he’d’ve blown it – all I could do was observe, and worry, and wait.

For what?

I sat on the sofa and stared into the fire, trying to feel pleasantly sleepy, instead of beaten down
exhausted. Alec came and sat and pressed himself against me, arms all around and caressing. I gave him a peck on the cheek.

“What! That weren’t very over-bowling. Come on, try again – this time with a bit of life to it. You do love me after all?”

“Of course I do.. Cross my heart.”

“So show us..”

So I did, I showed him, though of course it was much more than visual display; I held him tightly on the sofa, and kissed him, moved and released my lips on his, softly, over and over, our tongues seeking and sliding and then drifting away, and back again, his hands up my jumper, eyes closed, slowly, slowly..

This was another fortress – somewhere to escape to, another element of the romantic relationship, further to friendship. Whenever there were troubles, then a kiss or a touch or a feeling hand or a bit lip were a balm – they didn’t quite solve the problem, but it assured us that no matter what forchance, there was ever the other’s body, there was ever care. He would always want me: scientific fact. I knew from his hand on my knee and his whines for air.

This is what having a husband is like – you have to take the good with the wonderful.

As the mantel-clock ticked and the flames licked, Alec drew deep breath through his nose and leaned back to look at me, the couch springs squeaking.

I thought it had been a very good kiss, top notch and up there among our best, but he studied me with those big brown eyes and stroked my face. “Maurice, this war ain’t really anything yet. Only mist in the distance. What really ails thee?”

“Oh..” I ought hardly be surprised by Alec’s plunge for the personal. How could he suspect it was, as ever – as ever – my own demons? Could it be? What ailed me?

“Try me,” said he.
It’s how he is – a distillery, making chaff into something relieving. I spilled all to Alec. Everything that had ever bothered me, played on me, near about and almost – I illustrated with the unspoken but express request that he resolve all of my old agonies and anxieties for me.. He rose to this magnificently in his own inexpert way. Did more for me than any priest or doctor or well-meaning authority ever could.

I told him again – abridged version – about Clive and our disastrous emotional entanglement: “Look, I said a’fore, the squire just don’t know what’s good for him! Chooses to keep his gaze trained skyward. Well..”

I told him about the crisis of Dickie Barry and that moral trial: “Young’uns! They n’oughn’t be seen nor heard.”

I described the animosity that festered so unfortunately between the girls and I: “Oh sisters. Don’t get me started on them. Why, me and our kids must’ve had more ding-dongs than St Paul’s.” And he took a pull on my pipe, with a kind, knowing smile.

Though he used many colourful words and stories, always, what he said in essence was thus: I like you, and what’s more, I’m like you. I love to hear to talk, but you don’t have to explain, to justify. I understand. I’m one of you.

“Thank you Alec, you’re so down-to-earth. It’s what so appealed to me when first I knew you.”

“I’ll be honest, I can’t say the same. Sure, I recognized in you another wandering soul, a kindred spirit, but you was wrapped up so distractingly at the same time.. In your three-pieces and evening tails and pressed cricket whites..”

With absolutely no change of atmosphere from the friendly into the carnal – they were one and the same, safe and exciting – Alec slid over into my lap, arms around my neck and my forehead to his.

Hands on my cheeks, his low voice: “Come on.. I knewed full-well you was a gentleman and it would be crossin’ a boundary, walkin’ the wilds.. I knewed there were summat particular’ naughty about falling in love with you. Broke all the social rules, didn’t it? Don’t you think that turned me on?”

“Mm.. Ah.. Oh..” Was I supposed to answer? Coherently? Alec had spoken so very many evocative words that sent every limb shaking – it was hard to string them all together, particularly as he kissed
his way up my neck to say, sultry, “You can call me Scudder if you like.”

“Ooo.. Would you like me to?”

A nod, and a blush, and with a smile in his voice, a whisper in my ear: “You know, I think the old Reverend Borenius were right about me. He were right to try and hook me, and save me sacred.. Mebbes I really am rotten to the core.” As he pushed me down on my back and crawled over me to straddle me, and pin me, I lay back with my eyes full of him, helpless – “But a lost cause, hay? I think there might be summat in me right deviant, sir.”

I closed my eyes, the better to feel his lips all over my neck and face, fingers in my hair. “If that’s the case.. Then there’s a pair of us in it. Scudder.. Darling..”

We enveloped one another, limbs opening in welcome and then desperately closing, and clinging around the other; teeth on skin, bulges rubbing, toes digging into the cushions.

“No – don’t take your clothes off, Maurice – want you to fuck me like as if you snuck away to.”

Was he devilish – trying to distract me?

Distract me from what?
Some days later, Alec said: “I hope you've arranged to leave work early on Wednesday? For your birthday?”

“Why, what are we doing for my birthday?” I said hopefully. One can always rely on Alec for fun.

Can't one! “Shakespeare in the Park,” he said promptly.

“What?” I laughed uproariously.

“You dress up and watch the show.. Participate if you like. I figured it'd be right up your alley.”

“When have I ever mentioned Shakespeare?”

“Well, you went to a posh school. And – your accent and everything.”

“And it naturally correlates that I like Shakespeare?”

“Well don't you?”


He nodded. “We can borrow costumes and clothes and that off Kate – she's loads. Trunks-full. I'll be a Fool. And what about you? Let me guess – a Queen.”

“A member of the chorus. An innocent bystander.”

“Tha' innocent! That'll take some acting.”
Verily, forsooth and prithee: there was acting, lots of it, and drinking and carousing and dancing too. Trees all lit with twinkling lights and branches festooned with garlands and flags – goblets of wine, barrels of apples, jaunty music ringing out – and more pointy hats, Tudor ruffs, and tight pants than one could shake a magical staff at.

On the night bus home, Alec and I drew any number of stares: no doubt the patrons thought that we would get off at the lunatic asylum, attired as we were and elbowing and laughing fit to burst. Somehow we climbed the stone steps up to the front door of the boarding-house, all yellow street-lamp lit.

“I don't even know where I got this – who belongsa this – flute?”

“It's not a flute, it's a lute – and you don't know how to play either of them.”

“I fair know how to raise a ruckus! Ain't that the point?”

“Not just to make noise, it ought to be.. Mellifluous..” I trailed off from both the silence and the noise that was in the foyer of the house. Silent because so many people – all of our fellow-boarders – were visible through the open door of the drawing-room, quite frozen; noisy because they all stood, sat, crouched, or leaned around the wireless, from which a crisp, cultured voice spoke loudly: “... a conflict which has been ongoing for two weeks now, as part of the French Army's Plan Seventeen offensive upon the German stronghold at Alsace-Lorraine. The German troops have been responding in kind, with a retaliating campaign most formidable, and Allied losses have been substantial. At the latest figure-release, we can now confirm that some twenty-seven thousand French soldiers were killed in action today. A mercy of God upon their valiant souls.”

Earlier that evening, among a band of festive, care-free merry-makers, we had been sloshing back the wine.. Loire Valley red. A fine vintage, rich in body and verdant in character.. It swirled and protested sickeningly in my stomach. Slowly I removed my floppy feathered felt Elizabethan hat.

“My land.. One day.. Such an amount.. And lads like us.” Alec's voice.
“I should think they were just like you, seeing as how they were French,” remarked Davey.

“Oh, shut up and eat your cabbage,” said Alec. I knew he then looked sideways at me, but I couldn't turn and meet his eye.

Twenty-seven thousand men. Young, able-bodied, breathing in air that rang with gunfire. Confused to death. Twenty-seven thousand. Each and every one of them potentially in love – with women, or with men, or, as Sally would say, with a companion 'as a friend.'

Dear and beloved by parents, brothers and sisters, close comrades – children! Perhaps their best friend was a dog or a cat or a horse. Maybe some of them were in love with art, or music or football. But now their hearts that once pumped with passion now lay slabs of meat on the earth's surface.

No distance. No denying the ties. No use in saying – oh, it's all ages away, they're French, they're foreign – for one thing, a lad is a lad. For another – if France was falling, the Germans were gaining ground. Ever nearer, westening.

Oh, I was all of a muddle all over again – it's my destiny. On the one hand – how I wanted to just wish the war away. But.. War and its impetuses won't be vanquished unless one fights it.

What ones?

The good ones, of course.

Us?

Alec tugged my sleeve. “Come on. Come on Maurice, let's get you upstairs and out of that dress.”

“It... it's not a dress, I told you.. It's a doublet.”

“Well, as long as I can lift it up over your head.”
Though daily life didn't yet change much apart from increases in newspaper sales – the war was something for scoops and soldiers, not we – still there was a prevalent feeling of tightening, of tipping one's chin to the surface for air, for running out of time.

“This Holy Roman nonsense is taking forever!” said Sally. “Now they're telling me I have to hang around barefoot at a lake of pilgrimage – ugh, I squirm at the feel of algae! And for forty days and forty – bloody hell – I don't have time for all of this patience!!”

Gin in hand, she sagged in the armchair. “I've got to convert though sharpish; he's slipping through my fingers. Davey takes it all so seriously. He's so hard to get near. Can't get him to stay safe and out of trouble! I've tried reason, threats, pleading – everything!”

“Really everything to drag him under your spell?” said Alec.

“Yes and I'm exhausted! Half the night and then again in the morning. He has me worn out. That boy has so much stamina.”

“Ooo.. Well, you'll have to up the ante,” said Alec.

“What do you suggest? Leather corset and a whip? He's not an idiot. And he can be shy enough.. It's his repressive background. Fear of God. He didn't go too far with girls back home, he says – only went as far as dropping the hand.”

“Ah, the old fish-fingers.”

“Can you please continue this conversation another time?” I said. “Like never?”
“But in saying that, I am worried that becoming a Catholic will ruin our sex life. What if it turns me funny?” Restlessly Sally leaned an elbow on her trousered knee. “And also, um.. Maybe he's only having fun with me. Like.. It's alright to fool around with someone if she's a Protestant. If I was to become one of his own kind, a serious prospect, we'd maybe, he'd maybe.. Things'll change on us. He don't want me really.”

“Of course he does! It was love at first sight when you came into his life. He told me so himself,” I said.

“He did?”

“Yes. From first he ever saw your face. Only – he thought you wouldn't pass him any notice – being as rough as he is.”

“He can rough me up any day of the week. Woof! Woof!” said Alec. “I mean – er – were I a single man, that is..”

“That can be arranged,” I said.

“Don't tease us!” He sat into my lap.

“Oi!! I'm not finished my dinner!”

“Oh, I can help you there.” He took my fork.

Sally in her thoughtful air moved to the window, a rose pressed to her lips, and she looked out at the pink sunset, the black silhouetted buildings, the burgeoning stars. Night and all it can offer. A tap of a finger on the glass.
For his part, Davey himself grew despondent all of a sudden; one day it was high fever and the next he sloped into the sitting-room and flopped on the threadbare armchair. From what we could gather – he still talked in code and of course there was his accent to contend with – he'd hit something of a wall with his comrades.

“Accuse me for a turncoat? Feckers.. They had no problem with the King's Shilling when I was sending it home to the Foresters' Hall..”

“What's wrong Davey? What happened?” Sally perched on the arm of his chair; he idled a hand on her thigh.

“They' won't give me any proper assignments. Won't trust me with any secrets. They think I'm a weak link because – well, because -”

Sally stood. “Because of your associates here.”

“Well..”

“Because of me.”

“Ah..”

“Is that why you've fallen out with them? You refused to give me up. You love me more than the Irish cause.”

“Oh my dear heart darling.. You know I do.”

“Then your dearest wish..?”
Davey whispered like a secret. “I've already got her.”

One would think, perhaps, that throughout this whole discourse, awkward admissions, conflicted allegiances, Davey would avoid Sally's face, seek the carpet, the walls, the window.. But as ever, he couldn't keep his eyes off her, his green gaze followed her all around.

And so, as he sat – almost lay – slumped right down in the armchair, legs stretched, arms folded – his eyes widened, though his mouth stayed closed as he watched in disbelief as Sally dropped to one knee beside him, pulled a red velvet box from her skirt pocket, and held it out to him, shining – the merest tremor in her small fingers.

“Wh- what?” Davey sat up.

“Oh by Christ!” said Alec.

“All I needed to know was that you loved me too, and forever. I'm already sure of my feelings.. Where I want to go and who with.” Sally's gaze steady up at Davey. “Now you decide for certain. Will you marry me?”

“Ah.. Oh..” Davey knelt on the cushion of the chair, his hands gripping the arm, as he boggled down at her. “Aye! Yeh! I will! I will indeed of course I will! Sally!”

“Oh Danny!!” Pure relief on her face as she rose to her feet and threw himself into his arms, and he into hers, and they together made a joyful tumbling heap on the chair, limbs everywhere and kisses.

“Yes, YES! Hurrah for Yeses!” Alec pulled me to him, arm around my waist. “Oh you kids!”

“Jolly good show, Sally,” I said. “Congratulations!”

With not a little pride, Sally nodded and adjusted her blouse to rights from her spot on Davey's lap; she combed back his messy hair.

Davey burrowed his face in his big hands, sighed and shook his head. “DAMN. It was never part of my plans to fall for a hearty Britisher.”
“Sometimes there's nowt to do but exactly what you want,” said Alec. He took Davey's hand; Sally grabbed mine.

“What's new?” said Alec, staring at his watch. “How shall we make it even bigger than ours?”

“A forest full of flowers,” I said.

Sally and Davey beamed at each other, open-mouthed, mid-laugh, amazement.

Love is so much more powerful than discord – it can flourish in any living thing, as it emanates from the personal core, and warms one out to the skin and fingertips, no matter what societal movements are going on in the world.

And what changes! In a trice, like the direction of the wind. All of a hop, things were looking up for Davey. First – the love of his life asked for his hand. And then -

“Got me orders at last! I'm signing the dotted. Off to war!”

Alec was speechless delight.

“Yes indeed.” Davey fingered his flannel lapels. “I'm to join Kitchener's army – go to war with you brats – er – Brits – and avail of all the training – the military expertise, land manoeuvres, rifle-
handling, shooting; and then when I'm all qualified, I'm to desert, come home, and use that very acumen to wage Home Rule war against the King in Ireland.”

“W- wait -” said Alec.

Davey strode around. “Also to infiltrate into the heart of British Defence with a view to learning it and levelling it from the inside via the passing of secret intelligence to our strategists on the sly in Dublin.”

“No – hang on – wait a minute -”

Davey paused to adjust his cap in the mirror. “It's a very important mission.”

“It's a very – a very – a pile of shite!” said Alec. “If we join up together we're to be on the same side!”

“We will be! In name only. Now don't sulk, Alec, it's not personal, only political. For training purposes only, as I said.”

“At Mons, the officers sent our British troops walking straight into the jaws of the lion,” I said. “I don't think the foot-soldiers are getting much in the way of training.”

“They're getting arms. Ah! Which reminds me. I'm off down to the docks.” Davey patted my face. “Don't wait up!”

Now, how did this bode for the upcoming Manders-Davey union? Usually war isn't part of the post-nuptial programme. On an international scale, anyway.

Then again, there wasn't much that was usual about Sally and Davey – no more than ourselves, or anyone that we knew in those days. And the whole world was poised to tip topsy-turvy.
Alors. One fine Saturday afternoon found us out in our bestest, parasol and picnic basket, and we went to a local green to play croquet. Imagine it – here were three one-time servants of Penge. And me, a one-time slave of the place – or to its master. Now the shackles of former labour and love were broken and shucked. The boundaries that governed our land for so long in neat tiers were wobbling with the shattering of earth in the distance.

Mind you, the others were simply dreadful at the game. They couldn’t assume the light touch required, and treated the mallet as the sledge-hammer.

Again the ball flew into the lake with a smash and a splash. Davey flung down his straw boater. “Argh!! They’re so fiddley and light!”

“It’s not cricket,” I said.

“I’ll say it’s not.” He let go of the mallet-handle and it fell to the ground. “I’ll go get us some ices.”

Davey departed, his broad shoulders hunched in annoyance under his – well, my – candy-striped boating blazer. Alec turned to Sally and said, “I thought you didn’t want to get married. Miss Modern Woman.”

“Well, I didn’t, in theory, once. But when you find the right fellow, hitching up is the natural thing to do. Staying together, setting up home. And – kids, well – maybe; Davey says he’s not bothered either which way.”

“And it wouldn’t happen accidentally?” said Alec.

“Not if you stick to oral. I rather doing it that way anyway. Much more of a guarantee of results. Davey does too, and he’s so good at it – like a starving man.” Sal lined up her ball on the grass, one eye squinting in concentration. “And as for him – he’s as happy with a lob-jobbo and – y’know – pulling the pudding.”
“Good lord,” said I.

“The key to a long and happy marriage,” said Alec.

“What’s more..” Sally took clumsy aim and missed. She leaned on her mallet, one ankle boot crossed over the other, her bonnet shading half her face in mystery. She pulled a lily petal from her hat band taut and let it go. All of this style performed, she went on. “I’m going to join up too. The Army, with Davey – learn all the drills and target-practice and how to kill a man and all, and with this knowledge carry my gun above my head back across the Irish Sea for the glorious Republican Revolution!”

Alec swirled his pointed finger in an arc around at her. “TRAITOR!!”

She adjusted her gloves. “Love makes you do crazy things.”

“Too right. But treason?”

“Oh – that’s just a fusty old made-up crime, like larceny or indecency. Strictly for the Torts. Besides, what’s the Crown ever done for me? Listen – over in Ireland, there’s awful Catholic oppression – cottages full of peasants, slums of Dublin.”

“There’s plenty of poverty right here in England,” said Alec.

“Right – the British Government is never so democratic as in how fairly they screw people over. Anyway, the inequality here is down to capitalist exploitation and deliberate blind-siding – mismanagement and lies about the working-machine – separation of labour and resources when in fact they are in tandem. Lawks, with our superior engineering, our industry, our high education and financial know-how, every man, woman and child in Britain ought be a millionaire! But no, it all goes one way: up to the Fat Cats, the Bourgeois Pigs.”

“Some animal farm you’re taking arms against,” said Alec.

“In Ireland, the natives are treated like second-class citizens to the British Empire. I can relate there.”

“We all can,” said Alec. “But you’re clear off your rocker, Sal.”
Sally looked up at the sky, dreamy smile. “If my little darling Davey wants a free Ireland, then a free Ireland he shall get.”

Over by the lake, the swans drifted serenely and the trees rustled over the distant traffic. We tossed breadcrumbs.

“Maurice, if I were to take a political stand – or rather a run – for a reason – would you follow me?” said Alec.

“Oh.. Of course I would. To the very depths of hell.”

“Actually I hear France is lovely this time of year. Oo! So it’s all settled then.” Sally slung an arm around Davey and Alec. “We’ll all go to war. Rah-rah-rah! Sis-boom-bah!”

“You know it wouldn’t be any fun without us,” said Alec.

Oh please don’t let me be peer-pressed into this! It’s school all over again. If I look down I may still be in short pants, all knobbly knees. Knocking.

A black thunderous cloud drawing ever closer! A dark ravaging mountain emerging, splitting the earth. Our own government seemed to have it in for us just as much as the Germans, with the recruitment drives and posters and persuasive efforts to make every man a soldier, a sacrifice. It seemed impossible that people were dying, were already dead. And yet dead they were.

At night I slept fitfully, I awoke often, uncertain and fearful – no longer steadfast in my objection. Yet far from enthused.. All at a loss. Under the bed-covers I reached into Alec’s warm pyjama pants
and held his soft cock and balls. As a comfort, to make sure he was here, alive, warm and weighty and a man and mine, I hadn’t dreamt the whole thing.

Life tiptoed on. In the everyday sphere I sought sense. “Do you think all of this conflict will really come to anything major?” I asked in the office, over a twitchy cigarette.

“I don’t know, Maurice,” said Eleanor. “But I’ve heard rumours in the canteen that they’re clearing out some of the third-floor storage spaces and starting an employment drive for a brand new Widow’s Pension section. Those rooms are enormous!”

“Bit presumptuous, to assume that soon we’ll be awash with widows, isn’t it? Ridiculously pessimistic.” I spoke loudly over the noise above our heads, hammers banging and saws sawing, heavy workmen’s boot-steps and furniture moving.

Brian Dawson! There’s a capital fellow. What a genuine, senseful, cheery, down-to-earth sort. Perhaps a bit too down-to-earth – or down in it, for when I asked him, just in passing, about our current political climate and how the outbreak of war might impact us nationally, rift the population at large and for generations to come, his response was glum.

“I do hope not, Mozza. I’m against the whole thing, I am. Whatever happens – I’m staying right out of it, and that’s for absolute.”

As he sloped off, I stared after him – a real-life Pacifist.

One of the last long evenings of summer and shadows of the cups and books on the wallpaper. The wind rustled the loose leaves at the open window as I sat at the kitchen table, in my braces and shirtsleeves, ash falling from my cigarette as I click-clacked on the typewriter.
So slow am I still at typing – and this story is _so long_ – well, you know yourself, poor pursuer; it was only supposed to be a biographical snippet, dutiful diaries to neatly chronicle a year of my life – but what a year, what a life! A forest full of paper, a hundred typists-typing would not be enough to describe every incident, every emotion, from last August until this one. I’ve tried.

_Stomp-stomp-stomp-stomp_ across the landing and Alec burst into the flat. “Maurice! Maurice, do you know how to drive a car?”

“Of course I do! What kind of a man doesn’t know how to drive a car? Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Ha! Ha.. Oh.”

Alec grabbed my hand and pulled me out of my chair. “Come quick! Quick! Oh, you just won’t believe it, so I’ll show you, just you wait.”

Hardly had to wait – he dragged me so unremittingly and ran and ran and ran through the town, beating the footpaths, racing as he used to all over Penge, only here it was city street concrete, not grass; surprised pedestrians instead of animals; lamp-posts to veer around rather than trees. We sped, boot-heels clattering. A mercy we’re fit.

“Gracious, Alec, where’s the fire?” I said between breaths.

We drew up to Alec’s work-place, the Tea Depot. He panted, pulled open the heavy wooden gate, and ran over to –

“A new motor Mr Nangle only just got today, look! For special deliveries, QC, sales meetings.. Our manager asked all of us boys who could drive a car and I said real quick yes, I could – Um..” He went a little red.

“Alright, alright – I see.”

“You’ll teach me – won’t you?” His hands clasped together in front of his chest. “I’ll be ever such a
good pupil.”

“That would be a first.” The accounting – remember?

Alec did, too. “This will be different. I’m more interested in this.” He ran his fingers along the black chassis, the gleaming green paintwork. Brass horn and dashboard-works; four headlights complete with adjustable covers; velveteen seats, enormous curved mud-guards – the bigger the better, you know.

Hands in pockets, Alec put a foot on the tyre and pressed to test the suspension. “I always wanted to try driving – always. But – it were only something rich folk did.”

“So you want to be rich?” said I.

“I am already, ain’t I?” He took my hand and put it in his pocket. It was empty – oh wait – oh, but of course, it wasn’t.

“Cracking, ain’t it?” said he.

“A car. And just now I thought you were crazy about the war?”

“What? Oh, yeh.. That. But, listen!” Energetically he turned the crank at the front of the bonnet – maybe twelve times – and the engine jumped to ear-splitting life.

“Beautiful! Hear them workin’?” roared Alec. “Purring like a kitten!”

Yes, with its tail caught in a door-frame.

Alec stepped back to stand side-by-side to me, his arm around my waist, the other hand in his pants pocket. “It’s a Morris. No wonder I were so drawn to she – er – he!”

“It’s so small and stubby and inconsequential!” I said. “What are you implying?!”
Alec was all flushed with passion, practically hopping on the spot – I fancied I could hear his heart thumping in tandem with his fantasies.

“Well.” I waved at the car. “Get in, then. Show me what she can do.”

“But – I can’t drive!” said he.

“Of course you can. Hop in behind the wheel there – I’ll show you what to do – hey presto – you’ll be driving. Easy as winking!”

Ridiculously optimistic – maybe! But everyone starts at the beginning, there’s no other way to go about a thing. I sat in the passenger seat and demonstrated to Alec how to give the accelerator some welly and slowly, slowly take his left foot off the clutch – CLUNK – he did it too fast and the engine died.

But on only the seventh go it worked, he got it – with me leaning over him and physically easing his foot off the pedal with my hand, which likely looked a little obscene to Alec’s co-workers who were lined up watching; but they seemed mostly impressed we were moving at all! At about five miles an hour, across the work-yard to the gates that led to the road.

“See you later chaps!” said Alec. He turned to grin at me. “Hey presto!”

“Yes! Well done! St- steer towards the gap in the gates, love – not towards the wall – NO!! Not so much to the left – gently – that’s it straighten – grand!”

As the car approached the gates, I said, “Slow down now, tap the brake – don’t slam it – now – just clutch and brake, to softly stop.”

“Slow? Stop? Aren’t we going somewhere?”

“Well, but we’re about to join a main road from the side – might be worth a quick look left and right to make sure nothing’s coming.”
Alec laughed. “Oh aye! Right an’ all! No sense getting ploughed into by a lorry on us’ maiden voyage, hay?”

Wobbling slightly, we crawled along the dock street, and I entreated Alec to press the clutch again and switch up to Second gear.

“Second!” He perspired under his cap and curls at the very idea, but how that smile curved up towards his dimples!

“These roads coming up are fairly even and uncluttered,” I said. “Shall we pop it up to Third?”

“Oh rather!” And Alec did so himself. Clever boy!

We scooted past factories and gates and windows and brickwork. Alec was in his element; for a one who had never done this before, he had a great flair. Near-expert and eager at something he had hitherto only dreamt about. On that last point I could certainly relate.

“You know why married couples have kids right away?” said Alec conversationally. “So’s they won’t let fly at each other with the frying pan and the rolling pin. Gives them a project, like. Summat to do.”

“That makes about as much sense as does anything you say.”

“So here’s summat for you to do: show me how to drive. You and I – we’ll have to improvise a bit in this marriage.”

Tenement buildings and faded brown blocks gave way to greenery, parks, shops, stalls, railings, statues, stations, as I directed Alec on a safe enough route through the markets, fancier residential districts, the cafés and bars; for once he could glide – well, chug – through as a motorist, a goer, a man with a plan. It does have a great impact upon one’s confidence.

“So you had a car at home, did you?” Alec slowed down to allow a lady to cross the street, then quickened on again. “And you drove it?”
“Eyes front, there’s a lad. Well, we had a chauffeur. He left around about the same time you and I got together, actually.” Not sure how Alec would take this news, my former little lordliness.

“Was he good-looking?” Of course.

“Can’t say as to whether I noticed,” I said.

“LIAR! Bet he was a finer. Chuck us a sweety, would you?”

I popped him a Bulls-eye, took one myself.

“So why’d he leave?” said Alec.

“Oh, likely me.. I was a curmudgeonly old employer. A nightmare I’m sure. He’d have an easier time of it elsewhere with someone nicer.”

“That ain’t possible. There’s no-one nicer than you. Land, you speak so down on thyself, Morrie. So modest it’s right grotty. Cor! If I had your looks, intelligence, charm, height – I’d never shut up about it!”

“So what would be different?”

Long, sharp evening shadows lay across the road as we made our merry way. Up ahead and in front of us was a one-way street – not our way – and so –

“Take a right up here, Alec.”
“Where?”

“Not yet – see, up there where that pillar box is? And the chap on the bicycle? Slow down – ah – and start to turn, darling –”

“Now?”

“Yes! And a bit of brake to slow down, that’s the way -”

“Help! I can’t do ever’thing all at once!”

“That’s alright, you’re doing grand –” Although he was going very tentative on the steering-wheel and we were nearly on top of the sharp corner –

“Turn the wheel! Wide strokes!” I gestured with my hands. “That’s the way.”

“You said to go easy on the steering wheel!”

“When you’re positioning yourself in the road, not when –”

CLUNK And we stalled – something of a relief – at least the car hadn’t flown off into a wall. As it was, though, it was sat flush across the road lengthways, at a slight angle pointing up towards Broad Street where we were headed. Mercifully no body-parts – auto or human – befell injury.

“Bit of a tight spot!” Alec grinned, but I could tell he was embarrassed; his hands still gripped the wheel.

“Not to worry,” I said. “These things happen all the time. We’ll just reverse back a bit and you can do the corner again.”

“I can’t,” he whispered.
“Why not? Oh..”

Why not had pulled up behind us in a shiny Model T. From it emerged a red-faced fellow in a black suit and cap. He came round to Alec’s side of the Oxford and roared. “What the bloody hell do you think you’re playing at? Get out the fucking way!!”

I popped my head around Alec, leaned right over him. “Hullo, old man! We overshot the mark somewhat, as you can see. I wonder if you wouldn’t mind reversing a few feet so we can move her, turn her into the lane.”

The man folded his arms. “Make me!” To Alec he added, “Where’d you learn to drive? Get off the roads if you can’t.”

I climbed out of the car and walked around to lean my rump on Alec’s door, between him and this newcomer. “Alright then, you want to discuss it.” I put my hands in my pockets and crossed my ankles. “Grand, we’re free to talk all day, aren’t we Alec?” Alec’s nervous smile.

“Or..” I addressed the man and crossed my arms. “You could move and we’d all be on our way.”

Wouldn’t you know, he was unimpressed with both options. He looked around. “Aha!” said he. “I can’t move back – look, there’s a pile-up. You’re holding everyone up now.” And such idiotic triumph.

I craned around him to see. “Oh really.. It’s one other car pulled up behind yours! Excuse me..” I walked to the third car in the line – and Aston Martin, so one could presume the driver to be a humble, reasonable sort.

“Good evening. How do you do?” I removed my cap before resting my elbow on the driver door – inside was a lady in a puffy-shouldered dress, with a red cloche hat; a long cigarette-holder in one gloved hand and a little fluffy brown terrier in the other.

She grinned hugely. “How do old boy! What seems to be the splash here? Mind you, isn’t it a ripping evening to be taking it easy! Usually I go around the place at quite eighty miles per hour. Haw! Haw!”
“Quite!” said I. “But we’re a little caught up ahead, you see – I wonder, would you mind terribly reversing a little so we can all move back, please?”

The woman wriggled with readiness in her seat and grabbed the gear-stick. “Say no more, my dear, say no more! I don’t mind a jot, by Jove. Tally-ho!” And she pulled out a compact mirror to check the road was clear behind her, honked the horn a few times for good measure, and with the dog still balanced on one arm, the car shot backwards a few yards at, indeed, quite eighty miles per hour.

Once she came to a screeching halt, she raised her hand and gave me a salute. Women tend to be safer drivers than men – they’re prepared for anything.

Our antagonist observed grumpily the several car-lengths of street now behind his Ford. From the distance the lady called: “Come on, sah! Plenty of room now, sah!” So he had no choice but to get in and reverse his car.

I returned to ours, turned the crank, and sat in beside Alec. “Now see – we’ve loads of room. Simply oodles. Let’s back up.”

“Maurice, you do it.”

“Or – you do it, and I’ll talk you through every motion?” I said. “You’re perfectly capable. And you have exactly as much right to be on the road as anyone.”

“Alright..”

“Firstly – breathe. Centre yourself in the seat – comfy? Don’t mind that idiot blowing his horn behind us! Let him burst his eardrums. Now, the most important thing is – slow control. Alright? Slow. That brute would just love it if we front-ended him! Tempting and all as it is..”

“Ha ha, yeh..” Still a little red, all the same Alec followed my instructions to the letter, and backed up, spun the wheel, backed up more to the opposite kerb.

Moving gradually, gradually, until there was space enough for him to switch from Reverse into First gear and carefully turn the corner; then smoothly into Second – Third – and we were away, whipping off to the sunset.
“Well done, darling!” said I. “A cool head in a crisis. You know, it’s good you encountered an obstacle on your first try. Now you can go home knowing you learned all sorts.”

Alec just smiled to himself, the wind tossing his hair. A natural.

“So this car might come along with some of your new duties at work?” I said.

Alec nodded. “If I play me cards right, I might even get to drive a truck. A truck!!”

“But what about Bonnie?”

“Ah. Well, actually, if the horses are offered retirement – well – I sort of said I’d take her. Buy her.”

“Oh will you now. And keep her up in the flat?”

“There’s a paddock right near, in Bethnal Green only, where she can live and we can visit her every day! A stables and everything! It’s only a pound a month room and board.”

“Well.” I crossed my arms. “Drive us to Bethnal Green, then. Let’s see if this stables is good enough.”

“Oh, I knew you’d be like this!” He threw his arms around me.

I struggled. “This is not safe driving behaviour!!”
Such a very honoured position I am in now – one that has nothing to do with status or money, but everything to with what I can do for another. Earned, apparently, on foot of what I am inside. A lover, through and through. I love, it’s what I do.

And yet, and yet – we are one, but still distinct. Our far history is not shared. Perhaps it will be, in time; what I mean to say is, I haven’t told Alec simply *everything*.

Oh, he knows all the important stuff of my makeup – the series of crises that led me to him after all – and he’s healed the wounds, but.. Still I fear his scorn, or a pained expression at some of my more inglorious moments. I wish to delight him with surprise, not shock him.

He loves me so. Oh, the boy worships me. But does he really realize just how beastly I was to Mother, to the girls, to Clive? For example, how would Alec feel if I were to tell him just how pompously I dismissed the Howells from service – of course I remember – with a wave of my hand and false confidence born out of my father’s fortunes – just like that, their livelihood gone.

And what became of them, where did they go when they disappeared from my personal narrative? I don’t have a clue, and at the time couldn’t care a whit. As long as I got my way – that was my only concern.

Of course, that was some five years ago: I was young and idiotic. And yet – I can picture an Alec of that age – about twenty, still spotty, both gangly of limb and round of face – and I simply can’t imagine him being that callous, that dismissive; not even that particular kind of clumsy cruelty born out of ignorance – my speciality.

In essence, Alec is so much more deeply Good than I. Have I hoodwinked him? Am I a crusade? Does he love me because he saw the desperate need in me, and his generous spirit was spurred into action?

I am afraid to tell him everything – strip it all away and expose – but I do believe I shall, in time. Because I do fall quiet every so often, and Alec won’t have that. For better or worse.
By the time we concluded our jaunt and had brought the car back to the depot, the sun had retired, leaving only the memory of its brightness above the ragged London skyline. Homeward bound, already with autumn leaves crunching underfoot, Alec looked back at the high wooden doors of the tea-yard.

“I’d like another go, though,” he said. “I’d like to practice till I master it – that going slow around corners, the revving when you’re clear ahead. What I’d main like to do is try for drivin' somewhere outside the city. Long country roads with grass, and trees, and meadows and flowers – with you – for a spin, visit a lake or a mountain for a picnic.”

“Is that a promise? I’ll hold you to it,” I said.

“Aye.”

I put my arm around his shoulders; he shuffled in close. Often we walked about like this – not holding hands, or embracing, but pressed to one another and the friendly arm about. You’d be surprised how little heed people paid. Or maybe we just didn’t notice.

Easy to put the empirical world out of one’s thoughts when such a heavenly body is flush to yours.

How-and-ever. Still. Yet. Nonetheless and although. It was coming. Rolling inevitably, like a ship splitting the water, like an ignorantly insisting visitor. It could be taken on – put up the shield, however small, against the dragon; protection of a human – a trifling safeguard, soft and fleshy – but what other option? Lie down? Or out-fox.
“War. You know, people die. We could die.”

“Could do. But to be honest with you, Maurice.. I haven’t the slightest intention of it.” When Licky says a thing Licky means it.

Alec Scudder. I’ve so romanticized him, I’m well aware of that; the Lead Role in a Love Story. But perhaps there are other shining sides to the diamond; perhaps he sees himself in other parts too – the warrior, the war-hero, the rough-and-tumble hardy soldier, battling for a great, great big Right.

His desire to protect. Unquenchable.

And of course he’s brave. I already knew that.

“We can’t avoid it. It’s rushing towards us like a tidal wave – we could hide behind the sand dunes, or –” Alec grabbed my hand and held his nose and mimed as if to jump – off the edge, underwater, into the blurry unknown.

Well. Maybe we’ll be beaten, wiped out, obliterated by the Great Onslaught coming.

Maybe we will be.

Or – you know. Maybe not. T’ain’t likely.
Because perhaps it will be just the opposite – we will be the contenders, the ones to beat, the mighty freight train out of the darkness, the power of Good and not just Alec and I – all men hopeful like us, and women, of all classes and races and creeds – the young folks of Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Serbia, Italy – and all – and all racing not to fight but to defend, and end the conflict and winning simply because they are doing so – the purity of the peacekeepers – the glorious rush of the Innocents, living and giving forever climbing and clamouring and conquering that muddy, bloody, gas-ridden, flea-bitten trench-drenched mountain of madness.

Autumn in the air, the crispy whiff of things to come. In the evening, the tea-steaming kitchen table, candles and lamps flickering, boots drying by the fire, bicycle leaning against the bookshelf, curtains idling over the darkening sky; fragrant sprigs of heather in a jam-jar, our bodies woolly-jumpered, hardy as sheep.

On the worn table-top, I helped Alec with his formal-writing, standard calligraphy to short-hand, in keeping with Clive’s canny advice about administrative skill: secretarial work being somewhat preferable to becoming cannon fodder.

I’d not forgotten the secret slip of paper Clive had given me either; old bosom-friend.

Dutifully, Alec studied the phrases I’d written in the notebook, then he carefully copied them out on the lines I’d pencilled underneath. “Been practising my printing too.”

“Oh, yes?” I said.

“Aye. You know, you said it were an important skill, a means of messagin’ when you want to communicate summat main important and clear.”

A fresh page, and he wrote in careful, bulky script, capital letters, lines and loops; he tore the leaf from the notebook and held it out to me.
“A message? What’s this?” I said.

“A statement, a secret. A promise, like. Keep it in your wallet and if you ever get frisked by the Police they won’t be able to make head nor tail of it. But you’ll know..”

I took the paper as he yawned, his elbow on the table, his sleepy, smiling young face cupped in his hand; a soft expression that could tell a life’s story in a heartbeat.

Though he said to fold it into my wallet – I’ll have him do out another – I believe I shall put this page with this stack of a tale: I’ve waffled on so much that it’s only fair and fitting that Alec get the last word, for now, the concluding sentiment and final say as it were. And so tucked in at the back of the book – this book – is a torn note, a written whisper, solid as lines on a contract, deep as a carving on a tree, everlasting assurance that whatever England faced, uncertainty or upheaval, the world could nest around this unshakable truth:

MAID MARIAN
LOVES
ROBIN HOOD

Shoreditch, London
EC2A
August 28 1914
Works inspired by this one:
- To Love and Kiss by keyboardclicks
- The Quiet Which Accompanies the Rain by keyboardclicks
- Tending To by keyboardclicks
- A Sense of Stability by keyboardclicks

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