



EDMUND CRISPIN

THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON



BLOOMSBURY READER

Edmund Crispin

The Glimpses of the Moon



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1. Reminiscences of Old Gobbo

There's humour, which for chearful Friends we got,
And for the thinking Party there's a Plot.

Thomas Betterton, or Anne Brace-
Girdle, or William Congreve, or Anonymous:
from the Prologue to Congreve's
Love for Love

1

'That's another of them, don't you know,' said the Major. As some people can sense the presence of a cat in the room, so the Major could sense a journalist, or at any rate claimed he could. 'Really, it's too bad. How long is it since Routh was murdered?'

'Eight weeks, I suppose.'

'Eight weeks at least. And yet here are reporters still rooting round the place like ... like pigs in Périgord. What the devil do they expect to find, after all this time?'

'I don't believe that's a journalist,' said Fen. He ate the last of his veal-and-ham pie - conventionally insipid stuff with which, however, The Stanbury Arms served Bengal Club mango chutney in mitigation - and drank some beer. 'Of course that's not a journalist, Major. You've got journalists on the brain.'

The subject of their discussion, who had come into the bar only a minute previously, was a harmless-looking man in early middle age with scanty hair and a round, clean-shaven, yellowish face. His eyebrows were thick and smudged, as if laid on with a palette-knife, and he wore a dark townsman's suit. As he paid for his drink he eyed Fen and the Major speculatively, and after a moment, glass in hand, came across to speak to them.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'I'm a journalist.' Fen gave a snort of exasperation. 'Padmore's my name,' the newcomer went on, with diminished confidence. 'J. G. Padmore. I wonder if I might join you?' He peered anxiously at them out of moist brown eyes.

'Sit down, my dear fellow, sit down, do,' said the Major cordially. Whatever his other faults, he never let his prejudices debase his manners. 'I'm the Major, and this is Professor Gervase Fen, from Oxford.'

'How do you do?' said Fen. 'I'm sorry I made that noise. It was the Major I was irritated with, not you.'

'Yes, I do irritate people, I'm afraid,' said the Major, pleased at Fen's tribute. 'I talk too much, for one thing. Yes, well now, as I was saying, Fen is a Professor, and from Oxford. He's staying down here for part of his sabbatical, to write a book. It's to be about the modern novel. The post-war novel, that is. The post-war British novel.' He seemed to feel that Padmore's vocation necessitated filling him in on all this detail before anything further could be allowed to occur.

'Burgess, Anthony,' Fen instanced helpfully. 'Amis, Kingsley. Lessing, Doris, Howard, E. J., Drabble, Margaret ... Brooke-Rose, Christine.'

'Hysteron proteron,' said the Major.

'I don't know Hysteron's work,' said Padmore. 'But the others, of course, are all very - are all ver

‘Well and fine,’ the Major suggested.

‘But as you’ll have gathered, I’m still only at the card-indexing stage.’ And not mad-keen to be forging forward from it, either, Fen’s tone implied. He frowned. ‘Major,’ he said, ‘do tell that dog of yours to stop sniffing at my head.’

Padmore, who could see Fen’s head but no dog anywhere near it, looked round him a shade wildly. He relaxed, however, partially, on catching sight of a small black whippet, skeletal like an advertisement for some animal Oxfam, which was investigating a sack dumped in a corner by the bar counter.

‘He’s only sniffing,’ said the Major. ‘He won’t try and worry it out, don’t you know, not the way Sal would.’ Sal was the Major’s other pet, an inexhaustibly strident cocker bitch loved by no one but her owner.

‘It’s a pig’s head, for brawn,’ Fen explained to Padmore. ‘A present.’

‘From a Mrs Clotworthy,’ said the Major, the informative urge still fermenting in him. ‘A butcher’s widow, just turned seventy-five. She lives here in Burraford in a cottage.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Padmore vaguely. ‘How do you do?’ he said, Then, ‘Well, if you’re sure I’m not interrupting anything...’

By this time, regardless of whether they were sure or not, he had sat down on a narrow old black-painted bench fixed to the wall beside their table. There were several such benches in the bar-room - memorials to a centuries-extinct clientèle of pin-buttocks - but otherwise the furniture was all modern, from the oak counter with its mirror-backed shelves to the green glass-topped tables and the matching vinyl-covered chairs grouped round them. Isobel Jones, the landlord’s wife, hummed quietly to herself as she polished glasses. By the fireplace, an ancient man with no collar on sat motionless as a reptile, the breath moaning in his nose like wind up a chimney. Fred, the whippet, had abandoned Fen’s sack with a heavy sigh and lain down; he was now alternately licking his forepaws and gazing lachrymosely at the Major. For a pub at 11.30 on a sunny Saturday morning it was not a large complement, but there was good reason for this: nearly all the able-bodied local men who would normally have been present had been dragooned by the Rector into putting up stalls and marquees for the Autumn Church Fête to be held that afternoon in the grounds of Aller House.

Padmore, having inoffensively siphoned some of his ale-froth in under an extruded upper lip, put his glass on the table in a decisive manner, by way of indicating that he was now, so to speak, open for business. ‘It’s about Routh,’ he said. ‘And, of course, Hagberd.’

Since this news came as no surprise either to Fen or to the Major, they said nothing, but merely nodded at him slowly in unison, like a pair of china mandarins. ‘You see, I’m writing a book too,’ said Padmore. ‘I too am writing a book. About the case.’ They nodded again. Suddenly a new thought seemed to strike Padmore. ‘No, I’m not,’ he said.

Fen looked at him in perplexity. ‘You’re *not* writing a book?’

‘I mean, not now.’

‘Started it and then gave it up,’ the Major suggested. ‘Pity. Would have been just the job, if you’ll forgive my saying so.’

‘I mean, as a matter of fact it’s finished.’

‘Good gracious, my dear fellow, you have been quick,’ said the Major admiringly. ‘Only eight weeks since the thing happened, and you’ve done a book about it already.’

‘You’ve got to be quick nowadays, with murders,’ said Padmore. ‘Otherwise someone else who’s interested gets the jump on you and takes half your sales away. I’ve been worrying about that, I can

tell you. "Is someone going to get the jump on *me*?" I ask myself. "Or have I been lucky – am I in fact leading the field?"

'Yes, yes, my dear chap, of course you're leading it.'

'And I can only answer, "I don't know. I can't know."'

'No, now you come to point it out, naturally you can't.'

'All I can do is to rush into print as fast as possible, and hope for the best. But it's not right.'

'Not right at all,' said the Major. 'Dreadful thing to be forced to do.'

'I mean, the draft of my book isn't right,' said Padmore testily. 'That is, re-reading it, I don't find that the two men, Hagberd and Routh, *emerge* vividly enough. They don't start out at one from the page.'

'I should hope not,' said the Major. 'A very nasty experience, that'd be. No, no, my dear fellow, I know what you mean. I was only trying to make a joke.'

'Not properly rounded,' said Padmore. He paused in momentary confusion as his eye lit on a photograph of a scrawny fashion model in a newspaper which lay on the bench beside him. Then, recovering, 'So I thought I'd give myself a few days longer,' he said, 'and come down here again, talk to some of the people who knew them, and try to visualize them more distinctly.' Put like that, the project sounded at once tedious and insubstantial, like ectoplasm at a séance. 'And then do a certain amount of rewriting, I suppose,' he concluded unenthusiastically.

'No use looking at me, I'm afraid,' said Fen. 'I didn't get here till a week after it happened. Try the Major. He knew them.'

But the Major regretfully shook his head. 'Only to pass the time of the day with, don't you know. And I should think you'll find it's the same with most people. Horrible man, Routh. And Hagberd, mad as a hatter, poor chap. So of course there was no one at all close to either of them - not that I'm aware of, anyway.'

'Hagberd definitely struck you as insane, did he?' said Padmore earnestly. 'Even beforehand?'

'Lord, yes, he'd been like it for months,' said the Major. 'Ask anyone. It was all that work he did.'

'But what I can't understand is, why nobody took any action about it, if they realized he was dangerous.'

'But, my dear fellow, that's just what none of us did realize. He could be very fierce, of course, especially against Routh and Mrs Leeper-Foxe, but then, who wouldn't be? Besides,' said the Major with an air of reasonableness, 'everyone who lives in the countryside's a bit touched, one way or another. If we all started trying to have each other certified there'd be nobody left.'

'So in fact, the murder came as a complete surprise?'

'We-ll ...' The Major took an interval for consideration, passing the side of his right index finger along his narrow black moustache. 'Yes and no. All that hacking and hewing afterwards, don't you know - somehow *that* fitted in with Hagberd all right. What didn't seem to fit in was the killing itself.'

Padmore reached for his glass. 'To Hagberd, the dead flesh was dead flesh: nothing more,' he intoned. Evidently he was now quoting from his book. 'In the abusing of it,' he went on, 'the abusing of the dead flesh, that is, there could consequently be no true harm. Pain, not death, was the enemy.' Fen and the Major made simultaneous mental notes, reducing the book's potential sales by two. 'Is that right, would you say?' asked Padmore, relapsing into the language of everyday life. 'Right more or less?'

'Quite right, my dear fellow, absolutely right,' the Major agreed. 'And very... very forcefully put. Yes. The only thing is - if you don't mind my mentioning it - that I don't exactly see the point of

putting it at all, forcefully or any other way. I mean, although it's true that we all thought Hagberd was harmless, he wasn't was he? He just ignored our ideas on the subject, and went ahead and—murdered awful Routh anyway.'

And it was at this point that a new voice struck into the conversation: the voice of the ancient man by the fireplace.

'Er never,' it said.

*

2

The ancient man was called Gobbo.

That, at least, was how he was universally addressed; his real name, Gorley or Gorman or some such thing, had been in disuse for so long that by now he had probably forgotten it himself. As to 'Gobbo', that was a Gothicism (nothing to do with Shakespeare) bestowed round about the time of the relief of Ladysmith owing to the young Gorman's (or Godwit's) habit of hawking and spitting with an amplitude considered excessive even in those relatively coarse-grained days. Gobbo no longer hawked or spat, his third wife having with some effort cured him of these obnoxious practices; but the nickname was by that time ineluctable (the third wife's reward, on sinking exhausted into the grave, had been to have 'Agnes Lucy Gobbo' carved on her tombstone by a monumental mason labouring under a misapprehension), and had remained. For the rest, like many native Devonians off the beaten tourist track, Gobbo gave the impression of having been left over unaltered from a very early novel by Eden Phillpotts. He cackled pruriently at references to love or courtship. He cadged drinks. He reminisced, racily if not particularly engrossingly, about a boyhood whose chief amusements had apparently been poaching and voyeurism. He proffered recipes for long life. In winter, The Stanbury Arms gave him a free pint of bitter each day, for looking after the fire. Sometimes he would remember to do this. Grunting feebly from the exertion, he would throw on to the fire a great log, which would dislodge another great log, which would tumble out and roll, burning fiercely, to the centre of the room.

'Er never,' Gobbo now repeated.

Padmore, who had opened his mouth to reply to the Major, slowly shut it again. He and the Major swivelled to face Gobbo, like gun-turrets on a man-of-war in a *Look at Life* at the pictures. Fen meditatively spooned a selected piece of Bengal Club out of the jar and ate it in his fingers on its own.

The Major said, 'Who never what, Gobbo?'

'Er never killed en.'

'Hagberd never killed Routh? But, my dear fellow, that's nonsense. We know he did.'

'Giddout,' said Gobbo.

This, if inexplicit, nevertheless had a punctuating effect, so that the Major felt obliged to pause for a moment or two before pursuing the argument. Then he said, 'But why, Gobbo? The police were satisfied, more or less. What makes you think they were wrong?'

Gobbo moved his jaws silently. He was considering. Presently, 'I'll tell 'ee fer why,' he said.

Gilded and warmed by the steady October sunlight, they waited as patiently as possible for Gobbo to go on. Isobel Jones had disappeared into a back room, from which clinkings and bumpings indicated that she was shifting crates of bottles about. The whippet Fred, tiring of the companionship of Fen's sack, had rejoined the humans and was nudging, with his nose, the rubber tip of the propped up walking-stick which the Major carried for his arthritis. Like most dogs, Fred detested pubs, and knocking the Major's stick over was one of his regular methods of giving notice that in his opinion the time had come for departure.

The silence extended itself.

Fen wiped his fingers on his handkerchief and lit a cigarette.

At last, abruptly, Gobbo spoke.

'I'll tell 'ee fer why,' he said.

The Major's stick fell with a clatter to the floor. 'Yes, well, my dear fellow, get on and tell us, then,' said the Major, retrieving the stick with the dexterity of long practice.

Again Gobbo's jaws moved, this time with a stridulating noise. He was summoning up saliva, presumably with a view to further speech. Again they waited. But when after a suspenseful interval no further speech had in fact occurred, it suddenly became evident to them all that Gobbo's mind had unhitched itself from the topic, and was drifting rapidly out to sea. 'Quick! Catch him!' said Padmore agitatedly, and, 'Gobbo!' the Major rapped out in an army voice. 'Answer the question, please!'

Luckily Gobbo had never been in the forces, so this worked. 'Ur,' he said. The current had reversed course, and he was coming back inshore again. 'Ur. Ur, ur.' All at once a spasm of energy seized him. 'Er never,' he began recapitulating, *doppio movimento, accelerando*. 'Er never killed en. And I'll tell 'ee fer why. Cuz,' he coda-ed triumphantly, *allegro assai*, 'I wer' talkin' to en.'

Padmore stared at him. 'Talking to Hagberd?'

'Ehss.'

'When?'

'Ehss.'

'Concentrate, Gobbo,' said the Major severely. 'You were talking to Hagberd *when?*'

'Ehss.'

'*Concentrate*. You're trying to tell us that you were talking to Hagberd at the time when he was supposed to be killing Routh?'

'Ehss.'

'And you're quite sure you know when that was? I mean, the date, and time of day?'

'Mazed as a brish, er wer'.'

'Yes, yes, my dear chap, we know all that. What I'm asking is, when was it?'

Gobbo once more fell silent; but this time, perceptibly, it was because he was giving the matter in hand his full attention. 'Twenty-second,' he presently announced, with decision.

'August the twenty-second ... well, that's right enough,' said the Major, whose voice was by now back in mufti. 'That's right enough!'

'Monday,' Gobbo elaborated, flushed with his success.

'Yes, that's right too. It was a Monday. And the time?'

'Ar pars seven, when I leaves.'

'You're not saying you were talking to Hagberd at half past seven *here?*'

'Ehss.'

'But my dear fellow, you can't have been. People would have seen you both.'

'Us wer' out under tree.'

'Oh ... They shove him out of here at half past seven every evening,' the Major muttered explanatorily to Padmore, whose eyes were already glazed with the effort to understand, 'because otherwise the woman who gets him his supper won't wait. But there's a seat round the trunk of the old elm outside, and he sits down and has a rest there on the way home,.. So you talked to Hagberd that evening under the tree?'

'Ehss.'

'Do try and be a bit more garrulous, my dear fellow, can't you?' said the Major plaintively. 'At this rate we shall be here till next week. You talked to Hagberd that evening - right. Now, what did you talk about?'

'Ehss.'

'"Yes" isn't a proper answer, Gobbo.'

'Ehss.'

'No, it's not. I'll put the question another way. What did *Hagberd* talk about?'

Gobbo, clearly on the point of reiterating his monosyllable, at the last moment thought better of it and substituted something else instead. He said, 'Said er wer' crook wi' a sheila.'

This unlikely-sounding string of vocables had a temporarily stunning effect, not because of its content, but because to listen to, it seemed at first to make no sense at all. After a few moments, however, Fen nodded in sudden comprehension. 'Hagberd was an Australian, wasn't he?' he said. 'So he was annoyed with a girl, or upset about one.'

'What girl, Gobbo?' said the Major.

'Er didn'arf create.'

'The girl did?' said Padmore, baffled.

'"Er" means "he", my dear chap,' the Major told him. 'In this context, anyway.'

'In *this* context,' said Padmore heavily. 'Yes. I see. But anyway, what girl? This is the first I've heard of there being a woman in the case - I mean, apart from Mrs Leeper-Foxe and the Bust child.'

'I don't think Hagberd would have referred to Mrs Leeper-Foxe as a sheila,' said the Major. 'Sheila's a more or less complimentary word, isn't it?' He returned to the attack. 'Now listen, Gobbo. You say Hagberd was going on about a sheila. What sheila?'

'Doan know no Sheilas,' Gobbo retorted firmly, as if he were being accused of something. 'Furrin sort of a name,' he offered, supplementing entertainment with instruction.

'Let's try another tack, then,' said the Major, 'Gobbo, you know *where* Routh was murdered, do you?'

'Ehss.'

'Well, where?'

'Bawdeys Meadow.'

'And how far away from here is that?'

Gobbo ruminated. 'Better nor tew mile,' he eventually said. A joke occurred to him. 'So be they abbn' move' en,' he added, cawing with laughter.

'Yes, well, my dear fellow, don't you see, if Hagberd was two miles away from here murdering Routh, you couldn't have been talking to him under the tree, could you?'

'Ehss.'

'No, you couldn't, Gobbo.'

'So be,' said Gobbo happily, 'they abbn' move' en - abbn' move' en, see? Abbn',' he croaked on a note of deep self-satisfaction, 'move' en.'

'That's right,' said Fen.

'But he *can't* have been talking to him,' said Padmore irritably. 'He's thinking of the wrong day.' He addressed himself to Gobbo direct. 'You *can't* have been talking to Hagberd that evening. Or anyway, not at the time you say you were.'

Gobbo gave a dignified sniff. 'Tes trew, after that,' he said. 'So be 'ee doan believe ut, ask en up over,' he went on, jerking his head in the direction of the ceiling. 'Er sees all, knows all.'

These indications, which seemed to Padmore to add up to God, were more mundanely interpreted by the Major. ‘Jack Jones?’ he said. He meant The Stanbury Arms’s landlord, a pronounced — ergophobe of thirty-eight who spent almost all of his time upstairs in bed. ‘But if he’d seen you, he’d have been bound to mention it, I’d have thought.’

‘But it’s all nonsense,’ said Padmore. ‘It *must* be all nonsense.’

‘Still, think what a scoop you’ll have, my dear chap, if it turns out that Hagberd didn’t murder Routh after all.’

‘I don’t *want* a scoop. I just want not to have to write seventy-five thousand words all over again.’

‘Someone ought to have a word with Jack Jones about it, though,’ said Fen.

‘But it’s all nonsense.’

‘Oh, come now, my dear fellow,’ said the Major, ‘we can’t just drop the matter at this stage, can we?’

‘But if there was anything in it, this Jack Jones or whoever you’re talking about would have said. You said so yourself.’

‘Yes, but he may know something he doesn’t know he knows. Fen, my dear fellow, don’t you think it possible that Jack Jones knows something he doesn’t know he knows?’

‘Quite possible, I’d say.’

‘Well then, so we must dig it out,’ said the Major, as though Jack Jones were a challenging deposit of mineral-bearing clay. ‘Let’s ask Isobel if we can go and see Jack now, shall we?’

‘Now?’ said Padmore.

‘Yes, why not?’

And Padmore sighed. ‘Oh, all right,’ he said resignedly. ‘It’s a wild-goose chase, obviously - or at least, I hope it is. But all right.’

So they got to their feet - the Major effortfully, because of his arthritic hip - and went across to the bar-counter. Fred, who had sprung up with a yelp of gladness on seeing them begin to move, subsided again despairingly as soon as their direction became apparent. With the suddenness characteristic of old age, Gobbo had fallen fast asleep; his mouth hung open, displaying ochrous leathery gums and a pink tongue. Isobel Jones, summoned from the room at the back, said Yes, of course, her husband would be delighted to see them.

‘Just a mo’ and I’ll let him know you’re coming,’ she said, ‘so he can straighten himself up. Not that he isn’t very clean and neat always, but he likes to make a special effort when people visit him.’ Picking up a broomstick, she thumped lightly with its handle on the ceiling; and after a short interval an answering thump came from above.

‘There you are, then,’ said Isobel, nodding brightly at them.

‘Away do go,’ said Fen.

3

Jack Jones’s avocation - doing absolutely nothing, cleanly, healthily and inexpensively - had defied rational expectation by making him happy - though there had been, of course, difficulties, such as any true pioneering scheme must encounter as a matter of course, at least in its earlier stages. In Jack Jones’s case, the chief of these had been a woman doctor in Glazebridge, who three years previously had taken it into her head to try and get his licence for The Stanbury Arms withdrawn, on the ground that the landlord’s systematic physical inanimation must mirror a deep-seated psychic disturbance, liable to result in neglect of the lavatories, watering of the whisky, a colour bar and many other similar anti-social catastrophes; and although the Glazebridge magistrates, who disliked the woman

doctor, had collaborated with the Glazebridge police in blocking this pragmatism, the woman doctor was still about, and Jack Jones consequently went (or to be more accurate, lay) in constant fear of the assault's being renewed. As a result, once yearly he would constrain himself to a fever of activity, getting up, dressing and having himself driven into Glazebridge, all in order to attend Brewster Sessions personally and make sure that his livelihood was not again meddlesomely being put at risk. As he himself was the first to admit, these expeditions were purely superstitious, since licensees are always notified well in advance if any objection to them is going to be made; but he would have been incapable of neglecting them, in spite of the dreadful exertions they dictated, however hard he tried.

In all other respects, however, his existence was a sunny one. At nights he slept with Isobel in the bedroom at the back. In the mornings, after exercising on a rowing-machine and taking a bath, he moved into another bed in the living-room at the front, so placed that he could look out of the window over the carpark, and watch people's comings and goings during opening hours. As to Isobel far from resenting this regimen, she enjoyed running the pub single-handed, and was delighted that her husband had had the chance to settle down to a way of life which suited him so definitely. What a piece of luck it had been (she often said), that Pools win which had made it possible for them to buy the Arms! But for that, poor Jack would probably have been forced to stay on in Dagenham for years and years and years more, going out to that nasty motor factory five days a week or more.

A thin, spruce man with horn-rimmed glasses which looked too large for him, Jack Jones greeted the committee from the bar with his usual sociable warmth. 'How do you do?' said Padmore, on being introduced. 'You're on the mend, I hope.' So then Fen and the Major had to explain that their host was not an invalid, but merely had a settled disrelish for being up and about.

'It's back-to-the-womb, so they tell me,' said Jack Jones, giving the tidily tucked placental sheet an approving pat. 'I'm emotionally immature – can't bear the thought of having to face up to life's problems. Well, it is nice to see you all,' he said with evident sincerity. 'I am pleased.'

They said that they were pleased, too, and the Major explained why they had come.

'Well, I don't know,' said Jack Jones, frowning slightly. 'It's a bit difficult. I do remember that evening, of course, because the police questioned everyone in the neighbourhood about it – even,' he said in gentle wonderment, 'me. So of course, that way it got fixed in my mind. And I can tell you one thing – Gobbo certainly did leave here that evening bang on time. I know because I looked at my watch because the afternoon seemed to have gone by in a flash, and I could hardly believe it was so late. And he did have his sit-down as usual under the old elm. But as to whether he talked to anyone, can't be sure. Because, look.'

With deliberation, so as to avoid punishing his muscles needlessly, Jack Jones elevated himself an inch or two against the pillows. He pointed out of the window. Clustering round the bed-head, Fen and Padmore and the Major gazed intelligently in the direction indicated. There, sure enough, was the elm-tree, with the bench fixed round its bole. There too was the battered grey Morris 1000 which Padmore had hired in Glazebridge to take him round the neighbourhood. And there too was a much newer, larger shinier saloon, whimsically disfigured by the words Avgas Will Travel painted along its side. Hundreds of unidentifiable small birds sat in rows on the telephone wires, pecking sedulously at their armpits. A light breeze blew. In the centre of the lane beyond the car-park a couched cat was having a choking fit, trying to bring up a fur-ball.

'Because, look,' said Jack Jones. 'From where I am' – and his inflection made it clear that where he was could be taken for all practical purposes as immutable – 'from where I am you can see the tree. Bend closer.' They bent closer. 'You can see the tree – only not, of course,' said Jack Jones, 'if there's anything in front of it.'

The Major straightened up rather abruptly. ‘Yes, quite so, my dear fellow,’ he said. ‘One very seldom can see anything if there’s anything in front of it. Not properly, anyway. So there was something in front of it that evening, was there? A car, I suppose. But in that case, from up here, couldn’t you even so have seen if –’

‘No, because it was a horse-box,’ Jack Jones said. ‘One of Clarence Tully’s. I’ve told him he can leave them here any time he wants, and that evening he did, and that’s what cut off my view of the old elm.’

‘So actually, you couldn’t even see Gobbo?’

‘Oh yes, I could see *Gobbo*. Well, part of him.’

‘Well then, couldn’t you see if he was talking to anyone?’

‘No, I couldn’t, I’m afraid. Anyone he was talking to would’ve been hidden completely by the horse-box.’

‘Yes, quite, but what I mean is, you could see he was talking to *someone*, couldn’t you? You could see his mouth move and so forth.’

‘No.’

‘But, my dear chap, why ever not?’

‘Because it was only Gobbo’s back part I could see. I couldn’t see his face at all.’

‘Well,’ said Fen, ‘but what about when Gobbo left, to go on home?’

‘I wasn’t here, I’m afraid. I’d got up to go to the toilet. And then when I came back, Gobbo had left ... I’m sorry,’ said Jack Jones sadly, ‘but there it is.’

‘As a matter of interest, though,’ said Fen, ‘when you came back, was there anyone in the car – parked at all?’

‘No, no one. Nothing except for the horse-box. Mondays are always quiet. No, the only other – Wait, though!’ said Jack Jones in sudden excitement. ‘Wait! The Rector!’

‘The Rector, my dear fellow? What about him?’

‘He passed!’

‘Passed? Where? When?’

‘Just before I went to the toilet, it was,’ said Jack Jones, gratified at having at last found something positive to tell them. ‘Coming up along the lane fast, the Rector was – you know, with that bandy-legged stride of his – and he scowled up that path that leads back to Mrs Clotworthy’s cottage, and then when he got opposite the old elm he scowled at Gobbo too.’

‘Scowled?’ said Padmore in some surprise. He evidently had no idea that Burraford’s Rector, a naturally splenic man, was apt to be irked by the mere sight of a parishioner, no matter how harmlessly occupied. ‘Scowled. I see. Yes. And what did he do then?’

‘Went on past.’

‘But if Hagberd had been there, talking to Gobbo, then he must have seen him, mustn’t he?’

‘No. Not if Hagberd was round at the back of the old elm. Because look at how thick that trunk is.’

‘Yes, I see that, but – but – Look, let’s put it this way. Was Gobbo facing right?’

‘No, left’

‘I’ll try again. What I meant was, was Gobbo facing the right way to have been talking to Hagberd if Hagberd was at the back of the elm?’

‘Oh, that. Yes. Sure he was.’

‘We’ll have to ask the Rector,’ said the Major. ‘There’s nothing else for it.’

‘But if he’d seen Hagberd talking to Gobbo, he’d be bound to have told the police.’

‘Yes, my dear fellow, but as we were saying before, if Gobbo was seen talking to *someone*, that would verify his story at least to *that* extent. We’ve got to go on inquiring, it seems to me, so long as there’s anything left to inquire about Jack, don’t you agree?’

‘Gracious, yes, Major. It’s all very interesting – quite an excitement I’m only sorry I can’t help you more over it myself, but it was that rhubarb Isobel gave me for lunch that day.’

2. Alps on Alps Arise

Though we write 'parson' differently, yet 'tis but 'person' ... and 'tis in Latin *persona*, and *personatus* is a parsonage.

John Selden: *Table-Talk*

1

So they left Jack Jones and went back downstairs to the bar, which by now was beginning to fill up a bit. Gobbo was still asleep - bent forward at an alarming-looking angle, as though putting his head down to ward off a faint - and Padmore, who wanted to ask him more questions, said that it would be only humane to wake him, and set him upright again. But the Major disagreed. They had much better see the Rector first, he said, and then if necessary refer the matter back to Gobbo later. As to Gobbo's posture, he often slept that way, and it seemed if anything to do him good, possibly by easing the pressure of his heart on his diaphragm, or vice versa. This transferable-vote hypothesis having subdued Padmore temporarily, they retrieved the whippet Fred, and Fen's sack, and went out into Indian summer.

The small birds had all disappeared, no doubt on the first leg of a migration, and so had the cat. From the kennels of the Glazebridge and District Harriers, three quarters of a mile away, came a clamour of hounds, at this distance uncannily suggestive of the bawlings of football fans attending a match. Suddenly there was a muffled explosion, and the near-side rear tyre of Padmore's hired car subsided to a rubber pancake.

'Now look what's happened,' said Padmore.

But the Major said that he was supposed to walk anyway, for the benefit of his arthritis, so after Padmore had stared fixedly at the car for several moments, the expedition to the Rector set off on foot. Waving good-bye to Jack Jones at his window, it turned left along the lane in the direction of Aller and Glazebridge - past the church with its tall tower ('Popish', was the Rector's opinion of church towers) and ring of seven bells ('Popish'); past the Old Parsonage, where Mrs Leeper-Foxe had had her dreadful experience while eating breakfast; and so, after a couple of hundred yards, out of Burraford into what once, before the Central Electricity Generating Board got at it, had been open country.

Power-lines marched and countermarched, criss-crossing one another at all angles, like files of army motor-cyclists giving a display at a tattoo; it was to Burraford, for preference, that the Board brought distinguished foreign visitors when it wanted to exhibit its method of never using one pylon where three would do as well. Underneath the Board's jumble of ironmongery there were, however, fields, hedges, trees, brooks, footpaths and farm animals. To your right, on a reasonably clear day, you could see part of the south-eastern escarpment of the Moor. To your left you could see the eighteenth-century façade of Aller House. Ahead - about a mile ahead where the lane sloped upwards to a series of narrow bends and the hedges changed to high stone walls and embankments - you could see Aller hamlet. Here the Rector lived, and here Fen had rented a cottage for the three months of his stay. If you carried on beyond Aller, for five miles or so, you arrived eventually at Glazebridge, the small but affluent market town which was the centre of the district.

Owing to the Major's hip, progress was slow; but Fen's sack weighed heavy enough to make him glad to amble, and Padmore was clearly not athletic at the best of times. They met, and were greeted by, a steady trickle of people coming away from the preparations for the Church Fete. Pattering along,

a yard or two ahead of them, Fred frequently turned his head to make sure they were still there. He seemed to be afraid that if he relaxed his vigilance at all, a pub would spring up magically by the roadside, and suck the Major in.

Padmore gave an account of himself.

He was not, it appeared, properly speaking a crime reporter at all. In reality he was an expert on African affairs, and had returned from the dark continent three months previously with the cheerless distinction of having been expelled from more emergent black nations, more expeditiously, than any other journalist of any nationality whatever. Even Ould Daddah and Dr Hastings Banda had expelled him, he said - the latter inadvertently, under the impression that he was a Chinese.

'Underdeveloped countries with overdeveloped susceptibilities,' said Padmore sourly.

There had been no question, he went on, of his trying to knock African aspirations; on the contrary he sympathized with them. Simply, he had had a run of exceptionally bad luck. He would send off a cable censuring some dissident General at the exact moment when the General's minions were successfully gunning down the palace guards, the Deputy Postmaster and the doorman at the television studios. Or he would praise the enlightened policies of a Minister already on his way to be sequestered or hanged. Or he would commend the up-to-date safety precautions at an oil refinery which the next day would go up in flames, with fearsome loss of life. As a result of all this, eventually his paper, the *Gazette*, tiring of running indignant news items about their special correspondent's various expulsions, had called him back to London, a call he had answered as soon as he could get out of the Zambian prison where he had been put because of an article drawing the world's attention to how well President Kaunda was always dressed (this had been interpreted as imputing conspicuous waste in high places). The *Gazette* people had been very nice about it, Padmore said. They hadn't at all blamed him. There had been no question of not keeping him on the strength. Nevertheless, no one had been able to find anything much for him to do until the night when Chief Detective Superintendent Mashman had given a party to celebrate his retirement after thirty years in the Force. All four of the *Gazette*'s senior crime staff had gone to this, and on their way back from it had driven rapidly into the back of a Bird's Eye Frozen Foods lorry and been removed to hospital. So when the sensational news of Routh's murder had come in, the following morning, Padmore had been assigned to cover the story; not (as he admitted) because he had any special qualifications for doing so, but because his mooning about the office was beginning to get on everyone's nerves.

'I expect you'll find you've seen much worse things in Africa,' his Editor had said.

'So I came down to Glazebidge and stayed for a week at The Seven Tuns,' said Padmore, 'and that was when I got the idea of ... why are we speeding up all of a sudden?'

The Major explained that they were speeding up because they were about to pass the Pisser.

Padmore said, 'I see.'

'Listen,' said the Major. 'It's making its noise again.'

There certainly was a noise going on, Padmore realized, and a disquieting one at that. It was being produced by a large, old-fashioned pylon set close against the left-hand side of the lane; and it was owing to the basic character of this noise, the Major explained, that this pylon which issued it was known throughout the neighbourhood as the Pisser (even intensely respectable elderly ladies, the Major truthfully claimed, would ring one another up and say, 'It's such a lovely afternoon, why don't we meet at the gate by the Pisser and go for a walk over Worthington's Steep?'). Long familiarity with the Pisser had not, however, bred contempt for it. On the contrary, it was universally felt that one of these days the Pisser's noise would end in a detonation, so that it would release the cables it supported, and these would fall on, and electrocute, anyone who happened to be in the lane at the point over which they passed. Complaints about the menace of the Pisser had at first been pooh-

poohed by the electricity people, the more so as its activity was intermittent, so that the first draft of investigating engineers had found it as quiet as an oyster, and had gone away full of indignation at having their valuable time taken up with false alarms. But then, months later, the Pisser had chanced to be overheard by a high official of the Board picnicking near by with his wife and children; the attitude of authority had consequently undergone an abrupt change, and the Pisser was now frequently visited by technicians in helicopters or vans, hoping to catch it making its noise and to decide what was causing it. In the second part of their programme they had so far been unsuccessful, since the Pisser's noise had not only survived two complete overhauls, but had actually intensified both in volume and in oftenness. For this reason everyone still stepped out smartly when in its vicinity, sometimes even breaking into an agitated trot.

By the time Padmore had been told about the Pisser's ways they were safely past it, but as the Major was out of breath from talking and hurrying at the same time, they stopped for a brief rest where a horse was peering at them over the hedge.

'You awful animal, you,' the Major said to it.

'Is it in poor condition?' Padmore asked.

'No, no, my dear fellow, it's just an ordinary healthy horse,' the Major assured him. The horse rolled its eyes at them, revolving its ears on its skull. 'Horrible treacherous brutes,' the Major said. 'Nip you in two at the neck as soon as look at you.'

As if to confirm this, the horse bared large discoloured teeth and seized hold of an ash shoot, backing away in an unsuccessful attempt to tug the shoot loose from its moorings in the hedge. 'But thought you'd been in the cavalry,' Fen said to the Major as they walked on. 'Before it was mechanized, I mean.'

'Quite right, my dear fellow. Twenty years of it, I had, in India.'

'But didn't that get you used to horses?'

'No, the reverse,' said the Major. 'The more I saw of horses, the more *unused* to them I got. I was drunk for a week,' he confided, 'celebrating the day they took them all away. Because after they'd gone, don't you know, I couldn't have a fall.'

'You mean you'd had a lot of falls.'

'No, none. I *never* had a fall, not even when I was learning to ride, as a child. Well, you can see what that implied. Theory of Probability and so forth,' said the Major, jouncing along briskly with the aid of his stick. 'The longer I went on without having a fall, the more likely it became that I *would* have one. In the end it got a bit unnerving, because every time I got on a horse, the chances were about a billion to one against my *not* having a fall. I won through, though,' he said proudly. 'I survived. No fall. I'm here to tell the tale. Padmore, do you ride?'

Padmore said not.

'Don't ever be tempted to try,' said the Major. 'Not unless you fancy sitting astride a mobile double bed with ten homicidal lunatics carrying it.'

On their left they passed the straight stony cart-track, with wire fencing on either side, which led to the grounds of Aller House; through the trees and the massed pylons they caught glimpses of the Church Fete stalls and marquees. Then on their right, coming round a bend into Aller hamlet, they passed the lane leading up to Broderick Thouless's bungalow, to Younging's pig farm, and to the Dickinsons' cottage which Fen was occupying.

Finally, round a second bend, they arrived at the Rector's house, a huge, lowering mid-Victorian erection in a comfortably large garden.

The Rector's house was called Y Wurry.

The Rector's family had lived in Aller continuously ever since one of his remoter forebears had fled to Devon to avoid being burned to death for Protestantism under Bloody Mary. Confirmed demolishers and rebuilders, they had put up house after house after house on the same site, a habit which had kept its impetus till the 1860s, when the Rector's great-grandfather had invested the family fortune in a Tavistock arsenic mine, and lost the lot. Not that the Burges were impoverished, exactly, even then. Though one of their dominant genes caused them to regard houses as infinitely expendable, another had made them very tenacious of other kinds of property, so that in the course of five centuries they had accumulated a staggering quantity of furniture, pictures, porcelain, silver, books, brocades and so forth, much of it rubbish, but some of it extremely valuable; and despite the fact that a great deal of this had been sold off during the last hundred years, enough still remained to fill three of the five attic rooms where once the damp souls of housemaids had despondently sprouted (thirty-five miles to the nearest Music Hall).

To do the Rector justice, Y Wurry hadn't been his idea. Up to 1937 the place hadn't been called anything in particular; but then in that year the Rector had gone off to India to preach better behavior to the polyandrous Todas, and had decided on a furnished let during his absence, to help top up the Church funds. Not realizing what they were letting themselves in for, a trusting couple from Hinchley Wood had taken on the lease on the agent's say-so. The wife, normally a stoical woman, had burst into tears ten minutes after entering the front door, but since they weren't specially well off, and couldn't afford to compound for the rent, they had had to make the best of it. It was not, they wrote to their friends, that there was anything definite they could complain about. It just wasn't home-y, that was all. 'Great big rooms with pointy sort of windows,' the wife wrote, more tears splodging on to the page, 'and all heavy dark furniture not like our nice Civil Service Stores and all heavy drapes dust traps and I'll swear there are mice or even rats! though Roland says don't be silly as we've put down cheese and no one's eaten it.' Eventually they had taken to living almost entirely in the kitchen. The wooden name-sign on the gate had been the last despairing bleat on Roland's slughorn in face of the Dark Tower; after that they had abandoned the attempt to humanize their surroundings and had instead anaesthetized themselves by constantly going into Glazebridge to the cinema, where they often saw the same programme three days running, worsening their condition, as they stared at the screen, by getting diarrhoea from eating too much ice-cream.

The Rector, returning from India, had been surprised to find his property baptized in his absence, but, not being a man very sensitive to literary nuances, had done nothing about the sign until many years later, when the Major had filled a conversational gap by suggesting that not worrying was probably a Popish practice, and so *ipso facto* unfit to be continuously recommended on the gates of proper Christian people of any sort, let alone proper Christian clerics. Though temperamentally little subject to anxiety himself, the Rector, struck by this notion, had at once gone to work on the nuts and bolts which held the sign to the massive wrought-iron curlicues of his great-grandfather's gate. When these resisted him - being by now rusted tight - he had seized a hatchet and dealt the sign itself a heavy blow diagonally across the middle, and would certainly have gone on to reduce it to splinters but for being interrupted by a parishioner in trouble. Later, after he had given the parishioner a lot of money and no advice, it had occurred to him that since many undeniable Protestants, such as Jesus of Nazareth, had advised against worrying, the Major must have been speaking frivolously; so that apart from a sermon against frivolity the following Sunday, with special reference to the Major (lightly camouflaged as 'a certain retired military person'), he had expelled the matter of the sign from his mind, and it had stayed expelled.

When the party from The Stanbury Arms arrived at the Rector's gate they saw a grey Mini neatly parked outside it

Visitor.

They went on in nevertheless.

The Rector's acreage was planted to a disconcerting extent simply with hedges - huge, unkempt, dusty, spider-haunted walls of lonicera and laurel and yew; making your way among them, you felt that you were in a giant's knot-garden, or a maze. And that Fen and Padmore and Fred and the Major were going to have to make their way among at least some of them was at once obvious. From somewhere out of doors over to their right, the Rector's voice, which even when imparting confidences could be heard fields away, was being raised in wrath.

'I don't care,' it was saying. 'I don't care. For all I care, the population of Plymouth can light its houses with tallow dips. Pylon, indeed. You're not putting any pylon in *my* paddock, and that's flat. And I'll tell you another thing.'

Guided partly by this uproar and partly by the Major, who professed to know his bearings, they plunged into the greenery, and so presently reached the source of the disturbance, which proved to be an overgrown circular grass clearing with an ancient sundial in the middle and hedges all round. With force rather than finesse, the Rector was in process of trimming these hedges, which as a result were beginning to look like a sort of cubist switchback. He had got down from his step-ladder and was waving his shears threateningly at a terrified little man in grey.

'Ha!' said the Rector.

If you took the Rector from the top downwards, the first thing you saw was iron-grey hair thatching a high, noble forehead. Below this point, however, matters deteriorated abruptly. No doubt about it, the Rector's actual *face* was simian - so that the overall effect was as if Jekyll had got stuck half-way in the course of switching himself to Hyde. The clothes were a crumpled, laurel-spattered clerical black, with dog-collar and with outsize cracked black shoes. Despite bow legs, the height was six foot three, and the frame was formidable. 'I'm not,' the Rector had once complacently remarked, 'the type of thing you want to meet unexpectedly on a dark night.'

The Major said, 'Morning, Rector. This is Padmore, who's here on a visit.'

'How do,' said the Rector. 'Morning, Fen. What's that you've got in that sack?'

'It's a pig's head. Mrs Clotworthy's birthday pig's head, actually. I picked it up from her porch this morning. She gave it me because I'm an M.A.'

'Poor woman's obviously getting a bit gaga,' said the Rector. 'Ah well, we all come to it, if we live long enough. I don't imagine I shall, mind, but most of us do.'

The terrified little man in grey said, 'I'm from Sweb.'

'How do you do?' said Padmore. 'From *where*?' he asked.

'Acronym,' said the Major. 'Stands for South Western Electricity Board. They think that if they call themselves Sweb, don't you know, it'll make people look on them as friends.' He shook his head sadly at the thought of so much innocence exposed in a harsh world, like babies on rocks outside Sparta.

'Damn the man if he doesn't want to put up a pylon in my paddock,' said the Rector.

'They want to put pylons everywhere,' said Fen.

'Every effort is made to safeguard the amenities,' the man from Sweb said in a high, tremulous voice. 'Every effort.'

'I can safeguard my amenities without any help from you, thanks very much,' said the Rector. 'You go and safeguard someone else's amenities. Oh, and by the way, now I come to think of it, since

you're in the neighbourhood you can look in at the Church Fête this afternoon. Do you a world of good.'

The man from Sweb smirked wretchedly. He was neat as a henbird, all in grey except for shoes and tie. Despite the warmth of the day he wore an overcoat and a homburg hat with a diminutive turned-up brim. His face was round and pink, a uniform clear pink like the inside of a young cat's mouth; his eyes were blue and protruding. He was clean-shaven. His little pot-belly kept his overcoat buttons occupied without straining them too noticeably.

'Church Fête? I - I'm not religious, I'm afraid,' he managed to get out.

'If you're not religious, you do well to be afraid,' said the Rector. 'However, we've no objection to taking money from the heathen, I'm glad to be able to say. If you can't get to the Fête, you can make your contribution to me personally, now.'

'I - I'm afraid that at the moment it's not - not quite convenient to - to -'

'Tight-fisted as well as a heathen,' the Rector commented. 'Well now, I hope you're quite clear in your mind about this pylon proposal. I reject it.'

'Y-you understand that we have p-powers to obtain a c-c-c-compulsory order,' the man from Sweb trepidantly squeaked.

'Don't you try threatening me, my man,' said the Rector, almost kindly. 'I've made my decision, and that's the end of that. So now be off with you.' He frowned slightly, apparently feeling that this peremptoriness ought in Christian charity to be softened a little, perhaps with a touch of light humour. 'Be off with you,' he amended, 'or I'll chop off your feet with these shears, and leave you to run away on your bleeding stumps.'

At this, the man from Sweb gave a small, moaning cry, turned from them and stumbled out of the clearing. Diminishingly they heard him blundering into shrubs and hedges as he tried to find his way back to the gate.

'Uncivil sort of a fellow,' the Rector remarked. 'Didn't even have the elementary courtesy to say good-bye. Well now, what can I do for you lot?'

They told him.

'Gobbo!' the Rector exclaimed. 'Yes, certainly I saw *Gobbo* that evening, the evening Routh was knocked off. Why shouldn't I have seen him?'

'No reason at all, my dear chap,' the Major agreed. 'But if I may say so, you seem to have rather missed the point. The question is, did you see Hagberd as well?'

'No, because he was off somewhere else, murdering Routh.'

'Yes, but Gobbo says he *wasn't*.'

'Ah,' said the Rector magnanimously, 'I see what you mean now. You didn't make yourself at all clear at first, chorusing at me all together like that. Did I see Hagberd with Gobbo, you're asking.'

'Yes.'

'No.'

'He wasn't there?'

'He may have been *there*?' the Rector admitted. 'All I'm saying is that I didn't see him. Couldn't have done, not if he'd been behind the horse-box or the elm.'

'It's all a lot of nonsense,' said Padmore.

'Gobbo *was talking*, mind you,' the Rector said.

'He was?'

'Yes. Might have been just to himself, though. Or he might even,' the Rector added doubtfully,

'have been saying a prayer ... Actually, don't pay too much attention to that,' he advised them, though none of them was in fact paying it any attention at all. 'Me being a clergyman, my mind tends to run on prayer.'

'Jack Jones said,' said Fen, 'that just before you got to the pub, you looked along the path that leads to Mrs Clotworthy's cottage and scowled at somebody.'

'Scowled?' said the Rector, scowling. 'I never scowl. And anyway, I don't remember that I -'

But then he did remember. Flicking his horny fingers with a noise like a fire-cracker, he said, 'Yes I do, though. It was Youings.'

'Who's Youings?' Padmore anxiously demanded.

'A pig farmer, my dear fellow.' The Major began absently scratching Fred's back with the rubber tip of his stick. 'Lives just up the road.'

'He was coming away from Mrs Clotworthy's,' said the Rector. 'Or perhaps he was just taking the short cut through from Chapel Lane.'

'Youings,' Padmore muttered. He seemed depressed at this fresh addition to the *dramatis personae* accreting round Gobbo's troublesome disclosures. 'Youings, Youings. Youings.'

The Major said, 'Did Youings follow you past the pub, Rector?'

'Don't know,' said the Rector. 'Could have done. You'll have to ask him.'

'House that Jack built,' said Fen.

'Well, I'm going back to talk to Gobbo again,' said Padmore. 'He's the mainspring.'

'Rusty old mainspring,' said the Rector. 'And if you take my advice, you'll take no notice of all this gammon he's been spouting.' ('Right,' said Padmore.) 'Amuse yourselves with it, by all means,' said the Rector, as though offering them a valuable indulgence. 'Don't take it seriously, that's all.' To Padmore he said, 'By the way, don't forget to come to the Fête, will you? All the fun of the fair. Yes, and while you're there don't forget to see the Botticelli.'

'The Botticelli?' said Padmore faintly.

'Well, of course, it isn't a Botticelli really,' said the Rector. 'Awful great nineteenth-century daub, actually, size of a barn door. Assumption of the B.V.M. or some such thing. Popish. Still, the Misses Bale imagine it's a Botticelli, so they get upset if enough people don't go and see it. You pay five bob and go in alone and sit in front of it and meditate on it for ten minutes.'

'Do you?' said Padmore helplessly.

'Yes, because that's what the Misses Bale's mother used to make their father do. Terrible woman. I don't believe she believed it was a Botticelli at all, but she always told her daughters it was, and now they can't get the idea out of their heads. Nice women otherwise, mind you, do a lot of work for the Church.'

'The Botticelli is School of Burne-Jones,' said the Major. 'And he's getting to be quite sought-after nowadays. There was a programme about him the other night on the telly.'

'Telly, telly, telly, telly,' said the Rector, as if calling a cat. 'All you ever think about is telly.'

'I don't watch much except for the commercials,' said the Major meekly. 'And then it's only for the jingles.'

This was true. Though a skilled water-colourist and a voracious reader, the Major had suffered all his life from tone-deafness, and so had had no comprehension whatever of music until IT V had come along, reducing the art to such brevity, and such absolute banality, that even the Major had found himself able to grasp it.

'The hands that wash dishes can be soft as your face,' he suddenly sang at the Rector in a loud, crackling falsetto, 'with mild green Fairy Liquid ... Liquid, Liquid,' he sang. 'I like that melodic turn'

or whatever you call it, on "Liquid". Very affecting.'

'It's your wits it's affecting, if you ask me,' said the Rector. 'I suppose you haven't been eating properly again. He doesn't eat properly,' he reported to Padmore.

'Ah,' said Padmore, pretending to have had a suspicion confirmed.

'You'd better stay to lunch,' the Rector told the Major. 'Liver and bacon today, fill up with vitamin B.'

'Good,' said the Major. He liked eating with the Rector, who not only had a first-rate cook but also declined to allow conversation during meals. Explaining this policy to his Bishop, who had been about to dine with him during the course of a visitation, 'What is the good,' the Rector had said, 'of God giving us delicious-tasting foods, if every time we lift a forkful to our mouths we have to break off to cope with the inane prattlings of our guests?' (The Bishop, though he prided himself on his conversational skill, had taken this very well, on the whole. In any case he found the Rector much less of a burden than the incumbents of some other parishes in his diocese, who were given to composing pop masses, selling Coca-Cola in the vestry, blessing motor-cycles and other similar unedifying practices, thereby offending such congregations as they had without permanently, or even temporarily, recruiting anyone new.)

'A Dettol home is a happy home,' the Major sang.

'Can't ask you other two,' said the Rector, 'because there's not enough.' Padmore uttered a single disclamatory vocable which would no doubt have blossomed into a full-length previous engagement if the Rector had given it the least chance. 'And now I must get on with these hedges,' the Rector said. 'Major, you can stand by and pick up the bits.'

3

On their way out, Fen and Padmore lost themselves, coming out on to the Rector's front path considerably nearer to his shallow front porch than to his gate. In the porch they saw grey-clad buttocks bent as if for a caning, their owner peering anxiously in through The Letter-box.

'So there we are,' said the man from Sweb, straightening at their approach. 'Has it gone in, or hasn't it?' he added, in the bright, uncommitted fashion of a television question-master offering alternatives in a quiz.

The Major having been left behind with Fred, and Padmore being still half stunned by the complexities of English rural life, Fen felt that it was up to him to take the lead. 'What is it,' he asked, 'that may or may not have gone in?'

'The Compulsory Service Order.' The man from Sweb sighed, with every evidence of genuine regret. 'We ask people to cooperate, of course, but if they won't, then there's nothing else for it.'

'But couldn't you save time and trouble by compelling everyone to cooperate straight away?'

'Oh, no,' said the man from Sweb, shocked. 'That'd be dictatorship, wouldn't it? Sweb wouldn't do anything like that. Dear me, no... The only thing was, I didn't feel the Rector was in quite the right mood for me to give him the order personally, so now I've put it in The Letter-box.'

'Let's hope so.'

'Of course I have.' The man from Sweb re-buttoned his grey overcoat efficiently across his middle. 'Well, I must be away, away, away. Anyone for a lift?'

But there was no one for a lift, since Fen lived close by, and Padmore was heading back to Burraford to have another go at Gobbo, whereas the man from Sweb's headquarters were in Glazebidge, in the opposite direction.

Though lunch was still pending, the man from Sweb puristically said 'Good afternoon,' and trotted

off to his Mini.

~~‘Ought to have remembered to tell him to get his people to do something about that pylon,’~~ said Padmore, on whom the Pisser had made its usual abiding first impression. ‘You’ll have a word with this Youings, then?’

Fen said that if possible he would. He still, however, lacked any real interest in the Routh-Hagber horrors, and off-hand, considered it unlikely that Gobbo’s reminiscences, even if correct, were going to make any serious difference to anyone so long as they remained so feebly supported.

‘That tyre,’ said Padmore sadly. ‘I’m going to have to change that wheel,’

Fen walked with him for fifty yards, back towards Burraford, and parted from him at the entrance to the Thouless-Youings-Dickinson lane. They had arranged to meet again later on, at the Church Fete.

‘Watneys brings us all together,’ Fen heard the Major singing in the distance. ‘What we want is Watneys.’

3. Youngings: A Rebuttal

Various the roads of life; in one
All terminate, one lonely way
We go; and 'Is he gone?'
Is all our best friends say.

Walter Savage Landor:
Wisdom of Life and Death

1

As he walked up the lane, towards Younging's pig farm and his own cottage, Fen heard more music.

To be accurate, what he heard was not so much music as sounds. The sounds were being produced by Broderick Thouless, on the piano in the hut in his garden where he worked.

Film-music composers are just as liable to type-casting as actors and actresses. Chance pitchforks them into working on a picture which turns out specially successful, and subsequently, regardless of whether they have contributed anything ponderable to the picture's success or not, producers go on for years and years mechanically re-hiring them for further pictures of the same kind, with the result that one spends his working life in a perpetual seascape, another writing wah-wahs on trumpet parts for people surfacing in mud-baths into which they have comically fallen, a third assembling electronic bees for nude love scenes, and so on.

For more than a decade now, Broderick Thouless had resentfully specialized in monsters.

For him, type-casting had set in with a highbrow horror film called *Bone Orchard*, a Shepperton prestige production which against all probability had made a profit of over a quarter of a million pounds. By nature and inclination a gentle romantic composer whose idiom would have been judged moderately progressive by Saint-Saëns or Chaminade, Thouless had launched himself at the task of manufacturing the *Bone Orchard* score like a berserker rabbit trying to topple a tiger, and by over compensating for his instinctive mellifluousness had managed to wring such hideous noises from his orchestra that he was at once assumed to have a flair for dissonance, if not a positive love of it. Ever since then he had accordingly found himself occupied three or four times a year with stakes driven through hearts, foot-loose mummies, giant centipedes aswarm in the Palace of Westminster and other such grim eventualities, a programme which had earned him quite a lot of money without, however, doing anything to enliven an already somewhat morose, complaining temperament. A bachelor of forty-six, he existed in an aura of inveterate despondency, lamenting his wasted life, various real or imagined defects in the luxurious large bungalow he had built himself, the slugs among his peas, his receding hair-line, taxes, the impossibility of getting decent bread delivered, the Rector, jet aircraft, the deterioration in the taste of Plymouth Gin ('It's a grain spirit now, you see') and a whole manifold of aches and pains, some of them notional, others the inevitable consequence of smoking too much, a sedentary life, mild obesity, not being young any longer. In spite of his tales of woe he was quite well liked in the neighbourhood, possibly because his depressive phases were relieved on occasion by manic ones, during which he could be amusing company. His single state was accounted for locally by the theory that on his visits to film studios he seduced starlets, a breed which no one realized had long since become extinct.

The monster music suddenly transformed itself into the last two phrases of *Pop Goes the Weasel*, then ceased altogether. Thouless appeared in the doorway of his hut, caught sight of Fen over the

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