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In the small hours of a blustery October morning in a south Devon coastal town that seemed to have been deserted by its inhabitants, Magnus Pym got out of his elderly country taxi-cab and, having paid the driver and waited till he had left, struck out across the church square. His destination was a terrace of ill-lit Victorian boarding-houses with names like Bel-a-Vista, The Commodore, and Eureka. In build he was powerful but stately, a representative of something. His stride was agile, his body forward-sloping in the best tradition of the Anglo-Saxon administrative class. In the same attitude, whether static or in motion, Englishmen have hoisted flags over distant colonies, discovered the sources of great rivers, stood on the decks of sinking ships. He had been travelling in one way or another for sixteen hours but he wore no overcoat or hat. He carried a fat black briefcase of the official kind and in the other hand a green Harrods bag. A strong sea wind lashed at his city suit, salt rain stung his eyes, balls of spume skimmed across his path. Pym ignored them. Reaching the porch of a house marked 'no vacancies' he pressed the bell and waited, first for the outside light to go on, then for the chains to be unfastened from inside. While he waited a church clock began striking five. As if in answer to its summons Pym turned on his heel and stared back at the square. At the graceless tower of

the Baptist church posturing against the racing clouds. At the writhing monkey-puzzle trees, pride of the ornamental gardens. At the empty bandstand. At the bus shelter. At the dark patches of the side streets. At the doorways one by one.

‘Why Mr Canterbury, it’s you,’ an old lady’s voice objected sharply as the door opened behind him. ‘You bad man. You caught the night sleeper again, I can tell. Why ever didn’t you telephone?’

‘Hullo, Miss Dubber,’ said Pym. ‘How are you?’

‘Never mind how I am, Mr Canterbury. Come in at once. You’ll catch your death.’

But the ugly windswept square seemed to have locked Pym in its spell. ‘I thought Sea View was up for sale, Miss D,’ he remarked as she tried to pluck him into the house. ‘You told me Mr Cook moved out when his wife died. Wouldn’t set foot in the place, you said.’

‘Of course he wouldn’t. He was allergic. Come in this instant, Mr Canterbury, and wipe your feet before I make your tea.’

‘So what’s a light doing on in his upstairs bedroom window?’ Pym asked as he allowed her to tug him up the steps.

Like many tyrants Miss Dubber was small. She was also old and powdery and lopsided, with a crooked back that rumbled her dressing gown and made everything round her seem lopsided too.

‘Mr Cook has rented out the upper flat, Celia Venn has taken it to paint in. That’s you all over.’ She slid a bolt. ‘Disappear for three months, come back in the middle of the night and worry about a light in someone’s window.’ She slid another. ‘You’ll never change, Mr Canterbury. I don’t know why I bother.’

‘Who on earth is Celia Venn?’

‘Dr Venn’s daughter, silly. She wants to see the sea and paint

it.' Her voice changed abruptly. 'Why Mr Canterbury, how dare you? Take that off this instant.'

With the last bolt in place Miss Dubber had straightened up as best she could and was preparing herself for a reluctant hug. But instead of her customary scowl, which nobody believed in for a moment, her poky little face had twisted in fright.

'Your horrid black tie, Mr Canterbury. I won't have death in the house, I won't have you bring it. Who is it for?'

Pym was a handsome man, boyish but distinguished. In his early fifties he was in his prime, full of zeal and urgency in a place that knew none. But the best thing about him in Miss Dubber's view was his lovely smile that gave out so much warmth and truth and made her feel right.

'Just an old Whitehall colleague, Miss D. No one to flap about. No one close.'

'Everyone's close at my age, Mr Canterbury. What was his name?'

'I hardly knew the fellow,' said Pym emphatically, untying his tie and slipping it into his pocket. 'And I'm certainly not going to tell you his name and have you hunting the obituaries, so there.' His eye as he said this fell on the visitors' book, which lay open on the hall table beneath the orange nightlight that he had fitted to her ceiling on his last visit. 'Any casuals at all, Miss D?' he asked as he scanned the list. 'Runaway couples, mystery princesses? What happened to those two lover-boys who came at Easter?'

'They were not lover-boys,' Miss Dubber corrected him severely as she hobbled towards the kitchen. 'They took single rooms and in the evenings they watched football on the television. What was that you said, Mr Canterbury?'

But Pym had not spoken. Sometimes his gushes of communication were like phone calls cut off by some inner censorship

before they could be completed. He turned back a page and then another.

'I don't think I'll do casuals any more,' Miss Dubber said through the open kitchen doorway as she lit the gas. 'Sometimes when the door bell goes I sit here with Toby and I say: "You answer it, Toby." He doesn't of course. A tortoiseshell cat can't answer a door. So we go on sitting here. We sit and we wait and we hear the footsteps go away again.' She cast a sly glance at him. 'You don't think our Mr Canterbury is smitten, do you, Toby?' she enquired archly of her cat. 'We're very *bright* this morning. Very *shiny*. Ten years younger, by the look of our coat, Mr Canterbury is.' Receiving no helpful response from the cat, she addressed herself to the canary. 'Not that he'd ever tell us, would he, Dickie? We'd be the last to know. Tzuktzuk? Tzuktzuk?'

'John and Sylvia Illegible of Wimbledon,' said Pym still at the visitors' book.

'John makes computers, Sylvia programs them, and they're leaving tomorrow,' she told him sulkily. For Miss Dubber hated to admit there was anyone in her world but beloved Mr Canterbury. 'Now what have you done to me this time?' she exclaimed angrily. 'I won't have it. Take it back.'

But Miss Dubber was not angry, she would have it, and Pym would not take it back: a thickly knitted cashmere shawl of white and gold, still in its Harrods box and swathed in its original Harrods tissue paper which she seemed to treasure almost above their contents. For having taken out the shawl she first smoothed the paper and folded it along its creases before replacing it in the box, then put the box on the cupboard shelf where she kept her greatest treasures. Only then did she let him wrap the shawl round her shoulders and hug her in it, while she scolded him for his extravagance.

Pym drank tea for Miss Dubber, Pym appeased her, Pym ate a piece of her shortbread and praised it to the skies although she told him it was burned. Pym promised to mend the sink plug for her and unblock the waste-pipe and take a look at the cistern on the first floor while he was about it. Pym was swift and over-attentive and the brightness she had shrewdly remarked on did not leave him. He lifted Toby on to his lap and stroked him, a thing he had never done before, and which gave Toby no discernible pleasure. He received the latest news of Miss Dubber's ancient Aunt Al, when normally the mention of Aunt Al was enough to hurry him off to bed. He questioned her, as he always did, about the local goings-on since his last visit, and listened approvingly to the catalogue of Miss Dubber's complaints. And quite often, as he nodded her through her answers, he either smiled to himself for no clear reason or became drowsy and yawned behind his hand. Till suddenly he put down his teacup and stood up as if he had another train to catch.

'I'll be staying a decent length of time if it's all right with you, Miss D. I've a bit of heavy writing to do.'

'That's what you always say. You were going to live here for ever last time. Then it's up first thing and back to Whitehall without your egg.'

'Maybe as much as two weeks. I've taken some leave of absence so that I can work in peace.'

Miss Dubber pretended to be appalled. 'But whatever will happen to the country? How shall Toby and I stay safe, with no Mr Canterbury at the helm to steer us?'

'So what are Miss D's plans?' he asked winningly, reaching for his briefcase, which by the effort he needed to lift it looked as heavy as a chunk of lead.

'Plans?' Miss Dubber echoed, smiling rather beautifully in

her mystification. 'I don't make plans at my age, Mr Canterbury. I let God make them. He's better at them than I am, isn't he, Toby? More reliable.'

'What about that cruise you're always talking about? It's time you gave yourself a treat, Miss D.'

'Don't be daft. That was years ago. I've lost the urge.'

'I'll still pay.'

'I know you will, bless you.'

'I'll do the phoning if you want. We'll go to the travel agent together. I looked one out for you as a matter of fact. There's the *Orient Explorer* leaves Southampton just a week away. They've got a cancellation. I asked.'

'Are you trying to get rid of me, Mr Canterbury?'

Pym took a moment to laugh. 'God and me together couldn't dislodge you, Miss D,' he said.

From the hall Miss Dubber watched him up the narrow stairs, admiring the youthful springiness of his tread despite the heavy briefcase. He's going to a high-level conference. A weighty one too. She listened to him step lightly along the corridor to room eight overlooking the square, which was her longest let ever, in her whole long life. His loss has not affected him, she decided in relief as she heard him unlock the door and close it softly behind him. Just some old colleague from the Ministry, no one close. She wanted nothing to disturb him. He was to remain the same perfect gentleman who had appeared on her doorstep years ago, looking for what he had called a sanctuary without a telephone, even though she had a perfectly good one in the kitchen. And had paid her in advance six-monthly ever since, cash-cash, no receipts. And had built the little stone wall beside the garden path for her, all in an afternoon to surprise her on her birthday, bullied the mason and the bricklayer. And had put the slates back on the

roof with his own hand after the storm in March. And had sent her flowers and fruit and chocolates and souvenirs from amazing foreign places without properly explaining what he did there. And had helped her with the breakfasts when she had too many casualties, and listened to her about her nephew who had all the schemes for making money that never came to anything: the latest was starting up a bingo hall in Exeter but first he needed the capital for his overdraft. And received no mail or visitors and played no instrument except the wireless in foreign, and never used the telephone except for local tradesmen. And never told her anything about himself except that he lived in London and worked in Whitehall but travelled a lot, and that his name was Canterbury like the city. Children, wives, parents, sweethearts – not a soul on earth had he ever called his own, except his one Miss D.

‘He could have a knighthood by now for all we know,’ she told Toby aloud as she held the shawl to her nose and inhaled its woolly smell. ‘He could be Prime Minister and we’d only ever hear it from the television.’

Very faintly Miss Dubber heard above the rattle of the wind the sound of singing. A man’s voice, tuneless but agreeable. First she thought it was ‘Greensleeves’ from the garden, then she thought it was ‘Jerusalem’ from the square, and she was halfway to the window to yell out. Only then did she realise it was Mr Canterbury from upstairs, and this amazed her so much that when she opened her door to rebuke him, she paused instead to listen. The singing stopped of its own accord. Miss Dubber smiled. Now *he’s* listening to *me*, she thought. That’s my Mr Canterbury all over.

In Vienna three hours earlier, Mary Pym, wife of Magnus, stood at her bedroom window and stared out upon a world

which, in contrast to the one elected by her husband, was a marvel of serenity. She had neither closed the curtains nor switched on the light. She was dressed to receive, as her mother would have said, and she had been standing at the window in her blue twinset for an hour, waiting for the car, waiting for the door bell, waiting for the soft turn of her husband's key in the latch. And now in her mind it was an unfair race between Magnus and Jack Brotherhood which of them she would receive first. An early autumn snow still covered the hilltop, a full moon rode above it, filling the room with black and white bars. In elegant villas up and down the avenue the last camp fires of diplomatic entertainment were going out one by one. Frau Minister Meierhof had been having a Force Reduction Talks dance with a four-piece band. Mary should have been there. The van Leymans had had a buffet dinner for old Prague hands, both sexes welcome and no *placement*. She should have gone, they both should, and swept up the stragglers for a scotch and soda afterwards, vodka for Magnus. And put on the gramophone, and danced till now or later – the swinging diplomatic Pyms, so popular – just the way they had entertained so famously in Washington when Magnus was Deputy Head of Station and everything was absolutely fine. And Mary would have made bacon and eggs while Magnus joked and picked people's brains and acquired new friends, which he was so tirelessly good at. For this was Vienna's high season, when people who have clammed up all year talked excitedly of Christmas and the Opera, and tossed out indiscretions like old clothes.

But all that was a thousand years ago. All that was until last Wednesday. The only thing that mattered now was that Magnus should drive up the avenue in the Metro he had left at the airport and beat Jack Brotherhood to the front door.

The telephone was ringing. By the bed. His side. Don't run, you idiot, you'll fall. Not too slowly or he'll ring off. Magnus, darling, oh dear God, let it be you, you've had an aberration and you're better, I'll never even ask what happened, I'll never doubt you again. She lifted the receiver and for some reason she couldn't work out sat in a heap on the duvet, plonk, grabbing the pad and pencil with her spare hand in case of phone numbers to take down, addresses, times, instructions. She didn't blurt 'Magnus?' because that would show she was worried about him. She didn't say 'Hullo' because she couldn't trust her voice not to sound excited. She said their whole number in German so that Magnus would know it was she, hear that she was normal and all right and not angry with him, and that everything was just fine to come back to. No fuss, no problems, I'm here and waiting for you like always.

'It's me,' said a man's voice.

But it wasn't me. It was Jack Brotherhood.

'No word of that parcel, I suppose?' Brotherhood asked in the rich, confident English of the military classes.

'No word from anyone. Where are you?'

'Be there in about half an hour, less if I can. Wait for me, will you?'

The fire, she thought suddenly. My God, the fire. She hastened downstairs, no longer capable of distinguishing between small and large disasters. She had sent the maid out for the night and forgotten to bank up the drawing-room fire. It was out for sure. But it was not. It was burning merrily and all that was needed was another log to make the early-morning hour less funereal. She put it on, then floated round the room prinking things – the flowers, the ashtrays, Jack's whisky tray – making everything outside herself perfect because nothing inside herself was perfect in the least. She lit a cigarette and

puffed out the uninhaled smoke in angry kisses. Then she poured herself a very large whisky, which was what she had come down for in the first place. After all, if we were still dancing I'd be having several.

Mary's Englishness, like Pym's, was unmistakable. She was blonde and strong-jawed and forthright. Her one mannerism, inherited from her mother, was the slightly comic stoop from which she addressed the world, and foreigners in particular. Mary's life was a record of fine deaths. Her grandfather had died at Passchendaele, her one brother, Sam, more recently in Belfast, and for a month or more it had seemed to Mary that the bomb that had blown Sam's jeep to pieces had killed her soul too, but it was her father, not Mary, who had died of a broken heart. All of her men had been soldiers. Between them they had left her with a decent inheritance, a fiercely patriotic soul and a small manor house in Dorset. Mary was ambitious as well as intelligent, she could dream and lust and covet. But the rules of her life had been laid down for her before she entered it and had been entrenched with every death since: in Mary's family the men campaigned while the women lent succour, mourned and carried on. Her worship, her dinner parties, her life with Pym, had all been conducted on this same sturdy principle.

Until last July. Until our holiday in Lesbos. Magnus, come home. I'm sorry I raised a stink at the airport when you didn't show up. I'm sorry I bellowed at the British Airways clerk in what you call my six-acre voice and I'm sorry I waved my diplomatic pass around. And I'm sorry – I'm terribly sorry – I phoned Jack to say where the hell's my husband? So please – just come home and tell me what to do. Nothing matters. Just be here. Now.

Finding herself standing before the double doors to the

dining room, she pushed them open, switched on the chandeliers and, whisky in hand, surveyed the long empty table glistening like a lake. Mahogany. Eighteenth-century repro. Counsellor's grade, nobody's taste. Seats fourteen with comfort, sixteen if you double up on the curved ends. That bloody burn mark, I've tried everything. Remember, she told herself. Force your mind back. Get the whole story straight in your stupid little head before Jack Brotherhood rings that door bell. Step outside yourself and look in. *Now*. It is a night like this one was, crisp and exciting. It is Wednesday and our night for entertaining. And the moon is like the moon tonight except for a bite out of one side. In the bedroom, that fool Mary Pym who notched up one A-level and never went to university stands with her feet too wide apart putting on her family pearls while brilliant Magnus her husband, a First at Oxford and already in his dinner jacket, kisses the nape of her neck and does his Balkan gigolo number to try to get her in the party mood. Magnus of course is in whatever mood he needs to be in.

'For God's sake,' Mary snaps more roughly than she intends. 'Stop fooling and fix this bloody clasp for me.'

Sometimes my military family gets the better of my language.

And Magnus obliges. Magnus always obliges. Magnus mends and fixes and carries better than a butler. And when he has obliged he puts his hands over my breasts and breathes hotly on my bare neck: 'Please, my dullink, have we not time for most divine perfect moment? No? Yes?'

But Mary is as usual too nervous even to smile and orders him downstairs to make sure Herr Wenzel the hired manservant has fetched the ice from Weber's fish shop. And Magnus goes. Magnus always goes. Even when a sharp smack across Mary's chops would be the wiser course, Magnus goes.

Pausing, Mary lifted her head and listened. A car engine. In this snow they come up on you like bad memories. But unlike a bad memory, this one passed.

It is dinner, it is the diplomatic happy hour, it is as good as Georgetown in the days when Magnus was still an upwardly mobile Deputy Head of Station with the post of Chief of Service squarely in his sights and everything is mended between Magnus and Mary except for a black cloud which night and day hangs over Mary's heart, even when she is not thinking of it, and that cloud is called Lesbos, a Greek island in the Aegean wholly surrounded by monstrous memories. Mary Pym, wife to Magnus, Counsellor for Certain Unmentionable Matters at the British Embassy in Vienna and actually the Head of Station here as everyone unmentionable knows, proudly faces her husband across Mary's silver candelabra, while the servants hand round Mary's venison, jugged according to her mother's recipe, to twelve unmentionably distinguished members of the local intelligence community.

'Now you also have a daughter,' Mary firmly reminds an Oberregierungsrat Dinkel from the Austrian Ministry of Defence in her well-learned German. 'Name Ursula – right? She was studying piano at the Conservatorium when last heard of. Tell me about her.' And to the servant, quietly as she passes: 'Frau Wenzel. Mr Lederer two down has no red sauce. Fix.'

It was a pretty night, Mary had decided as she listened to a recitation of the Oberregierungsrat's family woes. It was the sort of night she worked for, had worked for all her married life, in Prague and Washington while they were rising and now here where they were marking time. She was happy, she was flying the flag, the black cloud of Lesbos was as good as blown away. Tom was doing well at boarding school and

would soon be home for the Christmas holidays, Magnus had rented a chalet in Lech for skiing, the Lederers had said they would join them. Magnus was so resourceful these days, so attentive to her despite his father's illness. And before Lech he would take her to Salzburg for *Parsifal* and, if she pressed him, to the Opera ball because, as they liked to say in Mary's family, a gal loves a hop. And with luck the Lederers could join them for that too – the children could spend the night together and share a babysitter – and somehow with Magnus these days extra people were a comfort. Glimpsing Pym down the candlelight she darted a smile at him just as he slipped away to engage a deaf-mute on his left. Sorry about being touchy earlier, she was saying. All forgotten, he was telling her. And when they've gone we'll make love, she was saying, we'll stay sober and make love and everything will be fine.

Which was when she heard the phone ring. Exactly then. As she was transmitting those loving thoughts to Magnus and having a desperately happy time with them. She heard it ring twice, three times, she started to get cross, then to her relief she heard Herr Wenzel answer it. Herr Pym will return your call later unless it's urgent, she rehearsed in her mind. Herr Pym should not be disturbed unless it is essential. Herr Pym is far too busy telling a funny story in that perfect German of his which so annoys the Embassy and surprises the Austrians. Herr Pym can also do an Austrian accent on demand, or funnier still a Swiss one, from his days at school there. Herr Pym can put you a row of bottles in a line, and by pinging them with a table knife make them chime like the bells of the old Swiss railway, while he chants the stations between Interlaken and the Jungfrauoch in the tones of a local station-master and his audience collapses in tears of nostalgic mirth.

Mary lifted her gaze to the far end of the empty table. And

Magnus – how was he doing at that moment, apart from flirting with Mary?

Going great guns, was the answer. On his right sat the dread Frau Oberregierungsrat Dinkel, a woman so plain and rude, even by the standards of official wives, that some of the toughest troopers in the Embassy had been reduced to stunned silence by her. Yet Magnus had drawn her to him like a flower to the sun and she could not get enough of him. Sometimes, watching him perform like this, Mary was moved to involuntary pity by the absoluteness of his dedication. She wished him more ease, if only for a moment. She wanted him to know that he had earned his peace whenever he chose to take it, instead of giving, giving all the time. If he were a real diplomat he'd be an ambassador easily, she thought. In Washington, Grant Lederer had privately assured her, Magnus had exerted more influence than either his Station Chief or the perfectly awful Ambassador. Vienna – though of course he was enormously respected here and enormously influential too – was an anticlimax obviously. Well it was meant to be, but when the dust settled, Magnus would be back on course and the thing here was to be patient. Mary wished she was not so young for him. Sometimes he tries to live down to me, she thought. On Magnus's left, similarly mesmerised, sat Frau Oberst Mohr, whose German husband was attached to the Signals Bureau at Wiener Neustadt. But Magnus's real conquest, as ever, was Grant Lederer III, 'he of the little black beard and little black eyes and little black thoughts', as Magnus called him, who six months ago had taken over the American Embassy's Legal Department, which meant of course the reverse, for Grant was the Agency's new man, though he was an old friend from Washington.

'Grant's a piss artist,' Magnus would complain of him, as

he complained of all his friends. 'He has us all round a big table once a week inventing words for things we've been doing perfectly well for twenty years without them.'

'But he is fun, darling,' Mary would remind him. 'And Bee's *terribly* dishy.'

'Grant's an alpinist,' Magnus said another time. 'He's stacking us all in a neat line so he can climb over our backs. You just wait and see.'

'But at least he's bright, darling. At least he can keep up with you, can't he?'

For the truth was, of course, that given the limitations of any diplomatic friendship, the Pym and the Lederers were one of the great quartets, and it was just Magnus's perverse way of liking people to kick at them and pick holes in them and swear he would never talk to them again. The Lederers' daughter Becky was the same age as Tom and they were practically lovers already; Bee and Mary got on like a house on fire. As to Bee and Magnus – well frankly Mary did wonder sometimes whether they weren't the tiniest bit *too* friendly. But on the other hand she had noticed that with quartets there was always one strong diagonal relationship even if it never came to anything. And if it ever *did* come to something between them, well, to be absolutely *totally* frank, Mary would be quite willing to take her revenge with Grant, whose lurking intensity she found increasingly to be rather a turn-on.

'Mary, cheers, okay? A great party. We're loving it.'

It was Bee, for ever toasting everyone. She was wearing diamond earrings and a décolleté which Mary had been eyeing all evening. Three children and breasts like that: it was bloody unfair. Mary lifted her glass in return. Bee has typist's fingers, she noticed, crooked at the tips.

'Now Grant, old boy, come on now,' Magnus was saying, in

his half-serious banter. 'Give us a break, be fair. If everything your gallant President tells us about the Communist countries is true, how the devil can we do a deal with any of them?'

Out of the corner of her eye Mary saw Grant's droll smile stretch until it looked like snapping in itchy admiration of Pym's wit.

'Magnus, if I had my way, we'd set you up on a big Embassy carpet with a shaker full of dry Martini and an American passport and magic you right back to Washington and have you pick up the Democratic ticket. I never heard a seditious case put so well.'

'Draft Magnus for President?' Bee purred, sitting up straight and pressing out her breasts as if somebody had offered her a chocolate. 'Oh goody.'

At which point the ostentatiously menial Herr Wenzel appeared and, bowing elaborately over Magnus, murmured in his left ear that he was required urgently – forgive, Excellency – on the telephone from London – Herr Counsellor, excuse.

Magnus excused. Magnus excuses everybody. Magnus picked his way delicately between imaginary obstacles to the door, smiling and empathising and excusing, while Mary chatted all the more brightly to provide him with covering fire. But as the door closed behind him something unforeseen occurred. Grant Lederer glanced at Bee, and Bee Lederer glanced at Grant. And Mary caught them at it and her blood ran cold.

Why? What had passed between them in that one unguarded look? Was Magnus really sleeping with Bee – and had Bee *told* Grant? Were they momentarily joined, the two of them, in perplexed admiration of their departed host? In all the turmoil since, Mary's answer to those questions had not budged an inch. It wasn't sex, it wasn't love, it wasn't envy and it wasn't friendship. It was conspiracy. Mary was not fanciful. But Mary

had seen and she knew. They were a pair of murderers telling each other 'soon' and the soon was about Magnus. Soon we shall have him. Soon his hubris will be purged and our honour restored. I saw them hate him, thought Mary. She had thought it then, she thought it now.

'Grant is a Cassius looking for a Caesar,' Magnus had said. 'If he doesn't find a back to stab soon, the Agency will give his dagger to someone else.'

Yet in diplomacy nothing lasts, nothing is absolute, a conspiracy to murder is no grounds for endangering the flow of conversation. Chatting busily, talking children and shopping – hunting frantically for an explanation for the Lederers' bad look – waiting, above all, for Magnus to return to the party and re-enthrall his end of the table in two languages at once – Mary still found time to wonder whether this urgent telephone call from London might be the one her husband had been waiting for all these weeks. She had known for some while that he had something big going on, and she was praying it was the promised reinstatement.

And it was at this moment, as Mary remembered it, while she was still chatting and still praying for her husband's luck to change, that she felt his fingertips skip knowingly over her naked shoulders as he returned to his place at the head of the table. She hadn't even heard the door, though she'd been listening for it.

'Everything all right, darling?' she called to him over the candelabra, playing it openly because the Pym's were so frightfully happily married.

'Her Maj in good shape, Magnus?' she heard Grant enquire in his insinuating drawl. 'No rickets? Croup?'

Pym's smile was radiant and relaxed but that didn't always mean too much, as Mary knew. 'Just one of Whitehall's little

rumbles, Grant,' he replied with magnificent casualness. 'I think they must have a spy here who tells them when I'm giving a dinner party. Darling, are we out of claret? Jolly mingy rations, I must say.'

Oh Magnus, she had thought excitedly: you chancer.

It was time to get the women upstairs for a pee before coffee. The Frau Oberregierungsrat, who held herself to be modern, was inclined to resist. A scowl from her husband dislodged her. But Bee Lederer, who by this time in the evening was disposed to become the great American feminist – Bee left like a lamb, peremptorily handed out by her sexy little husband.

'Now comes the punch,' says Jack Brotherhood contentedly, in Mary's imagination.

'There is no punch.'

'Then why are we shaking, dear?' says Brotherhood.

'I'm not shaking. I'm just pouring myself a small drink waiting for you to arrive. You know I always shake.'

'I'll have mine straight, please, same as you. Just give it me the way it happened. No ice, no fizz, no bullshit.'

Very well then, damn you, have it.

The night is ending as perfectly as it began. In the hall Mary and Magnus help the guests to their coats and Mary cannot help noticing how Magnus, whose life is service, stiffens his arms and curls his fingers with each successfully negotiated sleeve. Magnus has invited the Lederers to linger but Mary has covertly countermanded this by telling Bee, with a giggle, that Magnus needs an early night. The hall empties. The diplomatic Pym, ignoring the cold – they are English after all – stand valiantly on their doorstep and wave farewell. Mary has an arm round Pym's waist and she is secretly poking her

thumb inside the waistband of his trousers at the back and down the partition of his buttocks. Magnus does not resist her. Magnus does not resist. Her head rests affectionately on his shoulder as she whispers sweet nothings into the same ear Herr Wenzel employed to summon him to the telephone and she hopes that Bee will notice their lovey-doveyness. Under the porch light – Mary luminously youthful in her long blue dress, Magnus so distinguished in his dinner jacket – we must have looked the picture of harmonious married life. The Lederers leave last and are the most effusive. ‘Dammit, Magnus, I don’t remember when I had such a good time,’ says Grant, with his quaint, rather faggy indignation. They are followed by their bodyguard in a second car. Side by side the very English Pym enjoy a moment of shared disdain for the American way.

‘Bee and Grant are terrific fun, really,’ says Mary. ‘But would *you* have a bodyguard if Jack offered you one?’ There is more to her question than mere curiosity. She has been wondering recently about the odd people who seem to loiter outside the house with nothing to do.

‘Not bloody likely,’ Pym retorts with a shudder. ‘Not unless he’ll promise to protect me from Grant.’

Mary extracts her thumb, they turn and arm in arm go indoors. ‘Is everything all right?’ she asks, thinking of the phone call. Everything is absolutely fine, he replies. ‘I want you,’ Mary whispers boldly and lets her hand brush across his thighs. Smiling, Pym nods and pulls at his tie, loosening it apparently in preparation. In the kitchen the Wenzels are waiting to leave. Mary can smell cigarette smoke but decides to ignore it because they have worked so hard. On her deathbed she will remember that she took the conscious decision to ignore their cigarette smoke: that her life at that moment was so relaxed, Lesbos so far away, her sense of service so complete, that she was able to

consider matters of such massive triviality. Pym has the Wenzels' money ready for them in an envelope plus a handsome tip. Magnus will tip with his last fiver, thinks Mary indulgently. His generosity is something she has learned to love even when her more frugal upper-class approach tells her he overdoes it: Magnus is so seldom vulgar. Even when at times she wonders whether he is overspending and she should offer him some from her private income. The Wenzels leave. Tomorrow night they will do another party at another house. The Pym's in close harmony move to the drawing room, hands linking and breaking and ranging freely for the ritual foreplay of a nightcap and a gossip post mortem. Pym pours two scotches but unusually does not remove his jacket. Mary is fondling him explicitly. Sometimes in these cases they don't manage to get up the stairs.

'Super venison, Mabs,' says Pym. Which was what he always does first: congratulate her. Magnus congratulates everyone all the time.

'They all thought Frau Wenzel cooked it,' says Mary, feeling for the top of his zip.

'Then sod them,' says Pym gallantly, rejecting the whole fatuous diplomatic world for her with a sweep of his forearm. For a moment Mary fears that Magnus has had one too many. She hopes not for she is not pretending: after the worries and fatuities of the evening she wants him very much. Handing Mary a glass, Magnus raises his own and drinks to her silently: well done, old girl. He is smiling straight down at her, his knees are almost touching hers and steady. Affected by the tension in him Mary wants him urgently here and now and gives him further clear evidence of this with her hands.

'If Grant Lederer is the *third*,' she asks, thinking again for a moment of that murderous look, 'what on earth were the first two like?'

'I'm free,' says Pym.

Mary fails to understand. She thinks he is capping her joke in some way.

'I don't get it,' she says a little shamefacedly. I'm so slow for him, poor love. A sudden awful thought. 'You don't mean they've sacked you?' she says.

Magnus shakes his head. 'Rick's dead,' he explains.

'Who?' Which Rick does he mean? Rick from Berlin? Rick from Langley? Which Rick is dead who can be setting Magnus free and, who knows, making space for his promotion?

Magnus begins again. Perfectly reasonably. Clearly the poor girl has not understood. She is tired from her long evening. She's had a couple too many. 'Rick, my father, is dead. He died of a heart attack at six this evening while we were changing. They thought he was okay after the last one but it turns out he wasn't. Jack Brotherhood phoned from London. Why the hell Personnel gave it to Jack to break to me rather than break it to me themselves is a secret not ours to share, presumably. But they did.'

And Mary even then doesn't get it right.

'What do you mean – free?' she shouts wildly, as all constraint leaves her. 'Free of what?' Then very sensibly she bursts out weeping. Loud enough for both of them. Loud enough to drown her own dreadful questions from Lesbos all the way to here.

And she has half a mind to weep again now, for Jack Brotherhood, as the front door bell sounds through the house like a bugle call, three short peals as ever.

Pym briskly drew the curtains and switched on the light. He had stopped singing. He felt nimble. Setting down his briefcase with a little grunt, he peered gratefully around him, letting

everything greet him in its own good time. The brass bedstead. Good morning. The embroidery picture above it exhorting him to love Jesus: I tried, but Rick always got in the way. The rolltop desk. The bakelite wireless that had listened to dear old Winston Churchill. Pym had imposed nothing of himself on this room. He was its guest, not its coloniser. What had drawn him here, back in those dark ages, all those lives ago? Even now, with so much else clear to him, a sleepiness came over him when he tried to make himself remember. So many lonely journeys and aimless walks in foreign cities led me here, so much fallow, solitary time. He had been catching trains, looking for somewhere, escaping from somewhere else. Mary was in Berlin – no, she was in Prague – they had been transferred a couple of months earlier and it was being made clear to him even then that, if he kept his nose clean in Prague, the Washington appointment would be next on the list. Tom was – good God, Tom was scarcely out of nappies. And Pym was in London for a conference – no, he wasn't, he was attending a three-day course on the latest methods of clandestine communication in a beastly little training house off Smith Square. The course over, he had taken a cab to Paddington. Mindlessly, the instinct guiding him. His head still crammed with useless knowledge about anodes and squash transmissions. He jumped on a train that was about to pull out and at Exeter crossed the platform and took another. What greater freedom than not knowing where you are going or why? Finding himself in the middle of nowhere, he spotted a bus bearing a vaguely familiar destination and boarded it.

This was granny-land. This was Sunday, when aunts rode to church with collection coins inside their gloves. From his spaceship on the upper deck, Pym gazed down fondly on chimney pots, churches, dunes and slate roofs that looked as

though they were waiting to be lifted up to Heaven by their topknots. The bus stopped, the conductor said, 'Far as we go, sir,' and Pym alighted with a most curious sense of accomplishment. I'm there, he thought. I've found it at last, and I wasn't even looking for it. The very town, the very beach, exactly as I left them all those years ago. The day was sunny and the world empty. Probably it was lunchtime. He had lost count. What was certain was that Miss Dubber's steps were scrubbed so white it was a shame to tread on them, and a hymn tune issued from the house, together with a smell of roast chicken, blue bag, carbolic soap and godliness.

'Go away!' a thin voice shouted. 'I'm on the top step and I can't reach the fuse and if I stretch any more I'll pop.'

Five minutes later this room was his. His sanctuary. His safe house away from all the other safe houses. 'Canterbury. The name is Canterbury,' he heard himself say as, the fuse safely mended, he pressed a deposit on her. A city had found a home.

Stepping to the desk, Pym now slid back the top and began turning the contents of his pockets on to the rexine surface. As a stocktaking preparatory to a shift in personality and premises. As a retrospective examination of today's events till now. One passport in the style of Mr Magnus Richard Pym, colour of eyes green, hair light brown, member of Her Majesty's Foreign Service, born far too long ago. There was always something rather shocking after a lifetime of symbols and codenames, about seeing his own name, naked and undisguised, splurged over a travel document. One calfskin wallet, a Christmas present from Mary. In the left side credit cards, in the right two thousand Austrian schillings and three hundred English pounds in various and elderly notes, his escape money cautiously assembled, more available in the desk. The Metro car keys. She's got the other set. Photo of family on Lesbos,

everybody absolutely fine. Scribbled address of girl he had met somewhere and forgotten. He put the wallet aside and, continuing with his inventory, drew from the same pocket one green airport boarding card still valid for last night's British Airways flight to Vienna. The sight and touch of it intrigued him. This was when Pym voted with his feet, he thought. In all his life till now, perhaps the first completely selfish gesture he had made, with the noble exception of the room where he now sat. The first time he had said 'I want' rather than 'I ought'.

At the cremation in a silent suburb he had had a suspicion that the tiny number of mourners was unnaturally inflated by somebody's watchers. There was nothing he could prove. He could hardly as chief mourner stand at the door of the chapel challenging each of his nine guests to state his business. And it was true that Rick's erratic path through life had attracted a host of people Pym had never set eyes on and never wished to. All the same the suspicion remained with him and grew as he drove to London Airport, and became a near certainty when he returned his car to the hire company, where two grey men were taking much too long to fill in their contract forms. Undeterred, he checked his suitcase to Vienna and with this very boarding card in his hand passed through immigration and sat himself in the insanitary lounge behind his *Times*. When his flight was delayed he almost concealed his irritation, but still contrived to let it show. When it was called he hurried obediently forward to join the straggling crowd on its walk to the departure gate, the very picture of a dutiful conformer. As he did so he could almost feel, if he could not see, the two men peel away for tea and ping-pong back at base: let the Vienna bastards have him and good riddance, they were saying to each other. He turned a corner and advanced towards a moving walkway but did not board it. Instead he ambled,

peering behind him as if in search of a delayed companion, then imperceptibly allowed himself to be borne backward by the opposing flow of passengers. Moments later he was showing his passport at the arrivals desk and receiving the quiet 'Welcome home, sir' that is reserved for those with certain serial numbers. As a last and spontaneous precaution he had taken himself to the domestic airlines counter and enquired in a loose and general way that was calculated to annoy the busier clerk about flights to Scotland. Not Glasgow, thank you, just Edinburgh. Well hang on, you'd better give me Glasgow as well. Ah, a printed timetable, fantastic. Look, thank you *very* much. And you can issue me with a ticket if I buy one? Oh I see. Over there. Great.

Pym tore the boarding card into small pieces and put them in the ashtray. How much did I plan, how much was spontaneous? It scarcely mattered. I am here to act, not brood. One coach ticket, Heathrow–Reading. It had rained on the journey. One single rail ticket Reading–London, unused, bought to deceive. One night-sleeper ticket, Reading–Exeter, issued on board the train. He had worn a beret and kept his face in shadow while buying it from the drunk attendant. Tearing these also into small pieces, Pym added them to the pile in the ashtray, and whether out of habit or for some more aggressive reason, set a match to them and gazed into the flames with an unblinking fixity. He'd half a mind to burn his passport too, but a residual squeamishness restrained him, which he found quaint about himself and rather endearing. I planned it to the last detail – I who have never taken a conscious decision in my life. I planned it on the day I joined the Firm in a part of my head I never knew about until Rick died. I planned everything except Miss Dubber's cruise.

The flames dwindled, he broke up the ash, took off his coat

and hung it over the back of the chair. From a chest of drawers he hauled an old cardigan, hand-knitted by Miss Dubber, and put it on.

I'll talk to her about it again, he thought. I'll think of something she'd like more. I'll pick my moment better. The important thing for her is to have a change of scene, he thought. Somewhere she doesn't have to worry.

Suddenly needing an activity, he switched out the lights, slipped quickly to the window, opened the curtains and set to work checking out the little square, life by life and window by window as the morning woke it, while he searched for tell-tale signs of watchers. In her kitchen, the wife of the Baptist minister, wearing her lovat dressing gown, is unpegging her son's football gear from the washing line in preparation for today's match. Pym draws back swiftly. He has caught a glint of steel in the manse gateway, but it is only the minister's bicycle still chained to the trunk of a monkey-puzzle tree as a precaution against unchristian covetousness. In the frosted bathroom window of Sea View a woman in a grey slip is stooped over a handbasin soaping her hair. Celia Venn, the doctor's daughter who wants to paint the sea, is evidently expecting company today. Next door to her at number eight Mr Barlow the builder and his wife are watching breakfast television. Pym's eye passes methodically on, until a parked van holds his attention. The passenger door opens, a girlish figure flits stealthily through the central gardens and vanishes into number twenty-eight. Ella, the daughter of the undertaker, is discovering life.

Pym closed the curtains and put the lights back on. I will make my own daytime and my own night. The briefcase stood where he had left it, strangely rigid from its steel lining. Everybody carried cases, he remembered, as he stared at it.

Rick's was pigskin, Lippsie's was cardboard, Poppy's was a scruffy grey thing with marks printed on it to look like hide. And Jack – dear Jack – you have your marvellous old attaché case, faithful as the dog you had to shoot.

Some people, you see, Tom, they leave their bodies to a teaching hospital. The hands go to this class, the heart to that one, the eyes to another, everyone gets something, everyone is grateful. Your father, however, has only his secrets. They're his provenance and his curse.

With a bump, Pym sat down at the desk.

To tell it straight, he rehearsed. Word for word the truth. No evasions, no fictions, no devices. Just my over-promised self set free.

To tell it to no one in particular, and to everyone. To tell it to all of you who own me, to whom I have given myself with such unthinking liberality. To my handlers and paymasters. To Mary and all the other Marys. To anyone who had a piece of me, was promised more and duly disappointed. And to whatever of myself remained after the great Pym share-out.

To all my creditors and co-owners incorporated, here once and for all the settlement of arrears that Rick so often dreamed of and that shall now be achieved in his only acknowledged son. Whoever Pym was to you, whoever you are or were, here is the last of many versions of the Pym you thought you knew.

Pym took a deep breath and puffed it out again.

You do it once. Once in your life and that's it. No rewrites, no polishing, no evasions. No would-it-be-better-this-ways. You're the male bee. You do it once, and die.

He took up a pen, then a single sheet of paper. He scribbled some lines, whatever came into his head. All work and no play

John le Carré

makes Jack a dull spy. Poppy, Poppy, on the wall. Miss Dubber must a-cruising go. Eat good bread, poor Rickie's dead. Rickie-Tickie father. His hand ran smoothly, not a crossing out. Sometimes, Tom, we have to do a thing in order to find out the reason for it. Sometimes our actions are questions, not answers.

A black and gusty day then, Tom, as sabbaths in these parts mostly are. I saw a crop of them as a child and I don't remember a sunny one. I hardly remember outdoors at all except when I was hurried through it like a child criminal on my way to church. But I am running ahead already, for Pym on this particular day was not yet born. The time is all your father's life ago plus half a dozen months, the place a seaboard town not far from this one with more of a slope to it and a thicker tower – but this one will do quite as well. A swirling, sopping doom-laden midmorning, take my word for it, and myself, as I say, an unborn ghost, not ordered, not delivered and certainly not paid for: myself a deaf microphone, planted but inactive in any but the biological meaning. Old leaves, old pine needles and old confetti stick to the wet church steps as the humble flow of worshippers files in for its weekly dose of perdition or salvation, though I never saw that much to choose between the two of them. And myself a mute and foetal spy, unconsciously fulfilling his first mission in a place normally devoid of targets.

Except that today something is up. There's a buzz around, and its name is Rick. There's a spark of mischief to their piety today they can't keep dim and it comes from inside themselves, from the smouldering centre of their dark little sphere,

and Rick is its owner and its origin and its instigator. You can read it everywhere: in the portentous, rolling tread of the brown-suited deacon, in the fluttering and exhaling of the hatted women who arrive in a rush imagining they are late, then sit blushing through their white face-powder because they are early. Everyone agog, everyone on tiptoe and a first-class turnout, as Rick would have remarked proudly, and probably he did, for he loved a full house whatever happened, never mind it was his own hanging. A few of them have come by car – such wonders of the day as Lanchesters and Singers – others by trolleybus, and some have walked; and God's sea rain has given them beards of cold inside their cheap fox stoles, and God's sea wind is cutting through the threadbare serge of their Sunday best. Yet there is not one of them, however he has come, who does not brave the weather a second longer to pause and goggle at the notice-board and confirm with his own eyes what the bush telegraph has been telling him these several days. Two posters are fixed to it, both smeared by rain, both to the passer-by as dreary as cups of cold tea. Yet to those who know the code they transmit an electrifying signal. The first in orange proclaims the five-thousand-pound appeal mounted by the Baptist Women's League to provide a reading room – though all of them know that no book will ever be read in it, that it will be a place to set out home-made cakes and photographs of leprous children in the Congo. A plywood thermometer, designed by Rick's best craftsmen, is fastened to the railings revealing that the first thousand has already been achieved. The second notice, green, declares that today's address will be given by the Minister, all welcome. But this information has been corrected. A rigid bulletin has been pinned over it, typed in full like a legal warning, with the comically misplaced capital letters that in these parts signal omens:

Due to unforeseen Circumstances, Sir Makepeace Watermaster, Justice of the Peace and Liberal Member of Parliament for this Constituency, will provide today's Message. Appeal Committee please to Remain behind Afterwards for an Extraordinary meeting.

Makepeace Watermaster himself! And they know why!

Elsewhere in the world, Hitler is winding himself up to set fire to the universe, in America and Europe the miseries of the Depression are spreading like an incurable plague, and Jack Brotherhood's forebears are abetting them or not according to whatever spurious doctrine-of-the-day prevails in the deniable corridors of Whitehall. But the congregation doesn't presume to hold opinions on these impenetrable aspects of God's purpose. Theirs is the dissenting church and their temporal overlord is Sir Makepeace Watermaster, the greatest preacher and Liberal ever born, and one of the Highest in the Land, who gave them this very building out of his own purse. He didn't, of course. His father Goodman gave it to them, but Makepeace, having succeeded to the fiefdom, has a way of forgetting that his father existed. Old Goodman was a Welshman, a preaching, singing, widowed, miserable potteryman with two children twenty-five years apart of whom Makepeace is the elder. Goodman came here, sampled the clay, sniffed the sea air and built a pottery. A couple of years later he built two more and imported cheap migrant labour to man them, first Low Welsh like himself and afterwards, and cheaper still and lower, the persecuted Irish. Goodman lured them with his tied cottages, starved them with his rotten wages and beat the fear of Hell into them from his pulpit before himself being taken off to Paradise, witness the unassuming monument to him six thousand feet high which stood in the pottery forecourt until

a few years ago when the whole lot was ripped down to make way for a bungalow estate and good riddance.

And today *due to unforeseen Circumstances* that same Makepeace, Goodman's only son, is coming down from his mountain-top – though the circumstances have been foreseen by everyone except himself, the circumstances are as palpable as the pews we wait in, as immovable as the Watermaster tiles the pews are bolted to, as fateful as the rasping clock that wheezes and whistles between every chime like a dying sow fighting off the awful end. Picture the gloom of it – how it stultified its young and dragged them down, its prohibition of everything exciting that they cared about: from Sunday newspapers to Popery, from psychology to art, from flimsy underwear to high spirits to low spirits, from love to laughter and back again, I don't think there was a corner of the human state where their disapproval did not fall. Because if you don't understand the gloom of it, you'll not understand the world that Rick was running away from or the world he was running towards, or the twisting relish that buzzes and tickles like a flea in every humble breast this dark sabbath as the last chimes merge with the drumming of the rain and the first great trial of young Rick's life begins. 'Rick Pym's for the high jump at last,' says the word. And what more awesome executioner than Makepeace himself, Highest in the Land, Justice of the Peace and Liberal Member of Parliament, to adjust the noose around his neck?

With the last chime of all, the strains of the voluntary die also. The congregation holds its breath and starts counting to a hundred while it seeks out its favourite actors. The two Watermaster women have arrived early. They sit shoulder to shoulder in the pew for notables directly beneath the pulpit. On almost any other Sunday, Makepeace would have been roosting there

between them, all six-foot-six of him, his long head cocked to one side while he listened to the voluntary with his moist little rosebud ears. But not today because today is extra, today Makepeace is in the wings conferring with our Minister and certain worried trustees from the Appeal Committee.

Makepeace's wife, known as Lady Nell, is not yet fifty but already she is hunched and shrivelled like a witch, with a habit of flicking her greying head without warning as if she were shaking off flies. And next to her – a tiny, earnest statue beside Nell's pecking and stupidity – perches Dorothy, rightly called Dot, an immaculate speck of a lady, young enough to be Nell's daughter instead of Makepeace's sister – and she is praying, praying to her Maker, she is pushing her tiny scrumpled fists into her eyes while she pledges her life and death to Him if only He will hear her and make it right. Baptists do not kneel before God, Tom. They squat. But my Dorothy would have stretched herself flat on the Watermaster tiles and kissed the Pope's big toe that day, if God would have let her off the hook.

I have one photograph of her and there have been times – though no longer, I swear it, she is dead for me – when I would have given my soul for just one more. I found it in an old scuffed Bible when I was Tom's age, in a suburban mansion we were hastily vacating. 'To Dorothy with all my special love, Makepeace', runs the inscription on the inside page. One in all the world. One spotted sepia brown photograph is all, taken like a pause in flight as she steps down from the taxi, licence number not in frame, clutching a home-made posy of small flowers that could be wild, and her big eyes have too much behind them for our comfort. Is she on her way to a wedding? To her own? Is she calling on a sick relative – on Nell? Where is she? Where is she escaping to this time? She has the flowers to her chin and her

elbows pressed together. Her forearms form a vertical line from waist to neck. Long sleeves nipped at the wrist. Muslin gloves, therefore no rings visible, though I have a suspicion of a bulge in the third joint of the third finger of the left hand. A cloche bonnet covers her hair and throws a shadow like a mask across the scaring eyes. Shoulders on a slant, as if she is on the point of losing her balance, and one tiny foot tipped sideways to prevent her. Her pale stockings have the zigzag sheen of silk, her shoes are of patent leather, pointed, buttoned. And somehow I know they pinch her, that they were bought against the clock like the rest of her outfit, in a shop where she is not known and does not wish to be. Her lower face pale as a plant grown in the dark – think of *The Glades*, the house she was brought up in! An only child, as I was, you can see it at a glance – never mind she has a brother twenty-five years ahead of her.

Shall I tell you what I found once, in the summerhouse in the Watermasters' great dark orchard, where I myself, a child like her, was wandering? The colouring book she had won at Bible class, *The Life of Our Saviour in Pictures*. And do you know what my darling Dot had done with it? Scored out every saintly face with savage crayoning. I was shocked at first, until I understood. Those faces were the dreaded ones from the real world she had no part of. They enjoyed all the companionship and kindly smiles she never had. So she coloured them out. Not in rage. Not in hate. Not even in envy. But because their ease of living was beyond her grasp. Look again at the photograph. The jaw. The stern unsmiling jaw locking out expression. The little mouth clamped shut and downward to keep its secrets safe. That face cannot discard a single bad memory or experience, because it has nobody to share them with. It is condemned to store every one of them away until the day when it will break from overloading.

Enough. I'm running out ahead. Dot, a.k.a. Dorothy, family name Watermaster. No connection with any other firm. An abstraction. Mine. An unreal, empty woman permanently in flight. If she had had her back to me and not her face, I could not have known her less or loved her more.

And behind the Watermaster women, far behind, by chance as far as the great long aisle allows, at the very back of the church, in their chosen pew directly beside the closed doors, sits the flower of our young men, their neckties pulled up and outward from their stiff collars, their slicked hair parted in a razor slash. These are the Night School Boys, as they are affectionately known, our Tabernacle's apostles of tomorrow, our white hopes, our future ministers of religion, our doctors, missionaries and philanthropists, our future Highest in the Land, who will one day go out into the world and Save it as it has never been Saved before. It is they who by their zeal have acquired the duties customarily entrusted to older men: the distributing of hymn books and special notices, the taking of collection money and the hanging up of overcoats. It is they who once a week, by bicycle, motorcycle and kindly parents' motorcars, distribute our church magazine to every god-fearing front door, including that of Sir Makepeace Watermaster himself, whose cook has standing orders that a piece of cake and a glass of lemon barley be always waiting for the bringer; they who collect the few shillings of rent from the church's poor cottages, who pilot the pleasure boats on Brinkley Mere at children's outings, host the Band of Hope's Christmas bunfights and put fire into Christian Endeavour action week. And it is they who have taken upon themselves as a direct commission from Jesus the burden of the Women's League Appeal, target five thousand pounds, at a time when

two hundred would maintain a family for a year. Not a door bell they have not pressed along their pilgrimage. Not a window they have not offered to clean, flowerbed to weed and dig for Jesus. Day after day the young troops have marched out, to return, reeking of peppermint, long after their parents are asleep. Sir Makepeace has sung their praises, so has our Minister. No sabbath is complete without a reminder to Our Father regarding their devotion. And bravely the red line on the plywood thermometer at the church gates has climbed through the fifties, the hundreds to the first thousand, where for a while now, for all their efforts, it has seemed to stick. Not that they have lost momentum, far from it. Failure is not in their thoughts. No need for Makepeace Watermaster to remind them of Bruce's spider, though he often does. The Night School Boys are 'crackerjack', as our saying goes. The Night School Boys are Christ's own vanguard and they will be the Highest in the Land.

There are five of them and at their centre sits Rick, their founder, manager, guiding spirit and treasurer, still dreaming of his first Bentley. Rick, full names Richard Thomas after his dear old father, the beloved TP, who fought in the Great War trenches before he became our mayor, and passed away these seven years ago, though it seems like only yesterday, and what a preacher *he* was before his Maker took him back! Rick, your grandfather without portfolio, Tom, because I would never let you meet him.

I have two versions of Makepeace's Message, both incomplete, both shorn of time or place or origin: yellowed press-cuttings, hacked apparently with nail-scissors from the ecclesiastical pages of the local press, which in those days reported our preachers' doings as loyally as if they were our footballers. I

found them in Dorothy's same Bible with her photograph. Makepeace accused nobody outright, Makepeace framed no charge. This is the land of innuendo; straight speaking is for sinners. 'MP sounds Stern Warning against Youthful Covetousness, Greed,' sings the first. 'Perils of young Ambition splendidly Highlighted.' In Makepeace's imposing person, the anonymous writer declares, 'are met the poet's Celtic grace, the Statesman's eloquence, the lawgiver's Iron sense of Justice'. The congregation was 'spellbound unto the Meekest of its Members' – and none more so than Rick himself, who sits in an enraptured trance, nodding his broad head to the cadences of Makepeace's rhetoric, even though every Welsh note of it – to the excited ears and eyes of those around him – is hurled at Rick personally down the length of the aisle, and rammed home with a botched stab of the lugubrious Watermaster forefinger.

The second version takes a less apocalyptic tone. The Highest in the Land was not ranting against youth's sinfulness, far from it. He was offering succour to the youthful falterer. He was extolling youth's ideals, likening them to stars. To believe this second version, you would suppose Makepeace had gone star crazy. He couldn't get away from the things, nor could the writer. Stars as our destiny. Stars that guide Wise Men across deserts to the very Cradle of Truth. Stars to lighten the darkness of our despair, yea even in the pit of sin. Stars of every shape, for every occasion. Shining above us like God's very light. The writer must have been Makepeace Watermaster's property, body and soul, if it wasn't Makepeace himself. Nobody else could have sweetened that awesome, forbidding apparition in the pulpit.

Though my eyes were not yet open on this day, I see him as clearly as I saw him later in the flesh and shall see him

always: tall as one of his own factory chimneys and as tapered. Rubbery, with weak pinched shoulders and a wide bendy waist. One jointless arm tipped out at us like a railway signal, one baggy hand flapping on the end of it. And the wet, elastic little mouth that should have been a woman's, too small even to feed him by, stretching and contracting as it labours to deliver the indignant vowels. And when at long, long last, enough awesome warnings have been uttered, and the penalties of sin outlined in sufficient detail, I see him brace himself and lean back and moisten his lips for the kiss-off, which we children have been begging for these forty minutes while we crossed our legs and died for a pee however often we had peed before we left home. One cutting gives this final preposterous passage in full, and I will give it again now – their text, not mine – though no Watermaster sermon I ever heard later was complete without it, though the words became part of Rick's very nature, and remained with him all his life and consequently mine, and I would be amazed if they did not ring in his ears as he died, and accompany him as he strode towards his Maker, two pals reunited at last:

'Ideals, my young brethren!' – I see Makepeace pause here, shoot another glare at Rick and start again – 'Ideals, my beloved brethren all, are to be likened unto those splendid stars above us' – I see him lift his sad, starless eyes to the pine roof – 'we cannot reach them. Millions of miles separate us from them' – I see him hold out his drooping arms as if to catch a falling sinner – 'But oh my brethren, how greatly do we profit from their presence!'

Remember them, Tom. Jack, you'll think I'm mad, but those stars, however fatuous, are a crucial piece of operational intelligence, for they lend a first image to Rick's unquenchable conviction of his destiny, and it didn't stop with Rick either;

how could it, for what is a prophet's son but himself a prophecy, even if nobody on God's earth ever discovers what either one of them is prophesying? Makepeace, like all great preachers, must do without a final curtain or applause. Nevertheless, quite audibly in the silence – I have witnesses who swear to it – Rick is heard to whisper 'beautiful' twice over. Makepeace Watermaster hears it too – slurs his big feet and pauses on the pulpit steps, blinking round him as if somebody has called him a rude name. Makepeace sits down, the organ strikes up 'What purpose burns within our hearts.' Makepeace stands again, unsure where to put his ridiculously tiny backside. The hymn is sung to its dreary end. The Night School Boys, with Rick star-struck at their centre, process down the aisle and in a practised drill movement fan out to their appointed posts. Rick, smart as paint today and every Sunday, proffers the collecting plate to the Watermaster ladies, his blue eyes glistening with divine intelligence. How much will they give? How quickly? The silence lends tension to these massive questions. First comes Lady Nell, who keeps him waiting while she pecks in her handbag and curses, but Rick is all forbearance, all love, all stars today, and each lady regardless of age or beauty receives the benefit of his thrilled and saintly smile. But where daft Nell simpers at him and tries to muss his slicked hair and pull it forward over his broad, Christian brow, my little Dot is looking nowhere but at the ground, still praying, praying even while she stands, and Rick has actually to touch her forearm with his finger in order to alert her to his godlike nearness. I can feel his touch now upon my own arm and it sends a healer's charge through me of weak-kneed loathing and devotion. The Boys line up before the Lord's Table, the Minister accepts the offerings, says a perfunctory blessing, then orders everyone but the Appeal Committee to leave at once and quietly. The unforeseen Circumstances are

about to begin, and with them the first great trial of Richard T. Pym – the first of many, it is true, but this is the one that really whetted his appetite for Judgment.

I have seen him a hundred times as he stood that morning. Rick alone, brooding at the doorway of a crowded room. Rick, his father's son, the glory of a great heritage creasing on his brow. Rick waiting, like Napoleon before the battle, for Destiny to sound the trumpets for his assault. He never made a lazy entrance in his life, he never fluffed his timing or his impact. Whatever you had in mind till then, you could forget it: the topic of the day had just walked in. So it is in the Tabernacle on this rainy sabbath, while God's wind booms in the pine rafters high above and the disconsolate huddle of humanity in the front pews waits awkwardly for Rick. But stars, we know, are like ideals and elusive. Heads begin to crane, chairs creak. Still no Rick. The Night School Boys, already in the dock, moisten their lips, tip nervously at their ties. Rickie's done a bunk. Rickie can't face the music. A deacon in his brown suit hobbles with an artisan's mysterious discomfort towards the vestry where Rick may have hidden. Then a thump. Round whips every head to the sound, till they stare straight back down the aisle at the great west door, which has been opened from outside by a mysterious hand. Silhouetted against the grey sea clouds of adversity, Rick T. Pym, until now David Livingstone's natural heir if ever we knew one, gravely bows to his judges and his Maker, closes the great door behind him and all but vanishes once more against its blackness.

'Message from old Mrs Harmann for you, Mr Philpott.' Philpott being the name of the Minister. The voice being Rick's and everyone as usual remarking its beauty, rallying to it, loving it, scared and drawn by its unflinching self-assurance.

‘Oh yes, then?’ says Philpott, very alarmed to be addressed so calmly from so far away. Philpott is a Welshman too.

‘She’d be glad of a lift to Exeter General to see her husband before his operation tomorrow, Mr Philpott,’ says Rick with just the tiniest note of a reproach. ‘She doesn’t seem to think he’ll pull through. If it’s any bother to you I’m sure one of us can take care of her, can’t we, Syd?’

Syd Lemon is a cockney whose father not long ago came south for his arthritis and in Syd’s view will shortly die of boredom instead. Syd is Rick’s best-loved lieutenant, a small, punchy fighter with the townie’s nimbleness and twinkle, and Syd is Syd for ever to me, even now, and the nearest I ever came to a confessor, excluding Poppy.

‘Sit with her all night if we have to,’ Syd affirms with strenuous rectitude. ‘All next day too, won’t we, Rickie?’

‘Be quiet,’ Makepeace Watermaster growls. But not to Rick, who is bolting the church doors from the inside. We can just make him out among the lights and darks of the porch. *Clang* goes the first bolt, high up, he has to reach for it. *Clang* the second, low down as he stoops to it. Finally, to the visible relief of the susceptible, he consents to embark on his forward journey to the scaffold. For by now the weaker of us are dependent on him. By now in our hearts we are begging a smile from him, the son of old TP, sending him messages assuring him that there is nothing personal, enquiring of him after the dear lady his poor mother – for the dear lady, as everybody knows, does not feel sufficiently herself today and nobody can budge her. She sits with a widow’s majesty at home in Airdale Road behind drawn curtains under the tinted giant photograph of TP in his mayoral regalia, weeping and praying one minute to have her late husband given back to her, the next to have him stay put exactly where he is and be spared the disgrace,

and the next rooting for Rick like the old punter she secretly is – ‘Hand it to them, son. Fight them down before they do the same to you, same as your dad did and better.’ By now the less worldly officers of our improvised tribunal have been converted if not actually corrupted to Rick’s side. And as if to undermine their authority still further, Welsh Philpott in his innocence has made the error of placing Rick beside the pulpit in the very spot from which in the past he has read us the day’s lesson with such brio and persuasion. Worse still, Welsh Philpott ushers Rick to this position and twitches the chair for Rick to sit on. But Rick is not so biddable. He remains standing, one hand rested comfortably on the chair’s back as if he has decided to adopt it. Meanwhile he engages Mr Philpott in a few more easy words of talk.

‘I see Arsenal came a cropper Saturday, then,’ says Rick. Arsenal, in better times, being Mr Philpott’s second greatest love, as it was TP’s.

‘Never mind that now, Rick,’ says Mr Philpott, all of a flurry. ‘We’ve business to discuss, as well you know.’

Looking poorly, the Minister takes his place beside Makepeace Watermaster. But Rick’s purpose is achieved. He has made a bond where Philpott wanted none, he has presented us with a feeling man instead of a villain. In recognition of his achievement Rick smiles. On all of us at once: grand of you to be among us here today. His smile sweeps over us; it is not impertinent, it is impressive in its compassion for the forces of human fallibility that have brought us to this unhappy pass. Only Sir Makepeace himself and Perce Loft the great solicitor from Dawlish, known as Perce the Writ, who sits beside him with the papers, preserve their granite disapproval. But Rick is not awed by them. Not by Makepeace and certainly not by Perce, with whom Rick has formed a fine relationship in recent

months, based it is said on mutual respect and understanding. Perce wants Rick to read for the bar. Rick is bent upon it but meanwhile wants Perce to advise him on certain business transactions he is contemplating. Perce, ever an altruist, is supplying his services free.

‘That was a wonderful message you gave us, Sir Makepeace,’ says Rick. ‘I never heard better. Those words of yours will ring inside my head like the bells of Heaven for as long as I’m spared, sir. Hullo, Mr Loft.’

Perce Loft is too official to reply. Sir Makepeace has had flattery before and receives it as no more than his due.

‘Sit down,’ says our Liberal Member of Parliament for this Constituency and Justice of the Peace.

Rick obeys at once. Rick is no enemy of authority. To the contrary he is a man of authority himself, as we waverers already know, a power and a justice in one.

‘Where’s the Appeal money gone?’ Makepeace Watermaster demands without delay. ‘There was close on four hundred pounds donated last month alone. Three hundred the month before, three hundred in August. Your accounts for the same period show one hundred and twelve pounds received. Nothing put by and no cash in hand. What have you done with it, boy?’

‘Bought a motorcoach,’ says Rick, and Syd – to use his own words – seated in the dock with all the rest of them, has a hard time not corpsing.

Rick spoke for twelve minutes by Syd’s dad’s watch and when he’d done only Makepeace Watermaster stood between him and victory, Syd is sure of it: ‘The Minister, he was won over before your dad ever opened his mouth, Titch. Well he had to be, he gave TP his first pulpit. Old Perce Loft – well, Perce had

fish to fry by then, didn't he? Rick had stitched him up. The rest of them, they was going up and down like a tart's knickers from waiting to see which way The Lord High Makewater's going to jump.'

First of all, Rick magnanimously claims full responsibility for everything. Blame, says Rick, if blame there be, should be laid squarely at his own door. Stars and ideals are nothing to the metaphors he flings at us: 'If a finger is to be pointed, point it here.' A stab at his own breast. 'If a price is to be paid, here's the address. Here I am. Send me the bill. And leave them to learn by his mistakes who got them into this, if such there have been,' he challenges them, beating the English language into submission with the blade of his plump hand by way of an example. Women admired those hands till the end of Rick's days. They drew conclusions from the girth of his fingers, which never parted when he made a gesture.

'Where did he get his rhetoric from?' I once asked Syd reverently, enjoying what he and Meg called a small wet at their fireside in Surbiton. 'Who were his models, apart from Makepeace?'

'Lloyd George, Hartley Shawcross, Avory, Marshall Hall, Norman Birkett and other great advocates of his day,' replied Syd promptly, as if they were the runners and starters for the two-thirty at Newmarket. 'Your dad had more respect for the law than any man I ever knew, Titch. Studied their speeches, followed their form better than what he did the geegees. He'd have been a top judge if TP had given him the opportunities, wouldn't he, Meg?'

'He'd have been Prime Minister,' Meg affirms devoutly. 'Who else was there but him and Winston?'

Rick next passes to his Theory of Property which I have since heard him expound many times in many different ways

but I believe this was its unveiling. The burden is that any money passing through Rick's hands is subject to a redefinition of the laws of property, since whatever he does with it will improve mankind, whose principal representative he is. Rick, in a word, is not a taker but a giver and those who call him otherwise lack faith. The final challenge comes in a mounting bombardment of passionate, grammatically unnerving pseudo-Biblical phrases. 'And if any one of you here present today – can find evidence of a single advantage – one single benefit – be it in the past, be it stored away for the future – directly or indirectly from this enterprise – which I have derived – ambitious though it may have been, make no two ways about it – let him come forward now, with a clear heart – and point the finger where it belongs.'

From there it is but a step to that sublime vision of the Pym & Salvation Coach Company Ltd., which will bring profit to piety and worshippers to our beloved Tabernacle.

The magic box is unlocked. Flinging back the lid Rick displays a dazzling confusion of promises and statistics. The present bus fare from Farleigh Abbott to our Tabernacle is twopence. The trolleybus from Tambercombe costs threepence, four-up in a cab from either spot costs sixpence, a Granville Hastings motorcoach costs nine hundred and eight pounds discounted for cash, and seats thirty-two fully loaded, eight standing. On the sabbath alone – my assistants here have made a most thorough survey, gentlemen – more than six hundred people travel an aggregate of over four thousand miles to worship at this fine Tabernacle. Because they love the place. As Rick does. As we all do, every man and woman here present – let's make no bones about it. Because they want to feel *drawn from the circumference to the centre*, in the spirit of their faith. This last is one of Makepeace Watermaster's own

expressions and Syd says it was a bit cheeky of Rick to throw it back in his face. On three other days in the week, gentlemen – Band of Hope, Christian Endeavour and Women’s League Bible Group – another seven hundred miles are travelled leaving three days clear for normal commercial operation, and if you don’t believe me watch my forearm as it beats the doubters from my path in a series of convulsive elbow blows, the cupped fingers never parting. From such figures it is suddenly clear there can be only one conclusion:

‘Gentlemen, if we charge *half* the standard fare *and* give a free ticket to every disabled and elderly person, to every child under the age of eight – with full insurance – observing all the fine regulations which rightly apply to the operation of commercial transport carriages in this increasingly hectic age of ours – with fully professional drivers with every awareness of their responsibilities, god-fearing men recruited from our own number – allowing for depreciation, garaging, maintenance, fuel, ticketing and sundries, and assuming a fifty per cent capacity on the three days of commercial operation – there’s a forty per cent clear profit for the Appeal and room left over to see everybody right.’

Makepeace Watermaster is asking questions. The others are either too full or too empty to speak at all.

‘And you’ve bought it?’ says Makepeace.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’re not of age, half of you.’

‘We used an intermediary, sir. A fine lawyer of this district who in his modesty wishes to remain anonymous.’

Rick’s reply draws a rare smile from the improbably tiny lips of Sir Makepeace Watermaster. ‘I never knew a lawyer yet who wished to remain anonymous,’ he says.

Perce Loft frowns distractedly at the wall.

‘So where is it now?’ Sir Makepeace continues.

‘What, sir?’

‘The coach, boy.’

‘They’re painting it,’ says Rick. ‘Green with gold lettering.’

‘With whose permission, at any stage, have you embarked on this project?’ asks Watermaster.

‘We’re asking Miss Dorothy to cut the tape, Sir Makepeace. We’ve drafted the invite already.’

‘Who gave you permission? Did Mr Philpott here? Did the deacons? Did the committee? Did I? To spend nine hundred and eight pounds of Appeal funds, widows’ mites, on a motorcoach?’

‘We wanted the element of surprise, Sir Makepeace. We wanted to sweep the board with them. Once you spread the word beforehand, talk it round town, you take the air out of it. PSC is going to be sprung upon an unsuspecting world.’

Makepeace now enters what Syd calls the dicey part.

‘Where are the books?’

‘Books, sir? There’s only one book *I* know of –’

‘Your files, boy. Your figures. You alone kept the accounts, we heard.’

‘Give me a week, Sir Makepeace, I’ll account for every penny.’

‘That’s not keeping accounts. That’s fudging them. Did you learn nothing at all from your father, boy?’

‘Rectitude, sir. Humbleness before Jesus.’

‘How much have you spent?’

‘Not spent, sir. Invested.’

‘How much?’

‘Fifteen hundred. Rounded up.’

‘Where’s the coach at present?’

‘I said, sir. Being painted.’

'Where?'

'Balham's of Brinkley. Coachbuilders. Some of the finest Liberals in the county. Christians to a man.'

'I know Balham's. TP sold timber to Balham's for ten years.'

'They're charging cost.'

'You propose to ply for trade in public, you say?'

'Three days a week, sir.'

'Using the public coach stages?'

'Certainly.'

'Are you familiar with the likely attitude to be taken by the Dawlish & Tambercombe Transport Corporation of Devon to this venture?'

'A popular demand like this – those boys can't block it, Sir Makepeace. We've got God driving for us. Once they see the groundswell, feel the pulse, they'll back away and give us our heads all the way to the top. They can't stop progress, Sir Makepeace, and they can't stop the march of Christian people.'

'Can't they,' says Sir Makepeace, and scribbles figures on a piece of paper in front of him. 'There's eight hundred and fifty pounds in rent money missing as well,' he remarks as he writes.

'We invested the rent money too, sir.'

'That's more than the fifteen hundred then.'

'Call it two thousand. Rounded up. I thought you only meant the Appeal money.'

'What about the collection money?'

'Some of it.'

'Counting all monies from any source what's the total capital? Rounded up.'

'Including private investors, Sir Makepeace –'

Watermaster sat up straight: 'So we've private investors too, have we? My gracious, boy, you've been going it a bit. Who are they?'

'Private clients.'

'Of whom?'

Perce Loft looks as though he is about to fall asleep out of sheer boredom. His eyelids are two inches long, his goatish head has slipped forward on his neck.

'Sir Makepeace, I am not at liberty to reveal this. When PSC promises confidentiality, that's what she delivers. Our watchword is integrity.'

'Has the company been incorporated?'

'No, sir.'

'Why not?'

'Security, sir. Keep it under wraps. Like I said.'

Makepeace begins jotting again. Everybody waits for more questions. None come. An uncomfortable air of completeness settles over Makepeace, and Rick senses it faster than anybody. 'It was like being up the old doctor's, Titch,' Syd told me, 'when he's made up his mind what you're dying of, only he's got to write out this prescription before he gives you the good news.'

Rick speaks again. Unprompted. It was the voice he used when he was cornered. Syd heard it then, I heard it later only twice. It was not a pretty tone at all.

'I could bring those accounts up to you this evening, as a matter of fact, Sir Makepeace. They're in safekeeping, you see. I'll have to get them out.'

'Give them to the police,' says Makepeace, still writing. 'We're not detectives here, we're churchmen.'

'Miss Dorothy might think a bit different, though, mightn't she, Sir Makepeace?'

'Miss Dorothy has nothing to do with this.'

'Ask her.'

Then Makepeace stops writing and his head comes up a

bit sharpish, says Syd, and they look at each other, Makepeace with his little baby eyes uncertain. And Rickie, suddenly his gaze has the glint of a flick-knife in the dark. Syd does not go as far as I shall in describing that stare because Syd won't touch the black side of his lifelong hero. But I will. It looks out of him like a child through the eyeholes of a mask. It denies everything it stood for not a half second earlier. It is pagan. It is amoral. It regrets your decision and your mortality. But it has no choice.

'Are you telling me Miss Dorothy is an investor in this project?' says Makepeace.

'You can invest more than money, Sir Makepeace,' says Rick, from far away but close.

Now the point is, says Syd rather hastily here, Makepeace should never have driven Rick to use that argument. Makepeace was a weak man acting hard and they're the worst, says Syd. If Makepeace had been reasonable, if he'd been a believer like the rest and thought a little better of poor TP's boy instead of lacking faith and undermining everybody else's into the bargain, things could have been settled in a friendly, positive way and everyone could have gone home happy, believing in Rick and his coach the way he needed them to. As it was, Makepeace was the last barrier and he left Rickie no alternative but to knock him down. So Rickie did, didn't he? Well he had to, Titch, it's natural.

I strain and stretch, Tom. I shove with every muscle of my imagination as deep as I dare into the heavy shadows of my own pre-history. I put down my pen and stare at the hideous church tower across the square and I can hear as plain as Miss Dubber's television downstairs the ill-contrasted voices of Rick and Sir Makepeace Watermaster matched against each other. I see

the dark drawing room of The Glades where I was so seldom admitted and I picture the two men closeted together there that evening alone, and my poor Dorothy trembling in our murky upper room reading the same handstitched homilies that now adorn Miss Dubber's landings as she tries to suck comfort from God's flowers, God's love, God's will. And I could tell you, I think near enough to a sentence or two, what passed between them by way of continuing their unfinished chat of that morning.

Rick's spirits are back, because the flick-knife never shows for long and because he has already achieved the object that is more important to him than any other in his human dealings, even if he himself does not yet know it. He has inspired Makepeace to hold two totally divergent opinions of him and perhaps more. He has shown him the official and unofficial versions of his identity. He has taught him to respect Rick in his complexity and to reckon as much with Rick's secret world as with his overt one. It is as if in the privacy of that room each player revealed the many cards, fake or real is of no account, that comprised his hand: and Makepeace was left without a chip in front of him. But the fact is, both men are dead, both took their secret to the grave, Sir Makepeace going ahead by thirty years. And the one person who may still know it cannot speak, because if she exists at all any more, then it is only as a ghost, haunting her own life and mine, killed long ago by the very consequences of the two men's fateful dialogue that evening.

History records two meetings between Rick and my Dorothy before that sabbath. The first when she made a royal visit to the Young Liberals Club of which Rick was at that time an elected officer – I believe, God help them, treasurer. The second when Rick was captain of the Tabernacle's football

team and one Morrie Washington, a Night School Boy and another of Rick's lieutenants, was goalie. Dorothy, as sister of the Sitting Member, was invited to present the cup. Morrie remembers the line-up ceremony, with Dorothy walking along the troops and pinning a medal to each victorious breast, starting with Rick himself as captain. It seems she fumbled the clasp, or that Rick pretended she did. Either way, he let out a playful cry of pain and went down on one knee clutching his bosom and insisting she had pierced him to the heart. It was a bold and rather naughty number and I am surprised he took it so far. Even in burlesque, Rick was normally very protective of his dignity, and at fancy-dress balls, which were the rage until the war came, he preferred to go as Lloyd George rather than risk ridicule. But down he went, Morrie remembered it like yesterday, and Dorothy laughed, a thing nobody had ever seen her do: laugh. What assignations followed we can never know, except that, according to Morrie, Rick did once boast that there was more than cake and lemon barley waiting for him up at The Glades when he delivered the church magazine.

Syd, I think, knows more than Morrie. Syd saw a lot. And people tell him things because he keeps his counsel. Syd, I believe, knows most of the secrets that lurked in the wooded house that Makepeace Watermaster called his home, even if in old age he has done his best to bury them six foot under. He knows why Lady Nell drank and why Makepeace was so ill-at-ease with himself, and why his damp little eyes were so tormented, and his mouth unequal to his appetites, and why he was able to castigate sin with such passionate familiarity. And why he wrote of a special love when he put his wretched name in my Dorothy's Bible. And why it was that Dorothy had taken herself to the furthest corner of the house to sleep, far from Lady Nell's rooms and farther still from Makepeace's.

And why Dorothy was so accessible to the smart-tongued upstart from the football team who spoke as if he could build her a road to anywhere, and drive her there in his coach. But Syd is a good man and a Mason. He loved Rick and gave the best years of his life, now to roistering with him, now to hanging on to his coat-tails. Syd would have a laugh, he would tell a story, provided it hurt nobody too much. But Syd won't touch the black side.

History records also that Rick took no account books to that meeting, though Mr Muspole the great accountant, another Night School Boy, offered to help him write some and probably did. Muspole could invent accounts the way others can write postcards on holiday or rattle off anecdotes into a microphone. And that in order to prepare himself, Rick took a stroll over Brinkley Cliffs, alone, which I believe is the first known walk of this kind, though Rick, like myself after him, was always a one for striding out in search of a decision or a voice. And that he returned from The Glades wearing an air of high office not unlike Makepeace Watermaster's, except that it had more of the natural radiance in it which comes, we are told, of inner cleanliness. The matter of the Appeal had been attended to, he informed his courtiers. The problem of liquidity had been solved, he said. Everybody was going to be seen right. How? they begged him: how, Rickie? But Rick preferred to remain their magician and allowed nobody to look up his sleeve. Because I am blessed. Because I steer events. Because I am destined to become one of the Highest in the Land.

His other good news was not vouchsafed to them. This was a cheque drawn on Watermaster's personal account in the sum of five hundred pounds to set himself up in life – presumably, said Syd, in outer Australia. Rick endorsed it, Syd cashed it, since Rick's own bank account, as so often in later years, was

temporarily indisposed. A few days afterwards, on the strength of this subsidy, Rick presided over a lavish if sombre banquet at the Brinkley Towers Hotel, attended by the entire court as then composed and several local Lovelies who were always an off-screen feature. Syd recalls a mood of historic change pervading the occasion though no one knew precisely what was over or what was about to begin. Speeches were made, mostly on the theme of old pals sticking together, and keeping a straight bat through life, but when Rick's health was drunk he responded with uncharacteristic brevity, and it was whispered that he was in the grip of an emotion, for he was seen to weep, which he did often, even in those days; he could weep buckets, on the drop of a handkerchief. Perce Loft the great lawyer attended the gathering to the surprise of some, and to their greater surprise brought with him a beautiful if incongruous young music student named Lippschitz, first name Annie, who put the other Lovelies in the shade even though she'd hardly a coat to cover her back. They dubbed her Lippsie. She was a refugee from Germany who had come to Perce in some immigration matter, and Perce in his goodness had decided to extend a helping hand to her, much as he had extended one to Rick. To close proceedings Morrie Washington the court jester sang a song, and Lippsie joined the other women in the chorus, though she sang too well and didn't fully appreciate the dirty bits, being foreign. It was by then dawn. A sleek taxi took Rick away and he was not seen in those parts for many years.

History records further that one Richard Thomas Pym, bachelor, and Dorothy Godchild Watermaster, spinster, both very temporarily of this parish, were the next day solemnly and discreetly married in the presence of two co-opted witnesses in a newly opened registry office off the Western by-pass, just where you turned left for Northolt aerodrome. And

that a little boy christened Magnus Richard and weighing in at very few pounds at all was born to them not six months later, whom the Lord protect. The Companies Registry, which I have consulted, also records the event, though in different terms. Within forty-eight hours of the birth, Rick had unveiled the Magnus Star Equitable Insurance Company Ltd., with a share capital of two thousand pounds. Its stated purpose was the Provision of Life Insurance to the Needy, Disabled and Elderly. Its accountant was Mr Muspole, its legal adviser Perce Loft. Morrie Washington was company secretary and the late Alderman Thomas Pym, affectionately known as TP, its patron saint.

‘So was there really a coach then or was it all flannel?’ I asked Syd.

Syd is always cautious in how he replies. ‘Now there *could* have been a coach, Titch. I’m not saying there wasn’t. I’d be a liar if I did. I’m just saying I never heard about a coach till your dad happened to mention it in church that morning. Put it that way.’

‘So what had he done with the money – if there was no coach?’

Syd really doesn’t know. So many thousands of pounds have floated under the bridge since then. So many great visions come and gone. Maybe Rick gave it away, Syd says awkwardly. Your dad couldn’t say no to anyone, specially the Lovelies. Never right with himself unless he was giving. Maybe a con came and took it off him, your dad always loved a con. Then to my amazement Syd blushes. And I hear faintly but clearly from the side of his mouth the ratta-tat-tat he used to make for me when I was a child and wanted him to do the clip of horses’ hoofs.

‘You mean he used the Appeal money to lay bets?’ I ask.

John le Carré

‘Titch, I’m only saying that that coach of his could have been horse-drawn. That’s all I’m saying, isn’t it, Meg?’

Oh but there was a coach all right! And it was not horse-drawn at all. That coach was the most splendid, powerful ever made. The golden lettering of the Pym & Salvation Coach Company shone from its lustrous sides like the illuminated chapter headings of all the Bibles of Rick’s youth. Its green was the racing green of England. Sir Malcolm Campbell himself was going to drive it. The Highest in the Land would ride in it. When the people of our town saw that coach they were going to go down on their knees and put their hands together and thank God and Rick in equal portion for it. The grateful crowds would gather outside Rick’s house and call him out on to his balcony till late into the night. I have seen him practising his wave in expectation of them. With both hands as if rocking me above his head, while he beams and weeps into the middle distance: ‘I owe it all to old TP.’ And if, as doubtless happened, it turned out that Balham’s of Brinkley, some of the finest Liberals in the county, had never strictly speaking heard of Rick’s coach, let alone painted it for cost out of the goodness of their hearts, then they were in the same state of provisional reality as the coach was. They were waiting for Rick’s wand to beckon them into being. It was only when meddlesome unbelievers such as Makepeace Watermaster had difficulty accepting this state of affairs that Rick found himself with a religious war on his hands, and like others before him was compelled to defend his faith by unpleasant means. All he demanded was the totality of your love. The least you could do in return was give it to him blindly. And wait for him, as God’s Banker, to double it over six months.

Mary had prepared herself for everything except for this. Except for the pace and urgency of the intrusion and the number of the intruders. Except for the sheer scale and complexity of Jack Brotherhood's anger, and for his bewilderment, which seemed greater than her own. And for the awful comfort of his being there.

Admitted to the hall he had barely looked at her. 'Did you have any inkling of this?'

'If I had I'd have told you,' she said, which was a quarrel before they had even begun.

'Has he phoned?'

'No.'

'Has anybody else?'

'No.'

'No word from *anyone*? No change?'

'No.'

'Brought you a brace of house guests.' He jabbed a thumb at two shadows behind him. 'Relatives from London, come to console you for the duration. More to follow.' Then he swept through her like a great ragged hawk on its journey to another prey, leaving her one frozen impression of his lined and punctured face and shaggy white forelock as he stormed towards the drawing room.

'I'm Georgie from Head Office,' said the girl on the doorstep. 'This is Fergus. We're so sorry, Mary.'

They had luggage and she showed them to the foot of the stairs. They seemed to know the way. Georgie was tall and sharp-edged with straight, sensible hair. Fergus was not quite Georgie's class, which was the way the Office worked these days.

'Sorry about this, Mary,' Fergus echoed as he followed Georgie up the stairs. 'Don't mind if we take a look round, do you?'

In the drawing room Brotherhood had switched out the lights and wrenched open the curtains to the French windows. 'I need the key for this thing. The Chubb. The whatever they have here.'

Mary hastened to the mantelpiece and groped for the silver rose bowl where she kept the security key. 'Where is he?'

'He's anywhere in the world or out of it. He's using trade-craft. Ours. Who does he know in Edinburgh?'

'No one.' The rose bowl was full of pot pourri she had made with Tom. But no key.

'They think they've traced him there,' said Brotherhood. 'They think he took the five o'clock shuttle from Heathrow. Tall man with a heavy briefcase. On the other hand, knowing our Magnus as we do, he might just be in Timbuctoo.'

Looking for the key was like looking for Magnus. She didn't know where to begin. She seized the tea caddy and shook it. She was getting sick with panic. She grabbed the silver Achievement Cup that Tom had won at school and heard something metal skid inside it. Taking the key to him, she barked her shin so hard her eyes blurred. That bloody piano stool.

'The Lederers ring?'

'No. I told you. No one did. I didn't get back from the airport till eleven.'