Author's Note

'I was born somewhere in Scotland, in the early morning of 14th December 1799. Later that day, the former President of the United States of America, George Washington, died at his home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. I believe there was no connection between the two events. It is my birthday tomorrow and I will be eighty-two years old.'

And so begins the unfinished, disordered, somewhat baffling autobiography of Cashel Greville Ross (1799–1882), an autobiography – plus related material – that came into my possession some years ago. It consists of around a hundred pages of handwritten reminiscences, dated December 1881, along with tied bundles of letters received, drafts of letters sent, some little sketches, maps and plans, some photographs, some published books filled with notes and marginalia, some small paintings, etchings and silhouettes and a few objects – a tinder box, a musket ball, a belt buckle, a tiny brittle lock of hair tied with a faded silk ribbon, a few silver dollars, a fragment of Greek amphora, and so on.

This small but intriguing trove was all that had eventually amounted from the life of this individual. It was, in a real way, everything that remained of him and was a fragmentary history of the time he had spent on this small planet. He had tried to write the story of his life, but failed.

However fascinating, these scribbled pages and these few artefacts are not much upon which to construct a portrait of the man – not much for a lifespan of eighty-odd years. What do we leave behind us when we die? At first it seems prodigious: all that mountain of 'stuff' we acquire, all the possessions, the bric-a-brac and copious documentation accumulated over the average life. But inexorably, and surprisingly swiftly, it begins to diminish and after a few decades, a half-century, a century, it can amount to virtually nothing.

It depends on who you are, of course – but most people don't leave much of a trace or record behind them once their goods and chattels are dispersed; once the memories of this or that individual quickly blur and fade as the younger familiars die out themselves. Diaries and letters moulder and become either bland or incomprehensible; legal documents lurk unsought-for in filing cabinets and bank vaults; photographs of family and friends become unidentifiable – become photographs of anonymous people – and while anecdote and legend may survive a little longer, assuming that the person did anything of note or achieved any sort of fame, modest or otherwise, the fact is that for the huge majority of people in human history their fate, after a couple of generations or three, is to become effectively unknown, forgotten, a ghost. All that remains is a name on a headstone, a notation in a census-count, an online obituary, a mention in a newspaper and – if they're lucky – a date of birth and a date of death.

So, who was this Cashel Greville Ross? What was the nature of his real life? How can its unique ontology be reconstructed? At least there is some evidence to hand, to begin with, but how far can it be trusted? There are many large, conspicuous gaps. To attempt to embark on writing a biography of this person – a total stranger – a man born well over two hundred years ago, seemed to me to be, if not entirely impossible, then an enterprise that would consist of meagre, unsatisfying supposition, in the end – all 'perhaps', 'conceivably', 'might have', 'possibly'. It would be half a life.

Maybe that is true of biography in general. A wise man once said, 'All biography is fiction, but fiction that has to fit the documented facts.'* If this first part is correct, then perhaps it's a more interesting proposition to extend that licence. The objective should be to go further than the documented facts, to go beyond that boundary of the factual palisade. And, intriguingly, it is only fiction that allows us to do this. Instead of trying to write a biography of Cashel Greville Ross, I thought there was a very good case to be made that the story of his life, his *real* life, would, paradoxically, be much better served if it were written instead – openly, knowingly, candidly – as a novel.

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* Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (new edition 2021), p. vi.

W.B.
Trieste
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1

Cashel always claimed that his first memory was of a man in black, leading a black horse. A man who – he then suspected – wanted to kill him, for some reason. This occurred when he was about four or five or six years old (he would vaguely recall) and the encounter took place when he was mooching around late one wintry afternoon in the big copse behind the cottage where he lived in County Cork, Ireland. He heard distant hunting horns and snatched halloos from the fields beyond and then, closer to hand at the fringes of the copse, out of sight, came a thrashing and snapping of vegetation, of something sizeable pushing and forcing its way through the undergrowth.

For some reason Cashel felt fear grow in him and chill his body. And then, wheeling round a substantial stand of holly, came a man leading a horse, a big, muscled, ebony stallion, huffing and blowing, its neck and shoulders clotted with a beige lather. Cashel could smell the tack and the musky, salty whiff of the horse's sweat thickening the air beneath the trees. The tall man holding the reins was in a black, knee-length coat, silver-buttoned, wearing a black top hat that made him seem even taller. His black riding boots were polished to a bright glossiness, with small blunt silver spurs, Cashel noticed.

This was Death, Cashel thought – so he claimed – come to seek him out. Or the man in black was the Devil himself.

But it wasn't Death and it wasn't the Devil – it was a man leading an exhausted horse through a wood. A square-jawed man with a wide moustache, tobacco brown.

'What's your name, little boy?' he asked.

'I'm Cashel, sir.'

'Where do you live, Cashel?'

'In the cottage on Glanmire Lane.'

'Ah. Do you, now . . .'

The man stared intently at him from his great height and reached out his free hand as if to touch his face – or catch me by the throat, Cashel thought, and strangle me dead. But then the stallion stamped its feet and whinnied, tugging at the reins the horseman held in his gloved left hand.

'He's lost a shoe so I can't hunt,' the man said reasonably, as if he owed Cashel an explanation. 'I'll give that bastard farrier a kick up the arse, all right.'

He pronounced the word 'ahse'. His accent was strange, Cashel noted, the same as the girls who lived in Stillwell Court. English voices. They didn't speak in the same way as he did or the other people he knew.

'Yes, sir.'

'You'd better cut along home, Cashel, old chap,' the man went on. 'The hunt's coming through and they might take you for a fox.'

'Yes, sir.'

Cashel turned and pelted breathlessly home to the cottage where he lived with his Aunt Elspeth.

He found her in the scullery, peeling potatoes.

'I've just seen the Devil,' he said, trying to control his panting, and described the man in black with the wide moustache, leading the giant horse, and the strange accent he had.

'Don't be so silly,' his aunt said, drying her hands briskly on her apron. 'That'd be one of Sir Guy's friends, over from England for the hunting. Don't be a gomeral. The Devil's not coming for you yet, no, no.' She laughed quickly to herself. 'He's got plenty more work to do before he comes looking for you, Cashel Greville.'

She heaved him up into her arms – she was a tall, strong young woman – kissed his cheek and took him into the parlour to look out of the window onto the lane. Half a dozen hunters were cantering heedlessly down it, great clods of mud thrown up, spattering, from the horses' hooves.

'Was he nice to you, this man in the top hat? Was he a nice man?'

'I don't know.'

'Did he ask you your name?'

'He did.'

'Did you tell him?'

'Yes.'

'Right. Good.'

'And he asked me where I lived.'

'And did you tell him that?'

'I did.'

She set him down on the tiled floor.

'Was that wrong to tell him, Auntie?'

'Come along and have your tea.'*

Elspeth Soutar, Cashel's aunt, a Scot from the Dumfries region, was unmarried and in her early thirties. She was an educated woman and governess to the two daughters of Sir Guy and Lady Evangeline Stillwell, of Stillwell Court, County Cork, Ireland. The girls were Rosamond (sixteen) and Hester (fourteen) and Elspeth had been responsible for their education for almost ten years, now. It was tacitly apparent to everyone that her tenure as governess was coming to its inevitable conclusion as the girls' entry into society approached. Thereafter, there would be no necessity for any more pedagogical refinement.

Cashel knew Rosamond and Hester well. They would play with him when he was a toddler, almost as if he were a household pet. Sometimes they would dress him up as a doll, in a frilly skirt and bonnet, or a toy soldier, or a savage Aborigine. They were fond of him and kissed and carried him and hugged him a great deal until he grew too rough and ungainly. But the familiarity remained. They had a host of nicknames for him: the Cashelmite, Cash-Cash-Coo, Cashelnius the Great. They could almost have been older sisters but for the social distance. Elspeth Soutar was staff, after all, and, therefore, so was her little nephew.

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* What is to be made of this story, a story Cashel Greville Ross retold throughout his life? Whatever the truth about it – a frightened little boy in a darkening wood; a tall man in black leading a nervy, shying black horse – its repetition has embellished all possibility of verification out of existence. But in a sense, as it applies to Cashel Ross, it doesn't matter. This is the biographical arena where the anecdote becomes the legend that sanctions its own truth – a personal narrative that creates its own 'reality'. More to the point, the encounter, as he described it, established a tone, an atmosphere and import that would prove very apt to his life's story as it unfolded. This is exactly what his first memory *should* have been like: it suited the man he became. Therefore, it was true.

Cashel never saw Sir Guy. A remote, almost mythic figure, he seemed always away – in Dublin, in London, on the Continent – and Cashel never really ventured into the grand salons of the house. He tended to stay in the nursery with the girls. Consequently, he very rarely met Lady Evangeline either, who, it seemed, was always ill and stayed for months at a time in her suite of rooms on the second floor, attended by a nurse and receiving weekly visits, all year round, from old Dr Killigrew with his patent medications from the nearby town of Castlemountallen. The few glimpses and encounters he managed left him with the impression of someone very stiff and upright, but at the same time very pale and fragile. As thin as paper, he thought – as thin as crumpled waxed paper.

Once, when Rosamond and Hester were wheeling him around the corridors in a small toy cart, they bumped into Lady Evangeline, fully dressed in a lace headcap and a gown of shimmering ultramarine silk, being helped down the stairs to some social engagement.

'Who is this little boy?' she asked Rosamond.

'He's Elspeth's charge, Mama,' Rosamond said. 'Her little nephew. The orphan, remember?'

'I don't recall,' Lady Evangeline said vaguely. 'Or perhaps I do, now you mention it. The orphan. Yes. Is he a well-behaved little boy?'

'Oh, yes. He knows that if he misbehaves we'll give him a good thrashing,' Hester said.

Lady Evangeline smiled thinly and the nurse led her carefully down the stairs to the drawing room.

When he was old enough to understand – when he was five – Aunt Elspeth sat him down and told him the sad story of the deaths of his mother and father, Moira and Findlay Greville, both drowned in 1800 when the packet to Belfast had sunk in a storm in the Irish Sea. There was a small amateur double portrait of a wooden-faced couple set on the mantel of the sitting room, the only visual record of his parents.

'They left on a boat for Belfast before you,' Elspeth explained. 'You were meant to go with them but you were sick with the croup so I was told to follow with you a week later. Thank the Lord you didn't go with them.'

'Was it a shipwreck?' Cashel asked.

'Yes. The ship went down with all hands.'

'What does that mean?'

'There were no survivors. Everyone was drowned.' Elspeth smiled sadly. 'That's how come you're living with me, my darling.' She stroked his thick fair hair, ploughing it with her stiff fingers. 'I'll never be your true mother but in every other shape or form I'm just as much a mother to you, wee lad, don't you worry.'

Elspeth had placed the double portrait in his lap as she gently related the story to him. Cashel looked at the ashen-faced puppets that were meant to be depictions of his mother and father. The man had a dense, spade-like beard. The woman wore a tight bonnet and seemed to stare out of the picture with sightless eyes.

'That's Findlay Greville,' Elspeth pointed. 'And that's my dear wee sister, Moira, bless her soul.'

'So, if I was on that ship I'd have drowned as well,' Cashel said, the reality of his situation slowly beginning to solidify itself in his young mind. He didn't know the words then, but he was beginning to understand the concept of his being parentless, of being an orphan.

'I'm very glad I didn't go on that ship, Auntie,' he said. 'And I'm very glad I came to live with you.'

He was surprised at the ardour of the hug she gave him and by the shine of tears in her eyes.

'You're a good boy, Cashel Greville. The best.'

*

Of course, Elspeth Soutar, being a very proficient governess, made sure that Cashel was as well educated as the Stillwell girls had been. He was writing and reading at the age of five. When, aged seven, he was sent to the dame-school in Castlemountallen he was immediately moved up two classes to study with the nine- and ten-year-olds. He still found the lessons – Latin, Greek, composition, mathematics, divinity – very easy and straightforward, he said.*

Life at Stillwell Court in the early nineteenth century was as ordered and seemingly unchanging as it had been throughout the eighteenth. The extensive demesne had been gifted to one Colonel Gervase Stillwell, an officer in Oliver Cromwell's army of 1649. The grant consisted of some five thousand acres in total, spread largely along the north bank of the valley of the Baillybeg river between Castlemountallen and Fermoy, with other plantations and farmlands added elsewhere in County Kerry and County Waterford. Gervase Stillwell, in addition, became the 1st Baronet Stillwell in 1659. In 1782 when Sir Guy Stillwell, 5th Baronet, inherited the property on the death of his father, Fielding, he sold off the distant Kerry and Waterford farms and woodlands and used the capital to build Stillwell Court, a project that took the best part of a decade, cost many thousands of pounds and resulted in the Stillwell family incurring serious and lasting debt. Mortgages were taken out with banks in Dublin, London and Amsterdam – and then the mortgages were re-mortgaged, the debt underwritten by the ceaseless flow of rents from the Stillwell estate's farmer-tenants. Yet, as far as the Stillwells were concerned, nothing in the quality and style of their lives ever changed at all. The funds required to live exactly as they wished seemed always to be available – in Ireland, as elsewhere, there were many ways and means for the privileged aristocratic minority to thrive.

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* There is a poem on a fragment of yellowed paper stuck in a scrapbook that is written in an obvious child's hand. This may be the only record of Cashel's intellectual precocity.

The sun it rises every day
To spread its bounty, ray by ray.
At night it sets to take its rest
And then at dawn we are newly blessed.

And beneath it the beginnings of a Latin translation:

Sol oritur cotidie
Ad suam largitatem . . .

And, as the house was slowly built over the years, so were the gardens laid out, a wide parterre constructed, hundreds of trees planted, a small river dammed to create a substantial lake with cascades, and a long 'ride' carved through dense beech woods. Sir Guy was determined not to compromise or sacrifice the vision he had of the Stillwell family seat. They were finally able to move in shortly after Rosamond was born and, fifteen years later, by the time Cashel had begun to take some kind of stock of the place he was growing up in, it had already achieved a patina of permanence, of longevity. The limestone of the big house's facade had weathered; dense ivy covered an entire gable end of the east wing; the stable block had seen two generations of hunters; the trees in the landscaped park were substantial; thick rushes and alder grew on the banks of the artificial lake; the crested, ornate gates – portals to the east and west drives – with their twinned lodges on either side, seemed to declare that Stillwell Court had been here for many ages and would remain for many more to come.*

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* This description of Stillwell Court comes from *Eminent Demesnes in the County of Cork, Vol. II* (Dublin 1845):

> *Stillwell Court is a substantial manor house built in the Georgian style towards the end of the last century. At its core is a three-storey eight-bay block with astylar three-bay wings. The façade is silver-grey limestone and the hipped roof sits nicely behind a low blocking course. The baseless Doric columns of the porch support a weighty entablature. The two-storey servants' quarters are well screened by shrubberies. The stable block and kennels have a small triumphal arch as an entrance (a whimsical touch) and by the demesne wall is a single-storey keeper's house in brick laid in Flemish bond with an octagonal wet larder or game store.*

Elspeth Soutar's relations with Cashel were warm and close. When he was too big to pick up and cuddle, she would ask him to sit on her knee in front of the turf fire and tell him stories about her childhood in Dumfries. She had a Scottish accent that Cashel unreflectingly acquired though once he began attending at the dame-school his Irish brogue inevitably thickened and covered over what Scottishness remained.

It was a linguistic journey inadvertently encouraged by the cottier children he played with further down Glanmire Lane, outside the high walls that surrounded Stillwell Court and its park. Along both sides of the lane Sir Guy Stillwell had paid for the construction of ten cabins for his cottiers, so-called, indentured tenants and reliable casual labourers. Cashel was friendly with two of the older boys of the Doolin family. Pádraig Doolin was a herdsman and a woodcutter. He and his wife, Aoife, had six children aged from eight years old to newborn, and Cashel was friendly with the two eldest boys, Callum and Lorcan. Callum was raw-boned and excitable; Lorcan sly and obviously clever. Sir Guy paid for him to attend the dame-school in Castlemountallen in the hope that a little education – literacy, even – might allow him a chance to move out of the never-ending poverty that the cottiers seemed destined to live in for ever.

From time to time, once a month or so, sometimes twice, Elspeth would instruct Cashel to 'go and play with the Doolin boys'. It was, Cashel realized, an injunction, not a suggestion; and even if he didn't particularly want to go he sensed from the tone of her voice that it was not worth objecting. On these occasions she would give him a present for Mrs Doolin – a pie, a jar of jam, an old shawl – as if to justify the visit. It was always in the afternoon and she would add, 'Don't come back until suppertime, mind.' And so Cashel would trudge off down the lane to the cabins, offering in hand, to spend two or three hours with the Doolin family.

On this particular spring day – it was cloudy and drizzly and the lane gleamed with thin tainted puddles in its rutted surface, scarred by the traffic of carts and drays – Cashel set off with a bundle of flax yarn and walked the half-mile to the cabins. He was somewhat disgruntled as he had been quite happily caught up in an elaborate drawing of a huge fortified castle (inspired by a visit to Charles Fort in Kinsale) and when he had protested Elspeth had snapped at him: 'I want you on your way, boy.' She said she had to prepare a course of French lessons for the Stillwell girls as they were about to make their first venture into the continent of Europe and she needed absolute peace and quiet.

The Glanmire cabins were all uniform. Built of mud-and-straw walls, eighteen inches thick, and thatched with potato stems, they looked more like growths than structures. Each cabin had an acre and a half of land to grow potatoes, every one had at least one cow, some two, and there were hen runs and pigsties. These simple dwellings had no chimneys, however, and the smoke from the turf fire inside had to leave the main room – the only room – through a door or a window.

Cashel approached the Doolin cabin and saw two of the little girls, quite naked, chasing the hens in their run, screaming with pleasure. He called out his name and Mrs Doolin invited him in. She was sitting on a stool by the fire suckling her newborn, another girl. She had no name, yet.

'Come away in, Cashel, my bonny boy.'

Cashel's eyes were already stinging from the peat smoke, hanging like a grey cloud beneath the rafters; the smell of something sour was in the air, incubating. He handed Mrs Doolin the flax he was carrying, unable to stop staring at the baby guzzling at her pale, dark-nippled breast.

'I've had you at my titties too, Cashel, dear. I was your wet-nurse when your auntie brought you home from Scotland, poor wee orphan fella that you were.'

'Yes, I know,' Cashel said patiently. He knew what a wet-nurse was. Mrs Doolin told him this fact almost every time he came to the cabin, as if somehow there was a deeper, almost familial, connection between them because he had drunk her sweet milk – that he was more to her than the orphaned nephew of the Stillwell governess. Mrs Doolin, always pregnant, always giving birth (three of her children had died), was famous for her copious supply of milk.

She stood up, the baby still suckling, and went to the door to call for Callum and Lorcan.

Cashel looked around. There was the simple wooden bed with its horsehair mattress and blanket and thick straw laid against the wall for the children to sleep on. They had a painted chest, chipped black, a table and three stools. By the fire stood the big pot for cooking potatoes and, beside it, the spinning wheel for making linen cloth. Cashel thought, as he always did, of his bedroom in the cottage – the bright gingham curtains at the window, the knitted rug, the warm eiderdown, the commode with the chamber pot. Here the family all relieved themselves on the midden outside where the pigs rooted freely. How he wished, suddenly, that his aunt hadn't sent him here to play with the Doolin boys. He hadn't been disturbing her, sitting at the kitchen table with his pencils and sheets of paper.

Still, he smiled politely as Mrs Doolin regained her seat by the fire and shifted the babby to her other breast. Her feet were bare and black with grime, her toes like tortoiseshell claws, he saw, and looked down guiltily at his buckled shoes, poking out from his breeches. He undid the buttons on his jerkin, as if that made him more at home here in this room, more informal, more at ease.

Then Callum and Lorcan sauntered in, grinning, hurling sticks loose in their hands.

'Well, hello, hello, Cashel,' Lorcan said, adding mysteriously, 'talk of the Devil.'

'Fancy a knock-about, Cashel?' Callum said, holding up his hurley.

'I don't have a stick.'

'Sure, we've got a spare,' Callum said. 'We can get Diarmuid over from next door and we'll have a bit of a game. You can keep goal.'

An hour later, Cashel limped homeward, his shoes in his hand. He hated hurling, and Callum Doolin, he was convinced, had deliberately hit him on the ankle, swinging his stick hard at the ball long gone. Blood flowed and Cashel yelled that his ankle bone was chipped.

'Don't play hurling, then, you babby!' Callum jeered. 'We don't play with girls.'

As Cashel neared the cottage the lane rose over a small bridge, allowing him to look down on his home and the neat walled garden at the rear. He stopped abruptly. A dark figure was down at the far end. A man in a black greatcoat, tall-hatted. This man opened the door in the rear garden wall and disappeared, closing it behind him, heading into the dense woodland beyond.

That garden door in the rear wall was permanently locked, Cashel knew. The wood beyond was out of bounds: 'Private property,' Elspeth said. 'They rear pheasants there and shoot them. It's dangerous.' And, as a result, Cashel had never ventured there. It was closely planted, full of coppiced oak and elm, a damp, gloomy wood anyway, choked with brambles and nettles.

But now this man? Was this a burglar? A murderer . . .?

He ran into the garden and up to the door. Locked. Locked from the other side, obviously. Baffled, he sped to the back door. Inside, there was no sign of his aunt in the kitchen, the scullery or the front parlour. He felt fearful and didn't want to go upstairs to the bedrooms, suddenly terrified at what he might find there.

'Auntie!' he yelled out, desperately, plaintively.

'Cashel?' came the immediate reply.

He ran to the staircase. His aunt was on the landing at the stair's turn, in her dressing gown. A second glance registered that her long dark hair was down, hanging loose over her shoulders. He very rarely saw her with her hair down and, even in this fraught moment, acknowledged how different she suddenly looked – how beautiful, how young . . .

But she was angered, her eyes thinned.

'What're ye doing back? I said suppertime!'

'That Callum Doolin broke me ankle!'

'My ankle.'

'He broke my ankle playing hurling. It hurts, Auntie. Look – there's blood.'

And she set to – boiling a kettle on the range, folding a soft cloth, wetting it in the hot water and gently dabbing away the dried blood. She even wrapped a gauze bandage round his ankle that made him feel somehow noble and brave.

Elspeth kissed his forehead. Cashel noticed that her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying.

'They may be rough boys, but they mean well.'

'No. He did it on purpose. Lorcan's my friend and Callum's jealous.'

She soothed him, made him a cup of sweet tea and, calmed, he went back to the drawing of his marvellous fortifications. Half an hour later she was downstairs in her blue dress, her long hair pinned up, secured by combs, preparing their supper of new-baked bread and a mutton broth. Only then, tranquillity re-established, did Cashel begin to wonder again about the man he had seen at the garden door and his aunt's strange state of undress. Had she been sleeping? Had she felt unwell? Was he a doctor? It was a mystery that he should try to solve, he told himself, and he knew the answer lay beyond the cottage garden – in the dark coppiced wood with its briars and stinging nettles.

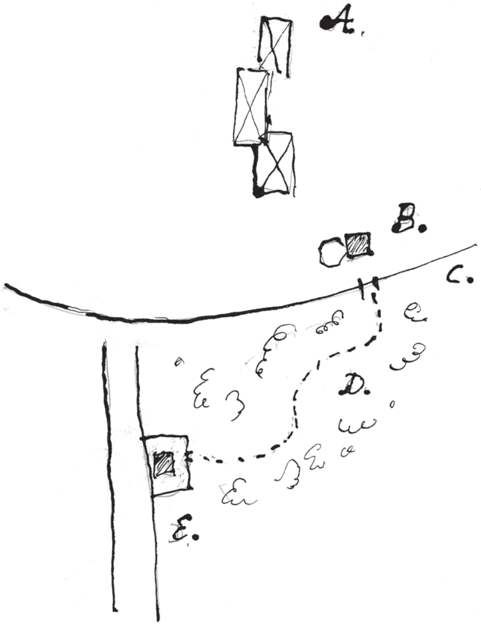
The next day was Sunday and, after the service for the Protestants in the servants' dining hall in Stillwell Court (a prayer, a hymn, a reading), Cashel told his aunt that he was going back to the Doolin cabin to show Callum his bandaged ankle and make him confront the damage he had done. But, once up the lane and out of sight of the cottage, he hopped over the drystone wall and made his way through the wood. It was difficult going – the undergrowth was thick and the long, barbed shoots of the brambles were everywhere, tugging at his clothes. Eventually, he arrived at the cottage garden wall. There was the door and he tried it. Locked.

That the man had gone out from the garden and now the door was locked behind him meant that he must have had a key . . .

And there was a path cut from the door that led into the wood – nettles scythed away, overhanging branches pruned. It was not well worn but it was indisputably a path. Cashel set off, following it, his heart-thump suddenly audible, he thought, aware of the dangers lurking in the wood. The path turned this way and that. Once he paused, seeing a cigar butt, two inches long, on the ground before him – damp, unfurling. He picked it up and sniffed it – that sour, sweaty, faecal smell still lingered. He threw it away. The path curled round the bole of a large ash tree and there, in front of him, was another wall, the demesne wall, ten feet high, and a tall iron-barred gate set in it.

Cashel pulled down on the handle to open the gate but it too was locked. Through the bars he could see the keeper's cottage on the Stillwell estate with its octagonal game larder, and beyond it the rear aspect of the big house with its pall-mall court and the deep ha-ha. He thought he could make out Hester in a cream dress, trying vainly to fly a kite in the fresh breeze.

So, Cashel thought, the man in the cottage garden had come from Stillwell Court, that much was clear. But who might he be?



The route from Glanmire Cottage to Stillwell Court. A. Stillwell Court. B. The keeper's cottage. C. The demesne wall. D. The path through Glanmire Wood. E. Glanmire Cottage on Glanmire Lane.

The gamekeeper? And what business did he have with his Aunt Elspeth . . .?

Cashel made his way back along the path, retracing his steps to the cottage. He was pleased by the result of his investigations but the answers to his questions were beyond him. He skipped over the wall and entered the cottage through the front door.

'I'm home, Auntie,' he called.

Elspeth was in the sitting room, drinking tea.

'How were the Doolin boys?' she asked. 'Did Callum say sorry?'

'They were out,' Cashel lied quickly. 'So I spoke for a minute or so with Mrs Doolin. She thanks you very much for the flax.'

'Poor woman,' Elspeth said. 'Still, she's luckier than some, I suppose.' She beckoned Cashel over. 'Come and sit down. I have some news. Momentous news.'

Cashel didn't particularly want to hear any momentous news but he sat himself down on the slipper chair opposite her.

'We're leaving Stillwell Court,' Elspeth said brightly.

'What?'

'My job here is done. Those girls are as educated as they'll ever be and they're both going to France next year, withal.'

'We can't leave here. What about me?'

'I'm no longer required. The family has been very generous.'

'But surely we can stay on here in the cottage?'

'No. We're going away.'

'Where?' Cashel felt salt tears sting his eyes. He couldn't imagine a life elsewhere.

'Not far away. Not to the ends of the earth, darling.'

'Where are we going?' he repeated dolefully.

'We're going to England,' Elspeth said. 'To a place called Oxford.'

2

It was an unusually hot day for early June and Cashel felt the sun warming his shoulders even though it was just past seven o'clock in the morning. School started promptly at eight and he had to tramp over a mile to reach it. He always gave himself plenty of time – if you were late, even by one minute, Dean Smythe would leather you. 'Punctuality is not a habit,' the dean would say, as he reached for the belt, 'it's a virtue.'

Cashel shifted the burlap sack he was carrying from his left shoulder to his right. The sack contained his lunch – a hunk of Aunt Elspeth's new-baked bread, a lump of cheese wrapped in a cabbage leaf, an apple and a stoppered flask of watered-down cider – as well as a bottle of ink, a box of quills, his penknife, and a bible. Every boy had to have his own bible at Dean Smythe's Academy.

He was striding briskly down the Botley Road, heading through the countryside for the centre of Oxford where the school was to be found. To his right he saw the church of St Thomas the Martyr amongst its venerable lime trees, and soon enough he was crossing the Isis Bridge and found himself in the town proper. 'A small town with many beautiful buildings,' was how Elspeth had described Oxford to him – though it should be called a city, he corrected himself, seeing as the place possessed a proper cathedral.

There was a dust haze hanging over the turnpike, raised by the wheels of the considerable morning traffic. The coach from Cheltenham had passed, rattling along at heedless speed into the town. Drays with kegs of beer headed for Oxford's inns and taverns, and dog carts and barouches all added to the clatter of the endless coming and going – even the noise was different here in England, he thought, everyone so busy – a far cry from the rural peace of Stillwell Court and Glanmire Lane.

As he crossed the bridge over the Isis he smelt the stink coming off the Oxford canal wharf and ducked down the alleyway that led him to Penny Farthing Street where the school was. He entered the cobbled lane and saw that the old soldier was still there with his pewter begging bowl set before him by his wooden peg-leg. His other leg had gone, also, but he allowed his canvas trouser to flap emptily, the better to provoke sympathy, Cashel supposed. His crutches leant against the stucco wall behind him. He wore his filthy scarlet jacket with its one tattered, fringed epaulette, and Cashel saw that he had added some kind of shiny medal to his breast.

‘Hello, schoolboy!’ he shouted at Cashel. ‘Spare a farthing in Penny Farthing Street for an old soldier.’

‘Haven’t got a farthing, sir,’ Cashel said, which was true, though he had three pennies in his jerkin pocket.

‘What’s in that sack you’re carrying?’

‘My luncheon, sir.’

‘Anything to drink? I’m fair parched standing in this here hot sun. Not as hot as Portugal, mind you, where my two good legs got blown away by the Frenchies.’

‘I’ve only got cold tea,’ Cashel lied, immediately regretting the admission.

‘A sip of tea would wet the whistle nicely, thank-ee kindly.’

Cashel sighed and rummaged in his sack for the bottle.

‘See? It’s only weak tea, sir.’ He held the bottle up for verification.

The soldier snatched it from him, drew out the cork and had a swig.

‘That’s fucking cider, you devil!’

He took some more swigs and handed the bottle back half-empty, grinning, showing his few brown stumps of teeth.

‘Tried to fool me, eh?’

‘You can finish it off,’ Cashel said, handing it back. He would not be drinking from that bottle now those lips had touched it.

The soldier glugged the rest of the cider down.

‘You’re a good lad,’ he said. ‘And make sure you finish your schooling, boy. Don’t end up like me, God preserve you.’

Cashel put the empty bottle in his sack and headed off down Penny Farthing Street towards the school.

Dean Archibald Smythe's Scholarly Academy (For Boys) was situated on the ground floor of a four-storey, pocked and flaking, somewhat dilapidated town house. The dean's living quarters were on the floors above. At the rear of the house, as a kind of annexe, was a very large room, almost like a barn, which was the schoolroom. High-ceilinged, it was lit during the day by a row of plain windows close beneath the ceiling, side by side, like a clerestory. It must have been some kind of meeting room or warehouse, Cashel thought, before it was turned into a school.

On both sides of the room were two long refectory tables – enough to take twenty chairs each. And on the wall above one was the painted sign '*Scholars*' and, above the other, '*Simpletons*'. Dean Smythe's educational ethic was straightforward: this was the divide his pupils must cross. Simpletons had to strive to become Scholars. Scholars must endeavour not to descend to Simpleton level. Promotion and demotion were regular occurrences. At the head of each table was a kind of elevated pulpit with a seat and a lectern, designed for the pedagogues: Dean Smythe took care of the Scholars; his assistant, Marmaduke Seele, was responsible for the Simpletons.

Cashel entered the big room and saw he was the first to arrive this morning. He took his allotted seat at the Scholars' table – he had never sat at the Simpletons' – and set out his quills and ink. Just as the Academy did not provide lunch for its pupils, it did not provide writing materials, either.

'Morning, Ross,' came a reedy voice. 'My, you're keen.'

Cashel didn't respond immediately. Even after two years gone by, he kept forgetting that his surname was now Ross, not Greville.

He turned to see Marmaduke Seele crossing the room, a ledger under his arm, and then climbing into his pulpit. He wore a greasy topcoat and the white stockings below his knee breeches were grey and darned and patched. His shoes creaked as he climbed the steps and sat down.

'Oh. Yes. Morning, sir.'

Seele was a skinny man in his thirties with a poor, patchy moustache. Dean Smythe treated him with undisguised disdain and contempt and, thus encouraged, the bigger, bolder boys mocked him mercilessly. Cashel quite liked Seele, in fact. He himself was always being mocked for his Irish accent –'Oirish' was his nickname – so he felt a strange bond with Seele.

'Soon be the summer holidays,' Seele said. 'Looking forward to the summer, Ross?'

'Yes, sir,' Cashel said, unreflectingly, but he wasn't sure he much looked forward to anything these days – life was so strange.

Dean Smythe bustled in, looking at his pocket watch. He was a small, portly man, in his fifties, with a smiling, roseate, chubby face. He still wore an old-fashioned short wig – somewhat askew, this morning. His fussy, busy manner disguised the brutal temper of a fierce disciplinarian. Boys were routinely leathered several times a day at the Academy.

And now, behind the dean, the Academy's pupils began to file in, shiftily, in ones or twos, whispering, most going to their designated places on the Simpletons' table. This morning Cashel only had two Scholar companions – little Benjamin Smart ('Smart by name, smart by nature,' the dean would observe, regularly) and burly Ned Masterson, who was seventeen and growing a beard. At the luncheon break he would pointedly smoke a pipe, as if to confirm his maturity. He looked stupid, as he coughingly puffed away, with his wet lips and his big, round, heavy-featured face, but he was almost as clever as Cashel. He wanted to become a priest and so was a favourite of the dean.

The three scholars were set their morning's work – to translate a page of Ovid from *Epistulae ex Ponto*. The dozen Simpletons were taken through their nine-times table by Mr Seele.

Cashel stared at the text in front of him – *Quod legis, o uates magnorum maxime regum*, he read – but his mind felt strangely inert. He knew why. It was because Elspeth had told him at breakfast that Mr Ross was coming to stay for a whole week.

Cashel knew that he was deliberately not confronting the reality of the 'Oxford Situation', as he termed it. He had a piecemeal understanding of what had happened since they had left Stillwell Court but there were gaps and he found himself quite happy not to try and fill them in, for some reason. Not knowing everything can be quite a tolerable state of existence, he had come to realize.

When they finally left he wept, unashamedly. In an entirely illogical way he felt that his life was ending – certainly the life he knew – and nothing in the future, his future, enticed him remotely. Elspeth patiently let his tears flow and it seemed to him he sobbed all the way to Dublin, where they caught the packet to Bristol. At Bristol docks there was a brougham waiting for them and a cart to carry their trunks on to Oxford. It was on the journey there – it took them a whole day as the roads were muddy – that Elspeth, calmly, authoritatively, told him of the circumstances of their new English life.

'You have to do what I tell you, Cashel, my dear. No ifs, no buts. Do it for me. It's not complicated but it's very important. If you let me down there will be serious consequences for me – and for you. I could go to prison.'

This prospect was what chilled and frightened him – there could be no more potent threat, however vague. What crime had she committed that would send her to prison? He gladly promised her, on his soul, that he would do as she asked. He listened hard.

The first new fact to take in, she told him, was that their names were going to change. Elspeth Soutar was to become Mrs Pelham Ross. Cashel would no longer be Cashel Greville but instead would become Cashel Ross. He could keep Greville as a middle name, if he wanted, but to Oxford and the world he was to be Cashel Ross. Moreover, he was to be her son, henceforth, not her nephew. 'Auntie' was gone – if he wanted to address her it should be 'Mama'. Understood? Try it.

'Yes . . . Mama. But why are we doing all this?'

'So that we can live in a new way, with new freedoms and new comforts. I'll never have to be a governess again. I don't have to work. We'll have a nice home. We'll have enough money for everything.'

'Right.'

She kissed him on the cheek.

'And there's one other thing you should know.'

'What is it?'

'I'm pregnant. You know what "pregnant" means?'

'Yes.' Then he added, 'Mama.'

'Good boy. In a few months you'll have a new baby brother or sister. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

'Yes. That would be nice,' he said dutifully, not really taking the information in. What was the opposite of 'nice'? It was all too much.

Elspeth took his hand and squeezed it.

'So, you understand why we had to make a new life for ourselves – for our new little family.'

'I do. I can see that . . .'

'Can you remember all this? Can you do it for me? No one must ever know about our lives before, in Ireland, at Stillwell Court.'

'Of course. I can do it.'

She hugged him close.

'I know it all seems very strange to you now,' she said softly. 'But you'll get used to it quickly – and it's for the best, my dearest. You and I are going to be very happy. Very.'

The house they came to occupy on the Botley Road, a mile outside Oxford, was called the Glebe. It was a substantial, square, white-stuccoed house – new, built some twenty years previously – set back from the road behind a gated driveway. There was a gravelled sweep around an ornamental fountain and a small porte cochère. Behind the house there was a wide sheep-cropped lawn with a walnut tree and a big revolving summer house. With a little effort the wooden structure could be turned to face whatever sun was available in whatever season.

To one side was a neat walled vegetable and fruit garden, an orchard, and a barn that contained their barouche and wooden loose boxes for the nag that pulled it. They had an elderly manservant called Doncaster, a young housemaid (Daisy), a cook (Mrs Pillard) and a young stable-boy and gardener called Albert who lived out, in Botley village, but who was always present, it seemed, dawn to dusk.

The staff had their quarters in the attic. Cashel had his own bedroom on the floor below, and below him, on the first floor, Elspeth had her suite of rooms. The house was well and tastefully furnished. There was a drawing room, a parlour, a dining room, and a music room with a square Broadwood piano. The kitchen, scullery, larder and laundry room were in a wing of outbuildings attached to the east corner of the main house.

It took Cashel almost three days to explore and comprehend the new geography of their lives – to see what potential the Glebe might offer him. After the little cottage in Glanmire Lane it was almost as if they had moved to a palace. He couldn't really understand how or why but, somewhere in the back of his mind, the realization slowly established itself that Aunt Elspeth – 'Mama' – had suddenly, obviously, become rich.

Mr Pelham Ross himself arrived some three weeks after they had moved in. Routines had by then been well established and the staff seemed to know and carry out their duties capably. Cashel had been enrolled in Dean Smythe's Academy (ten guineas a term) and he and Elspeth had explored Oxford and its environs in the barouche, efficiently driven by young Albert.

Elspeth gave Cashel a day's notice.

'If you address him, you're to call him "Father",' she said.

'But he's not my father. Findlay Greville was my father.'

She shook his shoulders vigorously, as if she could shake sense into him.

'You promised me, Cashel! You swore on your soul. You can't let me down.'

He began to sniffle and she hugged him.

'Maybe this'll help. Think of it as a game we're playing,' she said, more consolingly. 'You and me against the world, fooling everyone. Now, wouldn't that be a grand thing? Let's play our game together. Let's pretend.'

At least this was a concept he could grasp. Let's make-believe. He could do that.

Pelham Ross turned out to be a tall lean man, clean-shaven, his greying hair beginning to recede at the front, Cashel noticed, when the man removed his top hat. He wore well-tailored expensive clothes – a double-breasted Nankeen jacket and tapered pantaloons. The high-standing collar of his shirt reached the corners of his mouth. His black cravat was silk. Elspeth brought Cashel into the drawing room to meet him and they shook hands.

'Good day to you, Cashel.' He had a deep, rather serious voice.

'Good day to you, sir . . . Father.'

There, Cashel thought. I've said it. The man's face was unmoved. Immobile. Then he gave a little smile.

'How do you like your new home?'

'It's very nice, sir.'

'And your school? Are you doing well there?'

'I'm a Scholar, sir. It's not too hard.'

Ross chuckled at this, glancing at Elspeth who seemed noticeably to relax.

'Clever lad,' Ross said. 'I hope to see more of you but I've got to go away regularly to South Africa. I have businesses there.'

Cashel wondered if South Africa explained their new prosperity.

'That sounds exciting,' he said. 'I'd like to go to Africa one day.'

'It is exciting – and boring. Takes so long to get there. I'll miss you two. But I'll be back.'

Elspeth poured them both a glass of Madeira and Cashel noticed that Ross's hands were very clean, his nails shiny and short, as he cut the tip off a thin cigar and lit it carefully with a taper, puffing smoke, blowing on the burning end and piercing the other with some kind of needle device, as if he were engaged in some miniature engineering experiment. He was a calm and dignified presence and Cashel sensed his anxieties and his reservations beginning to recede. Pelham Ross seemed to offer no threat. Maybe everything would be all right. He could see – now the man was here – how happy Elspeth was in her new incarnation as his wife.

Daisy, the maid, came in at this juncture, smart in a new blue dress with a lace pinny, carrying a tray of vol-au-vents and sweetmeats which she set down on a lacquered table to one side.

‘You can go up to your room, now, Cashel. We’re expecting some neighbours – we want to introduce ourselves,’ Elspeth said, putting her hands on his shoulders and steering him to the door.

‘Yes, you cut along, Cashel,’ Ross said. ‘This will be boring, I guarantee.’

‘Goodbye, sir.’

‘And I’ll bring you a present back from Africa,’ Ross said vaguely, relighting his cigar.

Elspeth leant down and whispered in his ear as he left the room.

‘Well done, darling, clever boy.’

That night, Cashel lay in his bed unable to sleep, something nagging at him, some distant memory half-triggered, and trying to come to terms with this ‘game’ they were all playing. Elspeth pretending to be married; Cashel pretending to be her son; Mr Ross pretending to be her husband and Cashel pretending he was his father. He heard Ross’s deep voice murmuring as he climbed the stairs and Cashel slipped out of bed and crept onto the landing, peering through the banisters to see Elspeth and Ross, lit by the candle Elspeth was carrying, as they climbed the curving stairway to the first floor. Just before they entered her bedroom he saw Ross run his hand up her back and squeeze the curl-shadowed hollow at the nape of her neck.

Ross stayed two days and then left on his African adventure. Cashel asked what he did in South Africa and Elspeth gave unsatisfactory replies, saying only that he had many business interests there, trading, mining, banking. In fact, he was absent for months as Elspeth’s pregnancy advanced and Cashel’s curiosity diminished. She became big-bellied and very fatigued, spending most of the day in bed. A doctor came to visit from time to time – a young man with bushy whiskers and small rimless spectacles, called Dr Jolly. It was he who informed her one day that she was in fact pregnant with twins. Some sort of trumpet-like listening advice that he pressed to her belly indicated two hearts beating within.

In February 1809, the twins were born. Two boys, who were named Hogan and Buckley. Cashel now had two ‘brothers’, a fact he found rather pleasing, even though he was a decade older than them. An elderly nanny – Miss Creevy – was hired to look after them. She had a room next to the nursery but seemed to pay the twins cursory attention. Most nights as he lay in his bed Cashel could hear one of the babies whimpering endlessly – Buckley, apparently, who was the smaller and sicklier of the two.

Pelham Ross returned eventually to meet his two new sons and Elspeth regained her verve and vigour. Cashel was growing taller fast, Ross remarked, tall for a boy of his age. At school he continued to dominate the Scholars' table, though Masterson left to go up to the university. To everyone's surprise the dean announced a long-weekend holiday in celebration of Ned Masterson's success and the honour he brought to the Academy.

Everything is normal, Cashel repeated to himself as he trudged home to Botley to enjoy the free day. Everything *seems* 'normal', anyway, he corrected himself, but he knew deep inside that in fact this was very much not the case.

When Cashel was thirteen he experienced his first nocturnal emission. He knew what had happened and it caused him no consternation. He had been vainly frigging himself for over a year and he was pleased that there would now be palpable results along with the pleasure, henceforth.

In their lunch breaks at the Academy the boys would sit in a row on a low wall that bounded a paved courtyard area outside the schoolroom. The talk amongst them was almost always to do with 'smut' and mainly to do with masturbation and its techniques – tugging, pulling, flogging, frigging, fetching mettle, nubbing and strumming were the favoured euphemisms.

But they weren't sufficient protection. The dean overheard two of the boys – Rhodes and Bramerton – talking 'filth'. He not only leathered them but sent them home for a week to confess their transgression to their parents. He then delivered a lecture to the assembled school – there were twenty-two pupils this particular year – on the Sin of Onan.

Dean Smythe stood in his pulpit and berated the ranked boys standing nervously in front of him. He spoke of the terrible dangers of ‘self-pollution’, this ‘melancholy and repulsive, solitary act’. He warned them that they would destroy their health, go blind, be unable to father children themselves and eventually slip into dementia and agonizing, shameful death. He read from the large bible set before him on the lectern.

‘Genesis, chapter thirty-eight, verse nine: “And Onan” – there is the degenerate’s name, Onan – “when it came to pass went in unto his brother’s wife, that he spilt it” – it, his seed – “upon the ground. And the thing he did displeased the Lord; wherefore he slew him.” ’ Dean Smythe paused here for better dramatic effect and allowed his eyes to range over the cowed boys in front of him. ‘He spilt his seed upon the ground – he committed the Sin of Onan – and the Lord slew him. Can anything be more clear? Commit this sin and you will DIE!’

The shock and terror engendered by the sermon wore off remarkably quickly and instead provoked untypical biblical exegesis as the Scholars and the simpletons, for once united, consulted their bibles and read Genesis, chapter thirty-eight, with forensic attention. There was incomprehension, misunderstanding and dispute. Nowhere, everyone remarked, in the key verses, was there any mention of frigging. Benjamin Smart suggested that the injunction was general – spilling seed on the ground was bad but straightforward fornication was allowed. Cashel wasn’t sure, but he was disturbed – as if the dean’s dire warnings were directed specifically at him alone – and for a week he managed to keep himself pure, until he started masturbating again.

The twins, Hogan and Buckley, were not identical. By the time they were two, Hogan already looked significantly bigger and brawnier. Buckley was a slimmer, weaker variant of his sibling. They both had dark hair and brown eyes but where Hogan had limitless reserves of energy, Buckley often sat quietly by himself for an hour or more, even without toys to preoccupy him, quite happy in his inertia. Cashel wondered if he were a bit simple. They both idolized him, their big brother, and followed him around like dogs. Cashel also noticed how fond Pelham Ross was of his twin boys. In their presence his sophisticated, watchful reserve disappeared and he would pick them up and fling them screaming into the air, catching them as they fell, or lie them on their backs and tickle their bellies until hysteria set in, or clamber round the nursery on all fours with one or the other twin on his back as if riding a horse. He was a different man with the twins.

After they were born he was far more often at the Glebe, visiting at least once a month, staying only for a couple of days or so, but all the same a regular paterfamilial presence. He paid attention to Cashel but there was no rough and tumble, no physical contact beyond a handshake. He was polite, he seemed interested in Cashel's welfare, but they did nothing together. Cashel found it easy to avoid addressing him as 'Father' although Elspeth still encouraged him to do so. Whenever Pelham Ross stayed at the Glebe Cashel was always reminded of the 'game', the secrets they were keeping and the pretence that had to be maintained, and he found that it made him uneasy. When Ross was absent he almost forgot about it entirely.

Cashel's voice broke, pustules appeared on his chin and around his mouth and a small furze of pubic hair seemed to grow above his cock almost overnight. One day he realized he was taller than tall Elspeth. Marmaduke Seele took him aside and asked him his plans regarding going up to the university and speculated which of the Oxford colleges would be best suited to his particular talents. Seele had briefly been a Balliol man himself (before being rusticated for debt) and thought the college might be ideal for Cashel. For the first time Cashel began to think about the future, of what it might hold for him, of what might he become. It was 1814, he told himself, Boney was in exile,* there was peace at last after endless war, everybody was celebrating, and interesting changes were definitely in the air.

The twins were now five years old and loudly boisterous, Miss

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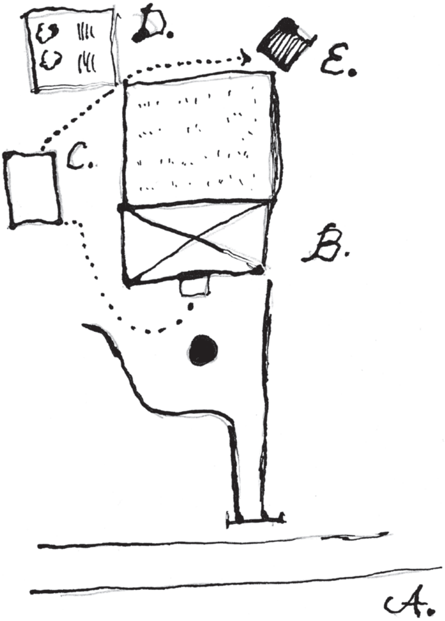
* After his abdication, Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled to Elba and arrived there on 4 May 1814. He was allowed to retain his title of 'Emperor' and so, for ten months, became the Emperor of Elba.

Creevy was long gone, worn out by her charges – even Buckley seemed more animated – and Cashel found the only way he could escape their constant attention and the household hullaballoo was by sneaking off to the summer house at the end of the back lawn. He made it his own place, bringing in some furniture – an old rug, a desk, a chair, a bookcase – and rigged up a kind of divan bed covered with a Kashmir shawl and some pillows where he could stretch out and read, undisturbed. It became his domain.

However, he was always careful to disguise his journey there, choosing a simple subterfuge of leaving through the front door, as if he were walking into town, then veering off unobserved to the stables to have a word with Albert, if he was there, and then, casually, he could skirt by the walled garden and dart unseen into the summer house. Hogan and Buckley searched for him in vain.



The route to the summer house. A. The Botley–Oxford Road. B. The Glebe. C. The stables. D. The walled garden. E. The summer house.

One summer afternoon while he was making his circuitous way to the summer house, he bumped into Daisy, the housemaid, as she emerged from the walled garden with a heavy basket of plums and greengages in her hand.

‘Oh, Daisy, hello, it’s you.’

‘So it is, Master Cashel,’ she said, smiling at him in her sly way.

‘Can I pinch some of those plums?’

She held out the basket for him, still smiling in a rather knowing manner, Cashel thought, as he filled his pockets. It had not escaped his notice that, since his voice had deepened and he’d grown six inches, Daisy had taken more interest in him. She was in her early twenties, now, a short, strapping young woman, with a mass of thick brown hair stuffed carelessly under her bonnet. She had a broad face with a snub nose that was too snub, Cashel thought, making her upper lip seem unnaturally long. But she was a lively, efficient, self-confident person and Elspeth relied on her a great deal for the running of the Glebe.

‘And where are you off to, Master Cashel? The summer house?’

‘Yes, as it happens. I have to finish reading a book by tomorrow and I need some peace and quiet away from the two monsters.’

‘Peace and quiet, mmm? I knows what you get up to in that summer house . . .’

She had a marked Oxfordshire accent. Her family lived in Charlbury in the Evenlode Valley, some fifteen miles away from Oxford. Her father had died and her mother swiftly remarried. ‘But I didn’t like my stepdad,’ she had once confided in Cashel. ‘He were a bit too fond of me, if you know what I mean, so I took myself off to Oxford to look for work and lodgings. And here I am.’

Now, Cashel felt his mouth going dry.

‘What do you mean by that? “Get up to”?’

‘I saw you going in there the other day and I crept up and spied on you. And I saw what I saw.’

‘What?’ Cashel’s face was hot.

‘I saw you pulling on your po-go, Master Cashel, that’s what I saw through the window.’

He said nothing. Swallowed hard. It was true, worse luck. No denial could save him.

'If you ever want a helping hand, you be sure to let me know.' She turned and sauntered off, hips swaying under her skirts.

Cashel didn't let her know – and when they encountered each other in the house nothing seemed to have altered since their charged conversation. But he kept on going to the summer house as usual and, one warm afternoon, with Elspeth out for a ride in the barouche with the twins, there was a light rap on the door frame and Daisy stepped into view.

Two weeks later, Cashel was fishing in the Cherwell, down by Merton Field, with Ben Smart. The day was sultry, and the thin clouds that screened the sun gave a strange opaque bony glow to the flowing river water, as if it were ashy, somehow.

Cashel watched Ben cast his line skilfully under overhanging willows. For an uncoordinated lad he fished well, he thought. In an unforced, natural, almost inevitable way, the two had become good friends over the years they had spent at the Scholars' table in Dean Smythe's Academy. Ben had tried to grow a downy dark moustache to make himself look older but wasn't really succeeding in that regard.

'You remember that sermon that Dean Smythe gave us?' Ben said, casting again into the stream. 'About the Sin of Onan?'

'Of course. Never to be forgotten.'

'It's been on my mind and I think I've finally understood it.'

'Oh, yes. And I feel you're about to inform me of your exegetical conclusions.'

'It's not about frigging, you see. That's a wanton distortion. It's about not doing it with your brother's wife – even if he's dead.'

'No, no, you must be wrong. The Lord instructed Onan to do it with his brother's wife.' Cashel paused, realizing this was the moment – he needed to confess.

'The Sin of Onan,' he went on, as casually as he could manage, 'is actually about *coitus interruptus*.'

Ben silently wound in his line and laid his rod on the riverbank. He turned and faced Cashel, hands on hips, staring at him.

'And what do you know about *coitus interruptus*, Ross, you blackguard?'

'I've done it.'

'You've kept this from me. Tell all, or I'll never forgive you.'

And it came tumbling forth as Cashel related to him, in considerable detail, everything that had happened between him and Daisy that day and what she had instructed him to do.

This isn't going to take place, Master Cashel, Daisy had said, unless you follow my strictest rules. She walked into the summer house and stood before him. I will, Cashel said instantly, I'll do everything you say. Then Daisy lifted her skirt briefly and showed Cashel the dark triangle of hair where her strong thighs met, then dropped her skirt. You can have the real thing, she said, but – but – you have to get off the coach before it reaches the inn, if you catch my drift. Cashel thought for a second. When you think you're about to explode, Daisy added, you retreat. Yes, I understand, Cashel said, realizing what she meant now.

Daisy sat down on the divan opposite him and lay back. Get them breeches off and keep your kerchief in your hand to catch yourself. Cashel shucked down his breeches and reached for his kerchief as Daisy spread her legs and hauled up her skirt. Cashel moved forward, cock already rigid. Daisy put her hand on his chest. One last thing, she said. I don't want to get knapped, see, like every other housemaid and chambermaid in Oxford in pod with a bairn on the way. If you don't perform as I say I'll tell your mother you forced yourself on me. That clear, Master Cashel?

Clear. Very clear, Daisy. Even though he was in a swoon of lust, Cashel did everything he was told.

On the riverbank Ben looked at him, disgustedly, jealously.

'So you withdrew your *arbor vitae* from her cloven inlet?'

'Exactly that. I committed the Sin of Onan. Q.E.D.'

'I assume you're going to enlighten the dean on his misreading.'

'Hardly.'

'How many times?'

'Five, so far.'

'Liar. Foul liar.'

'Honour bright, Ben. I can't quite believe it myself.'

Strangely, the next day, there was no sign of Daisy about the Glebe. He asked Mrs Pillard where she was and Mrs Pillard said, darkly, that he had better ask Mrs Ross. Cashel sought out Elspeth and, as unconcernedly as he could manage, wondered if Daisy was having a day off.

'No. She's been dismissed, I'm afraid,' Elspeth said firmly.

'Dismissed?'

'She is no longer in our employ.'

'Why? What happened?'

'Pilfering. It seems she's been pilfering for months – for years, for all I know.'

'Daisy? Surely not? She loves working here. She told—' He stopped himself.

'What's it to you, Cashel?'

'Nothing. I just thought you liked her.'

'I do. I did. Until I found out she was a thieving minx.'

'There's nothing more to be said, then,' he added, carelessly, he hoped.

'I'm interviewing another maid this afternoon. Domestics come, domestics go. It's the way of the world.'

'How did you discover her?'

'Hogan did.'

'*Hogan?*'

'He went up to her room – he shouldn't have been there, I know – and turned out a chest he found under her bed. It was full of our stuff – silver, china, gewgaws.'

'Hogan? But how—'

'He brought down a sauce-boat that I thought had been lost. I asked him where he found it and he showed me. She was very clever. She only took things that were rarely used, small things easily not missed. An ivory thimble, a christening spoon, a Toby jug in the back of a cupboard. I had no option.' She looked closely at Cashel. 'She wasn't to be trusted. You can't have a servant in your house who can't be trusted.'

'Yes, I can see that,' Cashel said, nodding sagely. 'You had no choice.'

The next time Cashel saw Hogan he gave him a heavy thwack with the flat of his hand on the back of his head which made the boy cry.

Daisy's malfeasance troubled Cashel. He felt guilty about her sudden dismissal – illogically, as if his own sexual transgression with her had somehow brought about her unmasking as a petty thief. Damn that boy, Hogan! Yet, as he thought on, he wondered if her overt advances to him had been part of another, larger plan in her mind. What would she have asked him to furnish or provide once he was fully in her sway? He would have done anything, he knew, out of pure, hot desire and with the further threat and fear of exposure always lurking – the most potent lever against him. He found himself thinking again, reluctantly, of Dean Smythe's sermon and its dire warnings and repercussions. Had he escaped some awful fate? Had he sinned? Was this the price for committing the real Sin of Onan? He vowed never to be so tempted again.

The new housemaid was duly appointed – Mrs Rosebury, a sour-faced, humourless woman in her thirties, widowed with three children. Cashel felt himself ill, troubled by the whole affair, and Dr Jolly was summoned. He diagnosed a fit of the ague and prescribed some of his potions – a tincture of Turkey Rhubarb and his own patent Restorative Nervous Cordial – that made Cashel feel marginally worse.

Pelham Ross returned for a stay of three weeks, much to Elspeth's and the twins' joy. Cashel rose from his sickbed and, given the distraction Ross's presence provided, began to feel better. Ross seemed in genial mood – all was well with his world – and for the first time Cashel felt the new force of his interest. There was talk of university, a career in the law perhaps, or even of joining Ross in his various business ventures.

One morning at breakfast – Cashel and Ross were the first downstairs – the discussion was renewed. Ross quizzed him about his strongest subjects; Latin and Greek, Cashel replied. Then it must be the law, Ross said and as a qualified lawyer you'd be well suited for the world of commerce, of buying and selling, with some advantage.

'I'd still like to travel the world,' Cashel said. 'Perhaps I could be of use in your South African affairs.'

'South Africa? What about it?'

'Your mines, your entrepots.'

'Ah, yes. South Africa is over, alas. Everything wound up. Pass me those kidneys, will you? I've the hunger of a wolf this morning.'

There was something about the glibness of this answer that gave Cashel pause. South Africa was routinely cited as the reason for his long absences from the family. Elspeth would remark, 'If only Pelham worked in Europe and not so far away. Still – needs must.' And that was the end of the matter. And now, suddenly it seemed, it was no more.

Ross acquired two horses, a big bay hunter and a smaller sorrel mare, and he and Cashel started to go on rides together through the great expanse of meadows south of the city. Cashel, never wholly comfortable on the back of a horse, had to admire how at ease Ross was in the saddle as he cantered along a loop of the Isis, leaping effortlessly over hedges and wooden gates. Cashel would dismount and lead his horse rather than risk a tumble, for which he was subject to Ross's gentle mockery. 'We'll make a horseman of you yet, lad, don't you worry.' He was pleased to be sharing time with Ross – unknown almost, hitherto – and he sensed the polite reserve that had existed between the two of them begin to dissolve.

Ross was sophisticated and well travelled; he talked to Cashel of his stays in Brussels, Paris and Vienna. He advised him – after he had taken his degree, of course – to spend a year or more travelling at his leisure through Europe, volunteering to subsidize such a trip as well. See something of the world, Cashel, while you're young and without responsibilities, he advised. Then you can find yourself a wife and a profession without dreaming of