

TIM
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THE WEST
COUNTRY
TRILOGY



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THE WEST COUNTRY TRILOGY

The Horseman

The Wanderers

The Redeemed

Tim Pears

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I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding upon a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel who talked with me said to me, ‘I will show you what they are.’ So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, ‘These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth.’

Zechariah, 1:8-10

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Prologue

The boy, Leopold Jonas Sercombe, stood by his father at the open doorway to the smithy. Jacob Crocker's younger son, the gangly one, fed a circle of metal into the furnace. Outside, behind the boy, the earth was frozen. His feet were numb and his arse throbbed with the cold but he could feel the heat on his face. His father's gaze was rapt and hawkish, he'd come to scrutinise, for these wheels were for the great waggon and he'd let naught shoddy by. Merely by his presence he gave Jacob Crocker to know that if Albert Sercombe found fault, nothing would please him more than to reject the lot for the master.

The stocks had been shaped from oak logs and rested in the seasoning chamber five years. The wheels and their parts were carved from oak and stored another three. The dates were nicked into the wood by the wheelwright next-door. Jacob Crocker laid a wooden wheel down on the tyring platform.

The boy had been here many times with the horses. In the corner sat the old fellow as he always sat, astride a childish stool, sharpening the horseshoe nails a Crocker son had cut from an iron rod; hunched over an ancient anvil this gatfer sat beneath a window festooned with cobwebs, and put a point on the nails with a small hammer. Did the old man ever move from that spot, night or day, or was he welded to it? Perhaps he had

been there for ever, tapping at the nails since the first horses were shod a thousand years ago, crouching with his little hammer like a hobgoblin smith at the oldest forge in the known world.

Jacob Crocker was wet with sweat. His younger son now worked the bellows. Standing in the doorway the boy could feel the temperature rise. When the smith moved, the boy could see the ground damp where sweat had run out of the soles of his boots. A white fowl pranced slowly amongst the litter of rusty iron on the coal-dusty ground, inspecting the clinker as if for tasty morsels. Horseshoes hung on nails spaced along the roof joists according to their size. The boy's backside tingled. His nostrils itched.

The smith's elder son, the one with the livid scar across his cheek that drew your eyes to it, reached in his pliers and drew the iron tyre out of the furnace, white hot. Crocker pincered it on the other side. The blacksmiths had made it three inches too small but in the heat of the fire it expanded. They eased it down onto the rim of the wooden wheel. As it seared the wood the great wheel burst into flame.

The wheel was on fire but the smiths ignored the blaze, calmly knocked the iron tyre into place, tapping it with their hammers here, and here. Each became satisfied that the fit was snug at the same unspoken moment and took a step back off the platform. Crocker signalled with a minute inclination of his head to his second son, who pressed a lever. The platform dropped, the wheel was plunged into a trough of water.

Fierce plumes of steam rose hissing and bubbling from the tempering trough. And now there came a loud knocking and cracking from under the water, as the metal tyre contracted and squeezed the component parts of the wheel impossibly tight together, driving the spokes into position. The men stood. The boy listened slack-mouthing to the sounds like those of a ghost rapping out a message for him.

The banging muted and gradually ceased, as the blacksmiths stood by, and the boy's father peered, till the water was still and the forge was silent, the first of four wooden wheels stifled into submission.

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January 1911

The boy walked through the cold darkness behind his father and older brother Fred. None spoke but at the farm Fred went to the other stable. Albert lit hurricane lanterns. The boy heard his cousin Herbert's footsteps as he came running towards them. Herbert appeared out of the dark and went directly to the feed room. Into the barrow he shovelled chaff and oat flour. The boy assisted him, pitching mangolds into the pulping machine whose handle Herbert turned. When it was done he added the pulp to the chaff. The boy mixed it up as best he could with a fork then Herbert wheeled the barrow to the stable and went from one stall to the next, shovelling the horses' breakfast into their feeding troughs.

The boy's father Albert came into the stable with a dense wedge of hay balanced on his head. He climbed the ladder into the tallet loft. From there the carter pitched summer-scented hay into the mangers, whistling through his teeth to his horses below. With their lips they pulled wisps and strands of the fodder through the wooden racks.

'Seein as you is here, boy, you can give em some corn. Give Noble double.'

The boy opened the metal bin. The clanking of the lid caused each of the horses to turn towards the sound. The biggest carthorse, Red, was nearest. In the cold stall he exhaled and his breath poured in two plumes from his nostrils. The boy scooped the corn.

They walked back to the cottage. The boy's mother Ruth gave them bread and boiled bacon. They ate in silence, the numb parts of their bodies tingling back to painful feeling. Ruth adjusted the wick of the paraffin lamp upon the table as light seeped into the room. This table upon which the doctor had removed Fred's tonsils some years back. The boy searched for the bloodstain. Perhaps it was no longer there.

Albert drained his mug of tea. 'They ploughs won't lead theirselves,' he said, and stood up. Fred stood too. They took up their croust bags that Ruth had placed upon the table, and left. The boy Leo followed. His mother did not try to stop him but said that his sister Kizzie would bring his lunch to school and that he'd best not be late again or he'd feel the switch from Miss Pugsley, and his mother would not object.

In the tack room the boy watched his father gather implements. A heavy plough spanner. Whip cord. Thongs of leather to repair harness. Shut links to mend the plough traces. He placed these in a canvas basket. Horse nail stubs to fix spreaders, cart nails for cleats to hold the plough wheels for a time.

Herbert geared up two of the horses, Red and one of the two-year-old black geldings, Coal, as requested by his carter.

Albert applied grease to the mould board of the plough, and they set off as light seeped into the world around them.

'Give you a leg up,' Albert told his son. The boy sat side-wise atop Red, the nearside horse. Albert walked next to him. He carried a plough paddle, using it as a walking stick though none was needed. His corduroy trousers were tied with string below the knee. Herbert chose not to follow this fashion. The carter's and his lad's croust bags hung from Red's hames.

'Not a bleedin cloud above us,' Herbert called from behind. 'Clean and raw today.'

They reached Higher Redlands, a pasture to be ploughed for corn. The boy rolled onto his stomach and slid off the carthorse. Herbert hung their

bags from the branch of an elm tree by the gate. Albert set the plough. When Herbert was ready Albert handed him the paddle. ‘Aim for that ash tree in yon hedge,’ he said. ‘Red’s steady but if Coal lags, crack the whip.’

‘Yes, gaffer, I knows that.’

‘Don’t touch him, mind, just crack it by his ears.’

Albert turned and walked back through the gateway. Herbert shook his head, then he clicked his tongue and called to the horses to move. The coulter bit into the turf and as the plough moved forward so the turf rose and turned over. The boy walked to the gate and on to school.

*

In the afternoon he walked home the same way. The sun lowered in the sky and some parts of the hillocky land were in shadow, others in harsh light. Four plough teams now worked in four small sloping, ill-shaped fields. His uncle Enoch and brother Fred drove two horses each. Herbert still ploughed Higher Redlands behind Red and Coal. His father Albert had put the other gelding next to Pleasant the old mare. He worked Lower Redlands, the steepest of the fields in that part of Manor Farm. He used a one-way plough, stopping at the end of each furrow to tilt the plough and so engage the alternate mould board. Ploughing one way across the slope of the hill the furrow was turned to the left, the other way to the right, both ways downhill as gravity demanded. The uppermost horse took most of the strain but the gelding did not shirk. The boy’s father told him that the old mare was their best exemplar. She had some quality that inclined young horses to copy her. He did not know what it was. The boy watched. He could not see it either but he believed his father, that it existed.

The turf rose up and curled over like a long thin wave breaking on the beach of Bridgwater Bay. This pasture had not been a fruitful one, it was full of stroil grass. The horses’ feet thudded, the whippetrees swung, the coulter ripped through speedwell, bindweed, dandelion. In one direction,

walking west across the field, the sun was glaring and his father bent his head. He walked with a rolling, sideways carriage, shoulders swaying. A gait he could no longer rid himself of even when walking unencumbered in the yard or lane.

None noticed the boy watching them for each man and lad aspired to the straightest lines, on which depended his reputation. They would plough one acre in the day, each walking fifteen miles.

The new soil came up dark brown, reddish, for the frost and ice to break it up. Behind his father, as behind each of the other three ploughmen, swirling blizzards of gulls fell swooping to the ground for wireworms and chafer-grubs. They had not been there this morning.

In the field where Herbert ploughed, other birds scavenged and the boy walked through the gate to study them. Wagtails. A chaffinch. Two or three lapwings strutted quickly forwards to peck up insects. He spotted curlews, starlings, golden plovers, stalking the upturned earth, but they were outnumbered by the gulls who bullied them for the worms in their beaks and chased them, screeching with a noise like metal scraped across metal.

Herbert reached the hedge and called to the horses to turn and set back once more in parallel to his previous course. The coulter jumped out of the furrow. The boy could not see if it had hit a stone. Perhaps it had. Herbert called the horses to a halt. He looked down at the ground. He kicked the soil over with his foot. As if surprised by this erratic unexpected behaviour the gulls ceased squawking for a moment. Without the sound of horses' footsteps, jangling harness, the coulter ringing as it cut the ground, there was a sudden quiet. No such sounds from the next field either where Albert ploughed.

'That won't show,' Herbert said out loud to himself as he toed the furrow straight.

Something, a sound or movement, caused the boy to turn towards the hedge. He saw his father's face through branches, some leafless and others the bright dark green of holly, like some wintry Green Man akin to that

carved into the end of one of the choir stalls in the village church; only seen by boys seeking it. A bodiless head in the foliage. His father's expression was blank. What he did there in the hedgerow was a mystery. Then his head shifted and the boy understood his father was buttoning his flies.

Albert walked along the hedge and came through the open gateway into the field. He did not see the boy or if he did he paid no heed. He walked up the furrow behind Herbert, who had resumed his course, and yelled for him to stop. The lad called the horses to whoa and turned. Albert asked him for the whip, and Herbert handed it over. He looked neither anxious nor surprised but merely at a loss. Albert told him to remove his coat.

Herbert frowned. There was in this grimace of fear some kind of sarcasm, almost a smile, as well.

'Take off your jacket, lad,' Albert said.

Slowly, button by button, Herbert undid his jacket and shrugged it off. He hung it over one of the handles of the plough.

'And your waistcoat,' Albert said.

The lad hesitated, then he unbuttoned his waistcoat. His expression became surly, petulant.

'And your shirt.'

Herbert seemed to shake his head though it might have been a shiver. 'Tis fuckin cold, uncle,' he said.

'Take it off.'

Herbert scooped his braces off his shoulders and let them fall to hang by his sides. He pulled the bottom of his shirt out of his trousers. He undid the top buttons of his white sweat- and mud-streaked cotton shirt and, leaning forward, pulled it over his head. Then he hung it with the waistcoat on the other handle of the plough.

He stood looking at his carter, waiting. His scrawny torso was white and bare save for a scribble of hair midway between his brown nipples.

Albert gazed at his lad. Then he took two steps forward, at a diagonal away from Herbert, as if to march off across the field. But then as he came level with the lad he raised the whip and turned and cracked it hard upon his back. Herbert squealed and turned away but Albert pursued him, following round after him and striking him once more across the back.

Herbert cursed and cried out in pain. Albert laid the whip carefully across the handles of the plough.

‘That won’t show neither,’ he said. ‘Now put your garments on and plough the furrow.’

The boy watched his father walk back into his own field. He watched Herbert pulling on his clothes in a desultory manner, sniffing to himself. A glimpse of red weal already on the white skin. Herbert buttoned up the waistcoat with trembling fingers. He looked up and saw Leo watching him. It seemed he would say something but he did not. He put on his coat and turned to the plough. He picked up the whip and cracked it close to Coal’s rump and told the horses to go on.

The boy heard a sudden tumultuous cacophony of birds bickering and squawking, and understood that they had made this noise all the while, but he had not heard nor seen them even though now they filled the air. He turned and walked homeward.

January

There were six farms on the estate. No two fields among them were of like size or configuration. No tracks ran straight but dipped and wove around the tumps and hummocks of land. Some hedges were laid, others left tall and wild. Conifers grew in neat yet oddly shaped plantations. Oak and ash and beech trees seeded themselves in hidden combes. Streams meandered in no discernible direction, cutting deep narrow gullies here, trickling over gravel beds there. Erratic walkways crisscrossed the estate. The boy's father Albert told him that when God created this corner of the world He'd just helped himself to a well-earned tipple. His mother Ruth derided that blasphemy and said that much of their peninsula was so contoured, her husband had seen little of it. To the west the land rose to the Brendon Hills and the moor beyond. To the east the Quantocks loomed.

Today, all was quiet. Horses remained in their stables. No machinery ran on the estate. No work was allowed on the land, for fear of disturbing the game. The master had few rules. This was one, on the second Friday in January.

After they'd fed and groomed the horses, Albert Sercombe and his carters oiled harness in the tack room. In the cottage, Ruth baked bread, Kizzie kneading the dough, and she cooked pork pies. The boy left them and walked across the estate to the keeper's cottage in Pigeon Wood, in

sight of the big house. The keeper's wife told him she thought they would be back home for breakfast soon and he could wait. He thanked her and sat outside, warming himself by hugging the keeper's Springer chained in the back yard. The spaniels welcomed his attention.

Presently the man and lad appeared. When he saw the boy the big man said, 'We only feeds one Sercombe here if that's what your weest brother's thinkin.' As he passed, he ruffled the boy's hair, chuckling, and said, 'Looks like he needs feedin up, mind, you can give im alf a yourn.'

Leo sat while they ate their breakfast, thick slices of hot bread and butter, and boiled bacon with much fat upon it. Mrs Budgell insisted that he ate a slice of bread and when he shook his head she put the plate in front of him anyhow and he consumed it, to the last crumb. It was the same colour as his mother's bread but more chewy in its texture and with a flavour of something. Honey? She poured four mugs of tea and placed one before him. Then she sat. She asked her husband whether all went well. He said it did and that he would go to the house shortly and walk the drives with the master. He asked Sid if his brother had come to help him.

'If he ain't, he's made a mistake, Mister Budgell, since he's goin to.'

They ate and drank. Aaron Budgell said to Leo, 'Do you wish to feel it? You been glancin at it like a little tit.' Leo looked at him blankly for a moment. Then he nodded. Aaron Budgell put a hand upon the table and leaned towards the boy. Leo ran his fingers over the knobbly ridge in the middle of the keeper's bald skull.

'The last poacher what laid a hand on me,' Budgell said. 'Docker Furze. The autumn of nineteen o seven. Whacked me with his cudgel, and it was made of oak. When people see this, you know what it makes em think of, boy?' Leo shook his head. 'It reminds em of the state Docker was in when I was done with the old boy, that's what. He's still only able to eat liquids to this day, I'm told.'

After breakfast Sid took Leo to the keeper's barn. On the table was a bolt of red cloth from which he cut a square some two feet by two with a pair

of scissors. ‘Use that for size to cut another one, and carry on for me,’ he told Leo. The scissors were sharp and cut the red cloth with ease. Sid punched holes in two adjacent corners of each square and tied them with string to ash sticks cut to size and with two nicks cut ready for the string to bite into. ‘We’ve twenty beaters, and I’ll make up five spare,’ Sid said.

The boy’s brother Sid was sixteen and sole under keeper for the head gamekeeper Aaron Budgell. Sid was fascinated by all animals, not horses in particular; it was the other way round for Leo.

‘There’s six Guns tomorrow,’ he said. ‘One a they’s a woman, if you can believe that. Lord Grenvil’s daughter. Mister Budgell reckons t’will give us bad luck. Her’s here like as a chaperone, so the master’s daughter can shoot this year and not look out a place, for she did insist upon it and as we all know the master cannot refuse Miss Charlotte nothin.’

Leo asked whether he would be carrying the cartridge bag for Lord Grenvil’s daughter.

‘I don’t reckon so,’ Sid said. ‘Us should give her a woman for loadin, and a cartridge girl, and some other trapper for pickin up an all, see how she gets on. Mister Budgell reckons her’s too pretty to be able to shoot straight. Maybe Lady Grenvil’s tryin to marry her off. Thinks her’ll meet a good man on the shootin field.’

Leo cut the red cloth. As his father’s tack room was filled with the accoutrements of the carter’s profession so this keeper’s barn possessed an assortment of strange tools and devices. Traps of different kinds, some surely antiquated, half gone to rust. Spades with hooks at the end of their long handles. Nets. Bird scarers.

‘The master and Miss Charlotte. Lord Grenvil. The Miss Grenvil. Colonel Giffard from over the Quantocks. And a Mister Carew – he’s some London toff not been here before. Arrived last night. I don’t know nothin about him. Tis his bag you’ll carry.’

Leo finished cutting the flags. He offered to help tie them to the ash sticks but Sid said that he should do them himself. It was not that he did not trust his younger brother but rather that if one came loose he had no

one to blame but himself, that was it. Leo studied the keeper's implements while Sid talked. A shelf of canisters. Renardine, creosote, paraffin. Strychnine, arsenic. A knuckle-duster with two spikes.

'I do believe the master has shoot days out a social obligation. He could do without em, I reckon. What he loves is goin out with me or Mister Budgell, walkin up the hedgerows and havin a pot-shot at a pheasant or two. A hare. They old Labs a his potterin alongside.'

Leo asked his brother if he knew how much he stank. Sid said he believed it for he'd been skinning stoats. They had some new steel gins that worked a treat. 'I'll make a few bob,' he said. 'Stoats, weasels, to go with the rabbits. We've had a few cats come into our coverts and all. Mister Budgell sends the skins off up to London. He gets a shillin or two for a stoat, four shillin for a good cat, and he shares it all with me.'

When the flags were finished Sid rolled each one around its thin pole and stacked them in a corner. Then he had Leo carry another pile of wooden posts to the cart outside. Each post had a number painted in yellow upon it, one to six. While he waited Leo counted the posts. There were eighteen numbered in all, plus two blanks. Sid returned leading the keeper's donkey, which he attached to the cart. Then he pulled the donkey's halter, and cursed her until she had made plain her reluctance to work, and then she plodded forward. 'Once she knows we're comin back home, she'll move quick then all right.'

Sid led the donkey through the wood, Leo beside him. Leo asked if they had caught moles. 'Moles?' Sid said. 'Moles don't hurt no one, you idiot. So long's they keep off the master's lawns. And then the mole catcher comes in, and he gets their skins. We had good sport with rats, though, you should a been here last week. All round the stables. We found their holes and put barley meal down. Next day, Wednesday, come back and did the same. They loved us, the little bastards. Thursday we give em nothin. Then Friday Mister Budgell mixed barley flour with caster sugar and arsenic. Had me put it down their holes with a spoon tied to a long stick.'

Sid spoke as they walked. The donkey plodded along. Sid Sercombe was loquacious as Leo was shy and taciturn. Their mother Ruth used to tell Sid he was taking the words out of his younger brother's mouth and leaving none for him, to kindly shut his trap for just one minute, but he would not.

'I had a dead jackdaw, Leo. Tied it to a line. We waited till these blasted crows was comin in to roost and I dragged it across the field. The crows come down to mob the bloody thing, dead as it was, and Mister Budgell scattershot em by the score. Magpies, you can't take em so easy. You have to find their roost for one thing. They like a patch a brambles to hide in, in a big wood. I waited for a good wind and then I went and shot a few. I got eight of em one afternoon.'

Sid unloaded a number of the posts, then carried on across the estate. He pointed out a gibbet of vermin of which he was mighty proud. There sparrowhawks hung with their wings outspread. There was a dog fox, a vixen, cubs. Ravens. Sid admitted he did not know whether the main purpose of the gibbet was to deter other vermin or to let the master know that his keepers were doing their job. He told Leo how owls would take the head off a young bird. They'd trapped tawny owls in a ginn, but used pole traps for brown owls. Mister Budgell would never kill a white owl, he said. No, he never would, Sid could swear on the Bible to that, and neither would Sid himself. He said that sparrowhawks were easy to shoot for they always came back to where they'd last killed, but kestrels were unpredictable. You just had to keep an eye out, and if you saw one when you had your gun, you nabbed it if you could.

Most vermin control took place in the summer and autumn, of course, but Mister Budgell kept it up all year round. During his two years on the job, Sid said, they'd put harriers, merlins and the hobby on the gibbet, and once a peregrine falcon he reckoned he'd mentioned before to Leo, and there weren't many keepers who could say as much.

They laid a bunch of posts at the second drive, and continued. As long as his brother spoke, the boy was happy to listen. Like Leo, Sid had

meeched off school and would cross the estate to help out Mister Budgell. As soon as Sid was old enough the head keeper had requested that his under keeper be let go and Sid Sercombe taken on. The master had obliged.

On the day following, the second Saturday in January, the boy walked back to the keeper's cottage before first light. There was a frost on the ground, the world was silent and new, he perceived it being born out of the darkness around him. The air was cold and clear. There were skeins of mist in the low fields that were like the breath of the land made visible, like his own. The last stars of the night sky disappeared above him into the pale blue. He might have been the first human upon the earth, striding through the garden. He doubted whether there were any places so beautiful in all the planets known or unknown to man, or to God.

Outside the gamekeeper's cottage, boys and men gathered. Some girls, ever hopeful. Most off the estate, Fred and Herbert among them, a few from the village. Aaron Budgell allotted them their roles. Sid gave a red flag to each beater. Boys and old men would be stops. Six cartridge boys, six pickers-up. The Guns would have their own loaders. One man had brought his dog along. Mister Budgell sent him home.

Most shoot owners and keepers believed that partridge shooting should finish by Christmas, for the birds began to pair in early January. The master instead shot none before. He believed that partridges drove better off land that lay quiet, and anyhow, partridges were incidental in this crooked landscape. Pheasant was the main quarry.

They walked en masse to the first beat. The boy's brother Sid wore corduroy breeches, pigskin leggings, ankle-length tea-drinker boots of horsehide, a thorn-proof tweed jacket. Aaron Budgell was accoutred likewise and he rode a cob at the head of the crowd. They reached the covert from which the first battue would proceed. Aaron Budgell explained that they would beat the birds out of this wood that was their

home, and in the afternoon would drive them back. He told the stops that if they wished they could light small fires to keep warm, not because he gave a tinker's cuss for their comfort but because in moving about in search of twigs and branches they would do more to keep the pheasants from sneaking out of the sides of the wood than in standing about doing nothing but shiver. The smoke too would help.

Mister Budgell left Sid to place the stops and the beaters. But first he said that some had been doing this job three Saturdays in January for many years, and might not take kindly to orders given them by such a youth. Mister Budgell said that if anyone had a problem with his under keeper then they had one with him, and should step forward now. None did. The remainder followed him on his pony down into the combe from which the Guns would shoot.

The boy's brother Fred was to be a picker-up, and walked beside him. He spoke quietly. 'See some a they beatin lads have big pockets in their coats?' Leo nodded. 'And I wouldn't be surprised if Herb put a bird or two by to collect later on.'

They waited at the pegs, the numbered stakes, which must have been hammered into place after the master and the gamekeeper had held their conference. Aaron Budgell told the cartridge boys and the pickers-up who their Guns were. He told them how the master deplored the drawing of pegs, a hit-and-miss method. The master and he had set the pegs with care, and Lord Prideaux had allotted the Guns to them as he best judged it. Leo would carry the cartridges for the stranger, Mister Carew. His brother would pick up for Lord Grenvil's daughter. One of the others said Fred Sercombe would have a restful day, it was money for old rope for some. As the laughter died down Aaron Budgell said, 'Now, now,' but he himself was still grinning. He rode the cob away and tied it to a tree some way distant and returned.

They heard a waggon trundling along and then they saw it, conveying the Guns towards them, the boy's uncle Enoch driving. One horse between the poles, Enoch's oldest Shire. The loaders walked behind.

Enoch brought the waggon to a halt. The Guns were seated upon benches put in place for the purpose. They rose and alighted from the waggon. Loaders stepped gallantly forward to assist their ladies. Miss Charlotte reached the ground before hers could do so. The master introduced his guests to the head gamekeeper, Budgell, who for those who did not know him had been with the family for many years. He had taught the master to shoot, and was teaching Lottie with the same gun, a small, single-barrelled muzzle loader she would use today.

Lord Grenvil told Budgell that he hoped he was doing a better job with the daughter than he'd managed with the father. If it were so, he should like to offer him the post on his own estate with a view to a similar improvement. He nodded to his daughter Alice, who smiled and shook her head. Colonel Giffard pronounced it nonsense, though what precisely no one knew.

Aaron Budgell explained to the Guns where the birds would come from. He asked the gentlemen to leave the low-flying pheasants for the ladies. He said they would have four drives this morning and two this afternoon. After lunch they would shoot only cock pheasants, but this morning they may shoot hens as well.

The master invited his guests to warm their blood with a sloe gin before they began. The cartridge boys and pickers-up joined the loaders at the back of the cart. Fred knew something of guns and admired them. The master used a pair of Charles Lancaster 28-inch 12-bores, their stocks rubbed to a smooth and shining patina. Lord Grenvil used a pair of Purdeys, his daughter very light Churchill 12s with 2-inch chambers. Colonel Giffard had a pair of Holland & Holland guns. Fred asked the man handling the remaining guns, which he lifted carefully from two wooden cases, whose and what they were. The man said they were Mister Carew's and had been made for him on his eighteenth birthday, in nineteen o seven, by Cogswell & Harrison. He said they were hammerless, of course, and had 30-inch barrels. Leo stared at them. They were inlaid with gold, and had intricate scroll engraving on the barrel.

The monogram on the stock was also embossed on the leather bag he was to carry, containing two hundred cartridges.

The Guns took their places at the pegs. Behind each stood their loader, holding the second gun, then the cartridge boy, and finally the picker-up, who would have nothing to do but watch until the shooting was over. The master's black Labradors were the only dogs present, to Mister Carew's left. Leo looked at the master's daughter at the next peg to the right. She only had the one gun, and it only had one barrel. She would have to wait to have it reloaded after every shot. She was not much taller than he was. He did not know her age. Her gun, though small, looked too big for her, yet she held it confidently, her left hand gripping the forestock, the fingers of her right hand around the trigger guard. She stood with her left leg forward, her long dark skirt brushing the grass.

Aaron Budgell stepped forward from the Guns and blew a battered old hunting horn up the slope in front of them, then he stepped back and walked to the rear of the pegs.

They stood in the cold quiet morning, in the shadowed combe, waiting for the beaters to drive the birds from their covert. After some while they heard a whistle, which Leo knew must be blown by his brother Sid. The shots raised their guns in readiness and stared at the empty sky. There was silence, broken only by the panting of one of the master's dogs who stood a few feet away. Suddenly the dog went quiet and held its breath, and then the first birds came over the bank above them.

The Guns had their lunch in the head keeper's cottage. The loaders and beaters and stops crowded into the barn. The stops were given a big lump of cheese and a pork pie each. Boys had small loaves or buns of bread with a chunk cut out of the middle and a lump of butter stuffed inside. The loaders and beaters ate salt beef sandwiches and pickled onions. There was a barrel of pale ale and another of mild, and bottles of pop. They spoke of the morning. Mister Carew had said not a word to anyone, whether those assisting him or his host or fellow guests. His loader was his

valet and had accompanied him from London. The man assured the company that the reason was shyness rather than arrogance. Be that as it may, all the pickers-up agreed he was the best shot they had ever seen. One of the old stops said the previous Lord Prideaux, the master's father, was a finer shot, but all laughed at him for as a stop in the wood he could not have witnessed a single shot of young Carew's. All that the beaters and stops saw of the entertainment was the occasional bird falling in front of them, and the loaders and cartridge boys were too involved in their work to watch.

Mister Carew's picker-up, who'd stood behind Leo all morning, asked if anyone else had seen the two birds he'd brought down on the second drive, one barrel after the other up in front of the sun. He said that Mister Budgell had asked the Guns to leave low-flying birds but it seemed this young marksman left everything below thirty yards. He said some were so high, seventy yards he reckoned, that he could hear the pellets rattling the pheasants' wings as they flew on, unscathed. Someone asked Mister Budgell whether there might be a bonus paid if more than a hundred pheasants were shot today. Mister Budgell said no, the stops would receive a shilling and the cartridge boys the same, and the beaters one and six, as he had already made clear.

It was agreed that the master's young daughter had bagged more pheasants with that child's gun than was feasible. Three, if not four. Fred said that the only birds shot on his, Miss Grenvil's, peg were those swiped by Colonel Giffard next door, and many laughed and nodded in agreement, for it was a well-known, ill-mannered habit of the old Quantocks codger. Sid went outside and when he came back he said he fancied a breeze was coming up, which could make for a brisk afternoon. Mister Budgell said that speaking of the afternoon it was upon them, and time to go.

The final beat took place back in the combe where they'd started, as the light began to fail. The pheasants were beaten homeward, out of the

hanging woods. They were driven gradually, steadily, to avoid flushes and give the Guns as many single birds as possible. When Leo heard Aaron Budgell, standing between Mister Carew's peg and the master's, say, 'He's doin it right,' he understood that the keeper was referring to Sid. Some birds flew straight across the little valley, no more than twenty or twenty-five yards above them, but the wind was indeed blowing, many birds were lifted and flew higher and faster. Mister Carew's loader worked so fast that the boy could hardly manage to keep him supplied with cartridges. He was too busy to witness Mister Carew's skill but he had certainly not seen such quick loading as from this valet.

He did not know how long they shot for but it was constant. When at last Mister Carew lowered his gun the boy saw flames pouring out of the ends of the barrels. Both guns were so hot that Mister Carew and his loader laid them down upon the ground, where they scorched the grass. The pickers-up did their work and the Labradors too padded around collecting the downed birds. Leo asked the loader how many Mister Carew had shot. The loader grinned and pointed to his ears. He shrugged and shook his head. Then the boy smiled too for he realised that he was deaf as well and had not heard a word of what he himself had said.

February

The bell sounded like a warning to the population that children had escaped. They came out of the schoolhouse to a world still fogged and frozen. They took one direction or the other in two keen unruly crowds. Some attempted to skate on the frozen ruts. Others broke off icicles and sucked them, winter sweets, or used them as weapons. Many ran to keep warm or simply for the sake of it. The boy did not. He walked, sucked in the sharp cold air, and breathed it out in plumes of steam.

Children dispersed homeward, the rabble thinned. They left the village. Around him children yelled and yelped. He did not hear them. He listened to the quietness. The birds that had left for more clement territory, the horses at rest, animals in hibernation, dogs asleep, men pottering. He listened to the emptiness.

His sister caught them up. A monitor, she stayed behind to help the teacher tidy, received in return a piece of cake or biscuit. A number turned off the road for the farms and cottages of the estate. One of the Sparke girls asked Kizzie whether she had any cake left. ‘Was you given summat taffety?’

‘That’s for me to know and you to wonder,’ Kizzie said. ‘And if one day you be monitor then you may know yourself.’

In Higher Redlands where he believed they intended to sow turnips the boy saw smoking piles dotted across the bare ploughed earth. Red stood

between the poles of one of the two-wheeled carts. Cousin Herbert forked manure off the cart into a heap. Beyond, the boy's brother Fred did likewise. Pleasant the old mare stood patiently waiting for him to finish. The muck-carts were the smallest the horses ever had to pull. They made the Shires look huge, giants towing toys. An easy job for the horses, less so for these lads. They had been doing it when the boy left for school and would doubtless do so until the day grew dark, spreading at the rate of twenty tons an acre. One or two of the girls waved, and the carting lads waved back, briefly.

Kizzie headed for their cottage but the boy walked on to Manor Farm. In the frozen world smell, like sound, was muted, but from where they'd shovelled muck came rich aromas. From Isaac Wooland's cowhouse the smell was sweet, like hay and meadow grass. By the stables the air was harsh with ammonia. Noble was in her stall and the boy went to her. Her foal was due within a month. Her belly hung swollen beneath her and the boy imagined her foal within, its spindly limbs folded, eyes closed, slung between the Shire mare's great haunches, her sturdy legs. The boy spoke to her. He told her she was the finest horse on his carter father's farm. The name she had been given at her own birth befitted her.

He took the stool that hung from a hook on the wall and stood on it beside her. He scratched a point low on her neck he had discovered by chance she liked as no other horse he knew of seemed to. The mare was still and listened to him speaking to her. He said he looked forward to seeing her give birth and he told her of his secret wish, that his father would involve him in the handling of her foal, for it was something he wished for above all things now. He believed he was ready, whatever others might say of his age or stature or other immaturity.

The boy heard voices. He did not know whether they had only just entered the range of his hearing or whether they had been there for some while and he had only just become aware of them. He listened now. The

voices of men. They came from the tack room, on the far side of the stall next door.

His father and one other.

Two others.

The boy climbed up into the manger and around the partition to Red's empty stall. He picked his way over Red's manger and crouched there beside the wall to the tack room. There was a foot of space between the wood partition walls and the back brick wall, left so that the carter could hear his horses.

'They over Home Farm builds middens in the yard and they takes them as serious as their corn or hay stacks, and so they should.'

It was his uncle Enoch speaking. The boy pressed one hand against the partition wall, the other on the wooden screen upon which he crouched. He leaned forward and peered into the tack room. None of the three men were seated, all stood. The stove had been lit but only Amos Tucker stood beside it. The others were in separate corners.

'This is how they build em, gaffer,' Enoch said. 'They lays a square about the size a this room.' He described the shape with his hands. 'Build as high as a man can reach, then they starts another square aside of it. Bin doin so for two year now. No takin it out a bit at a time, half rotted.' Enoch opened wide his arms. 'One great midden.'

'Is he done?' Albert said.

'Tis all mixed up so tis all the same. Not patchy like ours.'

'Is he finished?' Albert asked Amos Tucker.

'No, I isn't,' Enoch said. 'It gets so hot in there all the damn seeds perish, every last one.'

Albert laughed. Amos Tucker said, 'Combustion.'

'I want no fires in my yard, gaffer,' Albert said.

'Will you look at the midden on Home Farm?' Enoch said.

'I will not,' said the boy's father. The men stood in silence, as if taking in what had been said and thinking deeply on it.

‘Yon brother a mine knows about horses, gaffer,’ Enoch said. ‘Don’t mean he knows bugger all else about farmin.’

The coal stove made no noise. The carters waited for the farmer to say something. To resolve the dispute one way or the other. He said nothing. Perhaps he was waiting for the words but they would not come to him. Instead he stepped slowly to the door and opened it and walked away.

The carters watched him leave. Enoch Sercombe shook his head. ‘You’s lucky the gaffer’s a coward,’ he said quietly. ‘He’s scared to give you a single fuckin order or get you to change one single thing in case you walks away.’

Albert pondered what his brother meant. ‘He’s right,’ he said. ‘I would.’

March

The boy stood in the field. He did not move. A statue of himself. What would someone think should they see him? A boy who, like the wife of Lot, had been walking across the field but looked back and been petrified to salt? Or had he been carried there for a scarecrow? Boys were paid to keep crows off seeds but they generally made a noise. Waved their arms about, or ran at the crows as if believing, like puppies, they could catch them. If they had catapults so much the better.

The boy stood still. He watched hares at play. The buck hares chasing the does. Hither and thither. An endless game of tag. He never saw the bucks catch up and receive their prize. They must couple later somewhere hidden.

He watched a fox chase a hare. Only for the sport, for hare meat did not agree with the vulpine palate. The fox would gain on its prey, then the hare turned sharply. The fox could not do this but rather jumped up, turning in the air. It landed and chased the hare again, who had opened up the gap between them once more. The effect was comical. Eventually the fox tired of its sport, headed for a hedge and vanished.

The boy did not move. A hare came across the field. It headed straight for him. It did not veer to left or right. It had happened once before a hare had run almost into him. He did not know whether it had been blind, or sick. He stood in the field. The hare came on towards him. He held his

breath. A few yards away it got his scent and turned its head a little, and saw him, and ran off. So, each species of animal had its own peculiarities of vision. This world we surveyed was not as it was but as it was seen, in many different guises.

Back at the cottage he found all their mattresses taken downstairs and stood up outside, leaning against walls or hedges, like tablets brought down from the mountain. Perhaps there were Commandments writ in the stains. A voice sounded from above.

‘Come and give us a hand then, Leo,’ his mother said, leaning out of a window.

‘Yes,’ said Kizzie, from another. ‘Don’t stand there gawpin.’

Leo climbed the stairs. There were three bedrooms. Kizzie was sweeping the bare boards of their parents’ room. Chairs, bedside tables, washstand were piled upon the slats of the bed. Ruth was in the room he shared with his brother Fred. She called him in. This room had been swept already. Ruth shifted one of the beds, wedging it against a wall at right angles to the other.

‘What do you think?’ she asked. ‘Like this?’

The boy frowned. ‘T’was all right how it was.’

‘Don’t be zart, Leo,’ his mother said. ‘How’s about next to each other but facin opposite ways? Then you and Fred can sit up and have a gab together.’

Ruth called it spring-cleaning but all knew this to be an excuse for rearranging furniture, creating a new configuration of their wooden beds and tables in the small rooms. Their mother did this every year. Perhaps such activity placated some restless spirit within her.

When the men came home from the farm, Kizzie whispered to her father what he might not otherwise have noticed. Albert looked around the cottage and returned to the kitchen and told their mother what an improvement she had made, and the children all agreed.

March

Albert Sercombe slept on a cot in the stable. So too the boy, on a bed of straw beneath a blanket in the tack room. He would not leave.

‘Ye’ll be like Dunstone, can’t see the point a home.’ But the boy was at home. He gazed upon the sets of waggon harness with their back-bands and belly bands, the breechings and the riding saddle. The halters and blinkers. Many pairs of reins. There was a smell of leather and saddle soap. Plough strings, cart saddles, cobble trees and swingletrees, each hung on wooden pegs in its allotted place. These were icons of beauty to the boy like the painted crockery his mother had brought in her dowry and kept in their parlour.

He would not leave until Noble’s foal was born. He attempted the habit of his father of rising at hourly intervals, more or less, during the night to check upon the mare. Was able to regain slumber upon his return to the straw. Then he was woken suddenly by voices, and understood even as he looked around him in the bright light pouring into the tack room that he had missed it. His father had not woken him.

Leopold walked to the loose box. The master stood beside his father, looking in over the open upper door.

‘A fine mare, carter. How many’s she given us?’

‘This’ll be her sixth foal, master,’ his father replied. ‘The last one was yon filly in the next box.’

The boy quietly approached, and stood beside his father. A girl stood beside the master. His daughter. ‘I can’t believe he’ll grow to be a carthorse,’ she said. ‘He looks so delicate.’

‘All babies do,’ her father said.

Miss Charlotte was at church every Sunday, sat in the front pew beside her father. The dowager countess, the master’s grandmother, no longer accompanied them. Otherwise Leo rarely saw the girl, though she lived on the estate as they all did. The shoot was a rare occurrence. Miss Charlotte did not go to the village school but had her own governess, a teacher all to herself who lived in the big house with her. He did not believe she had ever been on the farm before.

‘I’ve water warmin for the mare,’ Albert said.

The boy, hearing this, went to the stable room. He felt the water in the urn with his finger. It was luke-warm. He poured a quantity into a bucket and heaved it along the yard. He could not help it swinging. Water sloshed out at either side. The master turned and said, ‘One of your sons, carter?’

His father took the bucket from him in one strong hand. ‘Not so big’s he thinks he is, master.’

‘No, no, carter, he’s willing. We like that, we applaud it.’

The boy did not look up yet he knew the girl watched him. His father opened the door and entered the loose box. Noble bared her teeth. She made a sound that was a kind of low growling.

‘Easy, girl, easy now.’ He put the bucket on the ground and backed out of the box, and the mare drank.

‘The most gentle mare I’ve ever had, master, but when she’s with a young foal ...’

‘Will she have to work again?’ the girl asked.

‘We’ll let her rest for ten days, miss,’ Albert said. ‘I’ll give her plenty a warm bran mash, and one or two other things besides.’

They watched the foal become accustomed by degrees to standing on his spindly legs. He probed beneath his mother’s belly and sucked her milk. The mare bent down on occasion and briefly nuzzled or licked him.

He leaned his head against her side and stroked it against her skin. As the foal explored the circumscribed territory of the loose box he sometimes staggered and looked as if he might fall but he never did.

The master chuckled. ‘I can tell my daughter would like to pet your foal. But I believe the carter here,’ he said to her, ‘will no more let you touch the creature than its mother will. Isn’t that true, carter?’

Albert Sercombe nodded. ‘Aye, master. We don’t handle them afore they’re broken.’

The boy glanced across at the girl. She was looking at her father and then away, her eyes narrow slits of anger, suggesting that what he had presumed of her was false, or else that his assumption was correct but she did not wish him to share it with their servants, the boy did not know which.

April

Though the windows were high and he could see but sky through them the boy gazed upward rather than before him.

‘Are you listening?’ Miss Pugsley said. She called his name and he turned and she asked him to name the capital of a certain country in such a tone as to suggest she had asked him already once or more. She wore her black-and-white hair in a tight bun upon her head. For his distraction or his ignorance, which he was not sure, she told him to hold out his hand and stung his palm with the switch she kept for that purpose.

The school day had begun with the children rung into the room by the bell in the roof. Jane Sparke played a harmonium and they sang the morning hymn. *Awake, my soul, and with the sun, Thy daily stage of duty run.* Miss Pugsley said a prayer then mounted her platform desk and filled in the register while a monitor read a lesson from the first book of the Old Testament about some of the many clans of the sons of Noah. She read them out. The Jebusites, Amorites, Gergashites, Hivites, Arkites. The Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites and Hamathites. Would all be slaughtered to make room for the Israelites, the chosen people of God? At intervals the monitor stopped and asked questions of those she deemed inattentive, and those who answered wrongly were called from their seats to stand in line at the front. Following the reading Miss Pugsley caned these miscreants.

They practised their writing every day. Studied arithmetic, reading and grammar.

Miss Pine tended to the younger children, herded to the back of the room. Today Miss Pugsley had taken the older ones through history then mathematics. During the first lesson she rebuked Leo for confusing Christopher Columbus with Ferdinand Magellan, and in the second she chastised him for making no attempt to calculate the simple equations chalked upon the board. The boy was right-handed. He held out his left palm; with each blow the pain intensified. In the lunch break some went home, some ate their bread and cheese or pie in the playground. Leo walked out of the village and watched farmhands at their labours, with their animals, as was his habit.

When Leo returned, Alfred Haswell approached him flanked by others and said, ‘Here he comes, the yay-nay what talks more to beasts than he do to us.’ The others laughed and Alfred said, ‘Why’s that then, Sercombe, is you a fuckin beast? With the brain of a beast and the mind a one too?’

Then his sister was beside Leo, saying, ‘He’ll get more sense from any a them creatures than he will from ye.’

More had gathered, and some chuckled at Kizzie’s wit, but one of those flanking Alfred, Gilbert Prowse, son of the baker, said, ‘And is big sister as to speak for e.’ He turned to seek the approval of his coterie. Kizzie struck him on his jaw presented side-on to her, and he staggered sideways into the crowd pushed up close around them. The bell rang. They looked over and saw Miss Pine by the door, shaking the bell so vigorously it belied her consumptive frame. They trundled across the playground and shuffled back into the classroom.

In the afternoon the swallows continued to build their nests in the eaves of the school. They flew away from the building and returned with plant fibre between their beaks or with nothing visible and Leo presumed their mouths were full of mud, though he did not know for sure. The subjects studied were geometry and Latin. He was not the only one to be chastised

but he received the switch more than anyone and he was the last, shortly before the end of the final lesson. He walked back to his place and studied his hand, the way the blood seemed to seep to the surface, drawn upwards by the impact of the switch upon his skin. Perhaps by the heat of it.

As the class made their way out Miss Pugsley requested that he remain behind. He sat in his place. The desks and tables were scoured with initials. Kizzie told him she had found the letters ES and was convinced they were those of their uncle Enoch, carved there when he was a child like them. Miss Pugsley dismissed Miss Pine, and when she had gone the schoolmistress called Leo once more to the front. Her voice echoed in the high roof in a way it had not when the room was full.

‘Leopold Sercombe,’ she said, more quietly than she habitually spoke. ‘What am I to do with you? You do understand, I hope, that punishing you gives me no pleasure? You will soon be one of the eldest and so you must set an example, or I must set one of you. I would much rather not.’

The boy stood with his head lowered.

‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Please speak clearly.’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘I can’t hear you. Do not mumble, boy.’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘And look at me when I’m talking to you. Oh, Leopold, you are not simple, I’m convinced of it. Can you not see that the world reveals itself to children who study? We walk in the footsteps of those who’ve studied before us and thus civilisation is created. The Empire thrives. Its peoples prosper.’ Miss Pugsley sighed.

The boy watched her feet as she turned and walked some paces to the side, then came back to where she’d stood before. Her shoes were of brown leather and they had a pattern punched and stitched in their sides. They had been polished in recent days if not this very one.

‘Your truancy is foolish and you must know how it saddens your mother. But at the very least, when you do come here, can you not concentrate? I wonder if you even try, Leopold. Instead you gaze at the sky and daydream.’

‘I’m sorry, miss,’ he said. ‘The swallows don’t be long in their labours this time a year.’

Miss Pugsley frowned. ‘Swallows?’

Leo told her of their nests in the eaves of the school house, and how they built them or renovated old ones from the year before.

‘You were studying birds?’

‘Most of the time I be listenin.’

‘To what, may I ask, if not to me?’

‘I believe, miss, there be an owl in yon chimney.’ He glanced across to the chimney breast above the iron stove. He saw Miss Pugsley turn that way too. ‘This time a year, one day you lights it, another day you don’t. Owls like the shelter of a chimney. They don’t know if they likes the heat. It gets too hot, they fly off. Then they comes back and it’s cooled down and they don’t know where they is.’

‘I see.’

Leo looked down at Miss Pugsley’s ornamented shoes. The cotton thread of her black stockings was finer than that of his sister’s or his mother’s. He knew she was no longer gazing at the chimney breast but was studying him.

‘I believe that is the most I’ve heard you utter in all these years,’ she said. ‘And you were listening to the owl come and go?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘She never went today. She bin there the whole time, I reckon. I could hear her frettin.’

‘Oh, Leopold,’ Miss Pugsley said. She stepped towards him. He felt her hands at the back of his head and her arms sliding around and drawing him towards her chest. He felt her neck against his mouth. He could smell a sweetness of powder and of the perspiration of her skin. She kissed the top of his head as she squeezed him to her. ‘Oh, Leopold,’ she said. ‘What

am I to do with you?’ She clasped him to her. He stood with his arms at his sides. As long as he kept his head down he could breathe unobstructed. He feared that she would lift his head, what would happen if she did. But she only held him tight and kissed the top of his skull through his hair and then she let him go, and stepped back. He looked up at her.

‘What will become of you, Leopold?’ she said.

‘I shall work on one a the master’s farms,’ he said.

‘For your father, I suppose?’ she asked. ‘He does not mind your truancy as your mother does.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Sons do not work for their fathers. The master won’t allow it. He said it be a sure recipe for discord. I could not be Father’s lad, nor his under carter. I should like to work on the master’s stud farm.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Then you surely will. You may go. Go home, Leopold.’

He turned and walked to the door, and opened it, and closed it behind him, and trotted out of the playground and along the lane.

April

‘He gets up and goes with you to help with your early chores, it’s no wonder he forgets to go to school.’

‘Would you stop him?’

The boy listened as they spoke of him though he was there beside them. Ruth put a log in the stove and closed the lid. ‘I’d rather he slept longer, yes, and woke later, like Kizzie,’ she said, wiping her hands on her apron. ‘And went to school with her.’

His father considered this long before answering. By the time he did so, Ruth was seated at the table too. ‘If you can keep him sleepin, good luck, mother.’

When either of them spoke their breath disturbed the candle flame, and the light fluttered in the room. His father sipped his tea.

‘Do you hear your mother?’ he said at length. ‘T’would be a help to the gaffer if I could write out orders and that. You needs to read and write, for certain, to be a carter these days.’

‘Or something better,’ said his mother.

The boy looked up and saw the colour in his father’s face darken as the blood rose. One of his hands clenched into a fist upon the table.

Leo looked down. In time his father’s voice came, steady and low. ‘Stay here this mornin. We’ll be turnin out tonight. Come then. Is that a bargain, boy? Go to school today.’

After Albert and Fred had left, Leo rose to go back upstairs. His mother took his hand and he turned. She gazed at him. ‘Your eyes are dark as sloes,’ she said. Her own were pale blue. ‘How strange that you all have your father’s eyes.’ She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it. ‘Go,’ she said. ‘Sleep a little longer if you can.’

Leo tried but he could not. In time he heard Kizzie stir and came directly downstairs once more. Ruth still sat at the kitchen table, sipping at her tea though it had long gone cold. She gazed at the wall. The boy asked his mother what she was thinking. She told him she remembered the days of her childhood. The sea, the restless churning waves, breaking on the esplanade. He asked her where it was she grew up, though he knew the answer, for he liked to hear her say the word, ‘Penzance.’

She had come east for work and met the young carter and married him in haste. Leo had not met any of her family. ‘My mother and my father,’ she told him, ‘your grandparents, are long gone in the ground. But I have a brother, if he be there still.’

Leo waited in the yard. He heard horses’ hooves in the lane and saw Herbert leading Noble, Red and Captain. He took them to the stable, and gave them each corn in their stalls.

‘You want to groom one a the big pair?’ Herbert said.

There was a box of grooming implements the boy had the use of, since in his grandfather’s time there’d been a second lad in each team. He brushed down Red as the great carthorse ate. Leo lifted the horse’s front left foot and removed mud and grit from it with the hoof pick. He worked down towards the toe, so that the point of the pick might not penetrate the soft parts of the frog. He cleared the cleft of the frog and studied it for signs of thrush but found none. He tapped the shoe to see that it was secure and ran the tips of his fingers round the clenches to see that none had risen. The Shire horse helped him, holding his leg up so that the boy did not carry the whole of the weight.

‘Yon horse been workin on the offside today,’ Herbert called over from the next stall. ‘Every time I turned em on the headland the bugger tried to grab young buds in the hedge with his teeth.’

The boy took up the dandy brush and climbed onto the stool he’d brought into the stall for this purpose. He began at the poll behind the crest of Red’s head on the nearside. He brushed to and fro with all the vigour at his disposal, shifting caked dirt and sweat marks from the horse’s coat. He brushed Red’s belly, then moved to the legs and brushed the dirt from the points of the hocks, from the matted fetlocks and pasterns. As he worked on the hind limbs the boy held the horse’s tail out of the way with his free hand.

‘I don’t know who’s more keen to get em out a the stable, them or I.’ Herbert’s voice came from further away. He’d finished Noble and was now in the stall of Captain the black gelding.

Leo took up the body brush, with its short and close-set hairs. He threw Red’s mane across to the other side of his neck and brushed the crest. He brought back the mane and commenced work upon it at the lower end by the withers. Using a finger of his free hand to separate some locks of hair, he brushed first the ends of the hairs to remove tangles and then the roots in the same way. He worked slowly up the neck, dealing with a few locks at a time. He inhaled the smell of the horse as he did so. The incomparable concoction of hay, dust, flesh and sweat. The scent was best just behind Red’s ears. Each horse had its own smell. Red’s was sweeter than most, but all that Leo had encountered were good. His father reckoned that the smell of a horse sometimes offered the first sign of illness.

When the mane was clear the boy passed to the body, now taking up the curry comb in his right hand. He began once more at the poll region on the nearside, brushing in short circular strokes in the direction of the lay of the coat, leaning the weight of his body behind the brush. After every fourth stroke he drew the brush across the teeth of the curry comb to dislodge the dirt. He tapped the comb on the floor to clean it out in its

turn. When he had completed the nearside he walked around behind the horse and began on the offside, switching hands.

When he had finished the body the boy unstrapped the halter and tied the rope around Red's neck. He returned the curry comb to the box and with his free hand steadied the horse's head. He worked more gently now and spoke quietly to the carthorse as he did so. When he had brushed its head he replaced the halter.

The tail the boy dealt with as he had the mane, a few strands of hair at a time, teasing and shaking the locks out.

'Your old man's harrowin. Be in soon, let's hope. He says we's turnin em out tonight. Captain's frisky summat awful. I reckon they know, somehow.'

The boy took up a wisp, a fresh one that he reckoned had not been used before. He filled a bucket of water, wet his fingers and shook them over the wisp, in a way the Bishop had sprinkled holy water at Confirmation. He told the horse what he was about to do and showed Red the wisp and then he brought it down with a bang upon the side of the horse's neck and ran it across his skin in the direction of the lay of his coat. He banged the horse in the same way ten times, counting them off, then he moved on to the horse's quarters, and thighs, the hard flat muscular regions of his body. Then round to the other side.

Albert Sercombe came in from harrowing with Coal and Pleasant. 'Finished already?' the boy heard him say. 'You've got Leopold groomin Red?'

'Your boy's only a little tacker, uncle. A course it takes him longer.'

'Thought you'd give him the big horse, did you?'

'Yes, and he has to keep gettin on and off that stool, poor little sod.'

Leo dipped the sponge in the bucket of water and wrung it out. He pushed the stool with his foot against the wall by Red's head and stepped up onto it. He sponged away from the corners of the horse's eyes and around the eyelids. He stepped down and wrung out the sponge and stepped back up and sponged the muzzle region, cleaning the carthorse's

lips and the inside and the outside of his nostrils. Again he watered the sponge and wrung it out then moved to the other end of the horse. He lifted the tail and gently cleaned the dock region.

The horse breathed contentedly. The boy found the jar of his father's hoof oil. He dipped the small brush in it and lifted the horse's foot and gave a thin coat of oil to the whole of the hoof and the bulbs of the heel as far up as the coronet, each hoof in turn. Then he returned the jar and all the equipment to their cupboard in the stable room.

Leo returned to Red's stall and spoke to him and then climbed the partition between that stall and the next. He climbed along the cribs past Noble and Captain and squatted on the next partition to watch his father complete the grooming of Pleasant. Beyond, Herbert worked on Coal, the second black gelding. Albert sponged the old mare's face. Then he stopped and peered into her eyes. The mare gazed straight ahead, munching her corn, and to the boy it appeared that man and horse looked long into each other's eyes. His father shifted position slightly, studying the mare's eyeballs from different angles. Then he stepped away and leaned down, filled his sponge with water and wrung it out, and began to clean the horse's muzzle.

Albert glanced up. He did not openly acknowledge his son's looming presence but said, 'I been to the Glenthorne Estate when I were a lad. Had to deliver a horse there for the master. A big hunter, he was. I got lost, I reckon, and I come to it along a track through a gateway in the middle a nowhere. The hunter spotted somethin above us and reared up beneath me.' Albert raised his arms above his head and spread his hands apart. Water dripped down his sleeve. 'A great archway over our heads. On top of each a the pillars was a crouchin gargoyle.' He resumed cleaning the old mare's mouth. 'Never seen nothin like it. That's what you's like up there, boy. A crouchin damn' gargoyle.' Albert chuckled to himself. 'Why I was lookin in her eyes was to see if her lens is cloudy. I'm thinkin there's the start a cataracts.' He picked up the bucket and moved to the back of the horse. 'Nothin to be done about it if there is.'

When Albert had finished he said, ‘Let’s get em out, then,’ and they took the horses, the carters with a pair each, Noble’s foal following her, the filly too, the boy leading Red, towering above him, out of the stable and through the yard and into Back Meadow where they let them loose.

‘You and me better sweep the stables out,’ Albert said to Herbert. They returned to the yard but the boy stayed and watched the horses. The young black geldings galloped around the field. Noble rolled on her back. Old Pleasant, cataracts or not, could smell the new grass and pulled it from the ground and munched it. Leopold saw that for her it was like the new potatoes of early summer eaten with no more than a knob of butter and a leaf or two of mint, or like the first green peas his mother shelled from their pods and boiled and which he savoured in his mouth. So was this first meal of pasture grass of the spring for the old mare.

Red came up to Noble and nibbled at her withers. Noble turned her head to her fellow Shire horse but she did not move. The foal stuck close to his mother. Captain trotted over towards the fence and then twenty yards away passed directly across in front of Leo, kicking his legs behind him as if in some balletic display for the boy, to show him of what acrobatics a big horse is capable.

‘Their antics is amusin.’

The boy had not seen or heard Amos Tucker approach. The farmer leaned against the fence pole upon which Leo sat.

‘Just turned out?’ Amos said.

Leo nodded.

The farmer and the boy watched the horses. Enoch and Fred brought their own groomed animals, the four Shires and the two young bay geldings, to the pasture and let them loose, then returned to sweep their stable. The two teams of horses, who saw little of each other at close quarters through the winter, began to reacquaint themselves in their liberty. They cantered to and fro across or around the pasture on a particular course, from this point to that point, with great purpose that no

human being could quite fathom. The boy doubted whether any horse other than the one in motion could either.

‘Your father will let em out each evenin, then let em out all night come Friday, I reckon. That’s what he does. What his old man did an all.’

Amos Tucker lit his pipe. The horses grazed each a while then took off again. Dusk began to fall. The carters came and collected their horses. It took them longer than they wished for whatever awaited in the cribs, however deep the straw in the stalls, nothing could compare to fresh grass and open space. But the evening cooled, and darkness fell, and the horses allowed themselves to be haltered, and led back to the yard.

April

In the morning, rain fell light but steady upon the land. Leopold and Kizzie walked to school as did other pupils off the estate and round about. Kizzie spoke with girls from the other farms. The boy looked around him. Cattle gathered on the least windswept side of their grazing pasture. Sheep sought shelter in bushes or in the lea of walls. Horses stood in the rain with their heads down as if suffering punishment. Or perhaps showing defiance. Leo took a detour through the wood. Birds did not fly but huddled on branches. Each shrank within a carapace of its wings and feathers. Rain dripped through the leaves.

The children ran through the schoolyard. They were glad to be in the warm dry schoolhouse, but the boy was not. At lunchtime he walked back to the farm.

In the afternoon the rain fell harder.

‘There’s harness to be oiled, gaffer,’ Herbert said.

‘Aye,’ Albert replied.

‘I’ll light the fire if you want, gaffer.’

‘Don’t push it, lad, don’t push it. Never too wet to cart muck.’

Albert sought out his brother Enoch, the under carter, and told him he would take the black geldings to the blacksmith for it was near as dammit time for their shoes to be refitted. Enoch said he believed it was. Albert told him that Herbert would follow with Noble and Red, and that Leopold

was here and would bring Pleasant who was due new ones as hers were a quarter-year old. Enoch said he and Fred would oil tack in the saddle room. Albert nodded his approval.

They took empty canvas sacks, cut gaps along the seams for head and arms and wore them as capes against the weather. Herbert and the boy, leading their horses, passed Albert in the lane, leading Coal and Captain in their refitted shoes, though the falling rain splashing on the stone of the road muffled the noise of them.

‘Wait,’ Albert Sercombe called to his son. Herbert did not hear and carried on. The boy halted the mare and stood. The carter tied his horses to branches in the hedge. He came back and took the mare’s halter from the boy. ‘I’ll walk her up the lane and walk her back. Watch and tell me what you see.’

He walked his great old mare up the lane. The rain fell upon them all. After the length of a cricket wicket, which was as far as Leo could see before the rain blotted out all things visible, Albert turned and walked back. ‘What did you see?’ he asked. ‘Did you notice owt?’

The boy nodded.

‘When?’ his father asked. His eyes were narrowed against the rain that beat against his face and ran in the wrinkled fissures of his weathered skin.

‘When she put her hind leg to the ground,’ the boy said. ‘Nearside.’

‘Good. Tell the smith to study it.’

Others too had come. Herbert tied the horses to iron rings on the outside wall of the smithy and left them standing patiently in the rain.

The boy stood between the bay mare and Red, the nearest of the Shires, sheltered from the cold rain by their great bodies and warmed by them likewise, if only a little. He peered inside the forge. He could see Herbert with other lads and men. They stood, morose, steam rising from them as their wet clothes dried out in the heat of the smithy, speaking doubtless to complain of their lot and to share bad news of their fellows. Then Herbert spoke and the lad nearest to him swung his arm around behind Herbert

and slapped the back of his head. His head bowed forward and his damp cap flew off, and the men laughed. Herbert bent forward to retrieve his cap and as he rose with it in his hand he was laughing too.

When his turn came Herbert took first one then the other of the carthorses. The boy remained outside. When it was done Herbert said he would not wait but would see Leo back at the farm, and the boy led the old mare into the forge. The smith Jacob Crocker greeted the boy and he greeted the horse. He told his tall younger son to fetch shoes for Pleasant and if he didn't yet know what size shoes, front and hind, Manor Farm carter's old mare required by now he should seek an alternative profession. The son reached up and made his selection from shoes that hung on nails on the roof joists. In the heat of the forge on this busy day he was naked from the waist up. Crocker saw the boy watching his son and said, 'Tis the one job here he's good for, innit, reachin up high. His back's no good for this work. Tis causin him grief already. He'll never lift an anvil.'

Jacob Crocker's own strength was a legend. His chest was said to measure fifty inches. He could hold two carthorses while they struggled to break away. His neck was so thick, he would let two men wind rope around it and do their best to strangle him. He would challenge any man to lift with their two hands what he could hold above his head with one. Leo himself had seen him bend a poker over his own bare arm, and straighten a horseshoe with his hands.

'My father says to look at her hind foot nearside,' the boy said. 'Her's noddin when her puts it down.'

Crocker shared this request with his elder son, the farrier. They were alike, two barrel-chested men who could lift a horse, a hunter at least if not a Shire. The son was scarred from some infant accident in the forge, the second son was made crooked and their father was as wide as he was tall, too squat, almost dwarf. Yet their flaws or oddities only made it seem to the boy more likely they had been forged by the Lord, who according to Isaiah created the smith, who blew the fire of coals and produced shoes

for the horses of chariots, and the wheels, and the weapons of those who rode them to inflict the wrath of God.

The tall second son who had chosen the new shoes put them in the blazing furnace. He shovelled coal and worked the bellows. His spine when he stood was not entirely straight.

The elder son leaned back against the mare's front left flank, bent forward, ran his hand down her leg, squeezed the tendon above the fetlock and lifted the hoof. The mare shifted her weight, distributing it across her other three feet. She allowed the farrier to hold her front left leg between his knees. He chiselled straight the tips of the nails then levered and pulled the old shoe off with pliers, throwing it onto a pile of such discards. He took up his hoof pick and cleaned out the hoof. He laid down the pick and took up his knife and cut the top layer of horn. He laid down the knife and took up his nippers and trimmed the hoof wall. When this was done he used a rasp to flatten and smooth the bottom of the hoof.

The boy looked away from the scar on the side of the young farrier's face. He found himself gazing at the misshapen spine of the second son, and looked away. His gaze returned unbidden to the first son's countenance. The farrier gestured to his brother, who brought the hot shoe to him. The farrier took the pliers and applied the shoe to the mare's hoof. The wall of the hoof hissed and smoked, the stench of the burning matter filling the boy's nostrils.

The farrier took nails from the pocket of his apron and drove them through the shoe and the wall of the hoof. The boy saw the tips protrude through the wall. The farrier used nippers to bend and clip the tips of the nails. Then with the hammer he clinched each nail with a single blow. He then reshod the second and the third hoof likewise. When he came to the near hind foot he removed the shoe and cleaned the hoof then dug into it, until pus came out.

His father, watching, said, 'He's found it. I knew it'd be there. Your old man's not often wrong.'

The boy believed that his father was never wrong when it came to horses but he did not say so.

Jacob Crocker wrapped the old mare's foot in a poultice of bran, in a leather bag secured with string tightened around her pastern.

'Walk her home slow, boy. Apply a new poultice three times a day for the next couple a days, then bring her back here. Tell your old man to put a drop a washin soda in it and all.' Crocker patted the mare's flank. 'A good un, this old girl. Must be comin up near to twenty.'

The boy nodded. 'Eighteen.'

'Er's got a little sidebone down at the coronet there, you might have noticed. I'm keepin an eye on it. We'll adapt her shoe if we has to. She must be gettin stiff in her joints but she's never pulled her foot away from us yet.'

May

James Sparke of Wood Farm kept a breeding sow. She farrowed in the early spring. The boy's mother Ruth announced one evening that a dozen sucklings had been born during the previous night. How their mother received such information was a mystery for she seemed rarely to leave home or garden. Word on such matters travelled around the tied cottages on the estate by some mystical means.

Over the days and weeks following, the boy and his sister Kizzie took a detour via Wood Farm on their way home from school. They leaned over the pig-sty fence and gazed at the great black sow, who lay like some proud obese monarch on the cleanish straw. Her sleek black piglets slept or crawled sleepily over her and each other or suckled at her teats.

After nine weeks Ruth accompanied them to Wood Farm. Leo carried the sack. Two of the litter had already gone. James Sparke and Ruth Sercombe enquired after each other's families. They spoke about the weather, animals, crops, church. The names of many people known and unknown to the children were mentioned and discussed. Leo watched his sister fall asleep standing up, as ponies do. Perhaps the gabbering pair would go on to talk of the people of other countries, other races, those upon the earth and those below, why not? But then the children's mother asked how much Mister Sparke wanted for this runt over here and he asked Mrs Sercombe whether she truly expected him to be as generous as

he was last year, surely she did not wish to take such advantage of a man's good nature again, and so they got to haggling.

James Sparke named a price of two shillings for the fattening pig. Ruth Sercombe burst into laughter as if Mister Sparke had cracked a rattling joke too subtle for the children to comprehend, and said she was glad that despite all the trials and tribulations of this past year he had not lost his sense of humour. She offered one shilling. Mister Sparke said Mrs Sercombe must have little to occupy herself, no? – perhaps her daughter here had taken over the household chores – if she enjoyed wasting a busy farmer's time for her own amusement. He would not go below one shilling and elevenpence. Ruth said, yes, she was quite happy to walk to and fro, she would leave now and would come back when he was serious. She offered one shilling and one penny. So they continued to barter until all of a sudden James Sparke spat on his palm and Ruth spat on hers, and they shook on a deal.

James Sparke leaned over the fence of the sty and caught a black piglet by one of its hind legs. It squealed, shrill and plaintive. Its mother protested with deep-throated grunts. Leo opened the sack. Mister Sparke lifted the piglet and fed it into the sack. The Sercombes walked home three abreast, Leo with the sack over his shoulder, Kizzie beside him speaking to the piglet with words of consolation and promises of how much he would relish his new home. The boy struggled with his load as the piglet wriggled in the sack until he found the breathing hole, and then he lay still with his snout sticking out and listened to the girl's words of reassurance.

May

Pigeons roosted on the beams under the roof of the open shed in the stable yard. The boy fancied their cooing soothed the horses through the long hours of winter darkness. Their number would increase periodically. Albert Sercombe decreed that their tribe be kept to a dozen, twelve apostles, their cooing the incantation of some bird-like gospel of their own.

‘Do we fancy pigeon pie, mother?’ he asked Ruth. The day following he shot the surplus and presented her with their carcases.

The pigeons gathered small twigs in their beaks and constructed their nests on the rafters. The nests grew by immeasurable, laborious increments. By the following spring they would be dilapidated and the birds would start again. When the chicks were hatched the boy climbed up and studied them. They grew wings. Before they could fly he collected them one Tuesday in a small crate, which he covered with a piece of cloth. This he put in the cart to which he harnessed the pony and so carried it to the crossroads near Home Farm on the eastern side of the estate. There he waited and in time a light horse and cart appeared from the direction of the village. It slowed as it approached him.

‘Got something for me, boy?’ the huckster asked. ‘Let’s see.’

The boy showed him the pigeon chicks, seventeen in total.

The huckster wore a chequered yellow waistcoat beneath his grey jacket. He looked around, tipped the front of his hat back. ‘You’re the carter’s younger boy,’ he said. ‘I want no argument with your father.’

The huckster bought surplus poultry, butter, eggs from the farms on the estate and doubtless others. He also sold all manner of items without order or reason. A year ago he’d sold a pair of laces to the boy’s brother Fred. They broke within days for they were made of cotton not of leather such as were required for hobnailed boots, and the following Tuesday Albert Sercombe waited for him. Leo went with him. The carter demanded back the ballast Fred had paid for the cotton laces. The huckster said it was an honest sale and warned Albert not to lay a hand upon him. Not notwithstanding this request, with a single punch Albert broke his nose and the huckster handed over the coin, all bloody as was the yellow waistcoat.

‘I’ll give ye half a crown,’ he told the boy now. ‘Don’t make a face, boy, that’s two pennies for every chick near’s dammit. If ye wish to walk to Taunton or bloody Bridgwater to find yourself a fairer price, you’re welcome.’

Leopold nodded and the huckster gave him the coin. He shook his head. ‘Don’t think you can spend it on my cart. I’ll buy but I’ll sell to neither you nor your kin.’

He made sure the crate was secure on his cart and then rode away along the lane. The boy watched. The odd items stacked upon the cart knocked and jostled against each other, making an almost musical sound as of a band of tambourines fading into the distance.

June

Gideon Sparke, son of James, announced to the cohort of his contemporaries stood around the schoolyard at breaktime that his father had acquired a new pony. He said it was better than any other such animal upon the estate and his father had bought it chiefly for his, Gideon's, use. Leo found this believable. James Sparke also gave his son pig bladders, which Gideon brought to school for football. If he found himself on the losing side he was inclined to grab the bladder and take it home.

Alfred Haswell said he supposed this pony had no vices. Gideon agreed. She was willing, well schooled, comfortable, and had the softest mouth you could dream of. Farm machinery did not rattle her.

Kizzie asked if the pony was pretty too and Gideon assured her that she was. 'A lovely bay mare, I should say, with a good bit a Welsh in her — lovelier than any a your lot over Manor Farm.' He said that she was seven years old, the perfect age. A touch under fourteen hands, an ideal height. That she came to call and boxed easy.

'Sounds just right for you.'

'No, she ain't a novice's pony, that's true.'

Gideon was a tall and portly boy, cumbersome, for not only did his father give him whatever he desired, his mother likewise refused him nothing, which in her case amounted to food. The other boys preferred to

tease than to cross him, for though he was no natural fighter, in a brawl his sheer size could prove awkward.

‘I’ll bet she’s fast, though, Giddy, ain’t she?’ Gilbert Prowse offered.

‘Fast?’ said Gideon. ‘Faster than any a yourn.’

‘You should breed from her.’

‘She’s already bred, when she were three. A lovely black foal, filly t’was.’

‘You saw it, did you?’

‘I heard about it. A wonderful mother, she were.’

‘Don’t let the master see such a prize,’ said Alfred. ‘Why, he’ll confiscate a fitty mare like that for hisself.’

‘You don’t believe me?’ Gideon said. ‘I’ll prove it. Get Sercombe there to bring his nag Saturday and I’ll race him. Father’ll give us one a his pasture fields. Bring your brass and I’ll bet the bloody lot a you.’

With that the bell rang and Gideon marched ahead into the schoolroom.

They congregated at Wood Farm on the morning of the appointed day, the children of the estate and of the village and one or two adults with naught better to do. Dunstone was one, Isaiah Vagges another. Kizzie had volunteered her services as bookmaker for the event.

Leo had not asked for the contest, but it did not occur to him to refuse. The boy walked their pony along the track. He was a skewbald gelding, less than thirteen hands high, a strong little cob who liked to work. He could be harnessed to the small cart in a moment for Ruth to take to the village or if Amos Tucker needed something fetching. Unlike the carthorses he had no name. Leo did not know why. It was as if a horse had to be of sufficient height to warrant one. He was happy for Leo to ride him. But he was not fast.

Gideon or perhaps his father had marked out a race track in a field of grass. The field was crooked like most hereabouts but there were half a dozen places where the hedge turned sharply, and at each of these corners

they had planted a stake some five yards out. Leo led the cob around the temporary course. He watched Gideon seated upon his bay mare in the middle of the field, allowing other children to come and pat the horse and otherwise pay homage. Unless there was something faulty with the bay she would surely be swifter than Leo's cob, but she had to carry far more weight and perhaps this would equalise the contest.

Kizzie took note of the bets. People bet against her pot and they bet against Gideon too, according to his challenge in the schoolyard. In order to be allowed to bet on a horse with Kizzie they had to bet a farthing against him. That was the deal.

The boys and girls put down their farthings or halfpennies. Gilbert Prowse, son of the baker, put down threepence. According to what proportion of stakes were put on which horse, Kizzie determined the odds. They began even but shifted with each wager. She noted the amount a person laid and their odds at that moment. Most, seeing the new pony, forgot how good a rider Leo Sercombe was and put their money on Gideon. Since they had also to stand Gideon's wager it was a way to spread their bet.

Kizzie did not know how bookmakers operated on professional race tracks but here on the estate the children had devised this system and it had become accepted as their custom. It required an older child such as herself, competent in mathematics, to administer it. After the race she would take her cut of five per cent then divide the rest according to a subtle combination of the odds and the amount in the pot. She would also either hand over farthings to Gideon or give him a list of those to each of whom he owed this sum.

When the master's daughter walked into the field all stopped what they were doing and watched her come towards them. She did not falter. She asked the first person she reached, Gilbert Prowse, if those two ponies were the only ones taking part. How she knew about the race was a

mystery, yet it was hardly profound, for one or two of the maids in the big house were elder sisters of those here present.

Miss Prideaux wore a blue skirt and white blouse. The skirt had neither pleat nor trim and the blouse was plain yet as she walked amongst them it was as if her presence were a gift conferred upon the assembled company. Leo was not sure how. She wore a straw boater tilted back upon her head and from beneath it her light brown hair fell loose upon her shoulders. When she saw Kizzie with the money she stepped forward and said, ‘Put this on the bigger horse.’

Kizzie stared at the coin now on her palm. She had seen a sovereign before, but not held one herself. It was oddly insubstantial, lighter than a florin. ‘Beg pardon, Miss Charlotte,’ she said. ‘We cannot cover it.’

The master’s daughter frowned. She took back the coin and returned it to her purse, producing a sixpence instead, which Kizzie accepted. She licked her pencil and wrote down the name.

Alfred Haswell asked Gideon how many times they intended to circumnavigate the field. Gideon said they would ride twice around. Leo nodded in agreement. He figured the field was between one and two acres. There were two stakes to mark the start line, which would also be the finish. Gideon rode his bay mare towards it. Leo watched him and knew at once that he and his cob would win the race, for the chubby older boy’s bareback mount upon the horse was loose and unbalanced. If Gideon let his mare go, he would be unable to stay upon her. That was all there was to it.

Leo looked around. The morning was overcast but warm, the grey sky would surely clear soon. He jumped onto his pony’s back and grasping the mane pivoted his body and swung his right leg over, and followed after Gideon.

There was no official starter. The riders made ready and Gideon yelled and took off. The boy let him go. The mare set off at a cracking pace. Gideon held on as best he could. Soon he was holding his arms as far

around the bay mare's neck as he could, while also pulling on the reins to slow her down. Leo let his cob canter behind some yards distant, for if the corpulent boy fell he did not wish to trample him. He wondered whether the others in the middle of the field realised Gideon's predicament. Perhaps they found the sight impressive and thought he was riding his bay mare like a jockey. Leo looked across and saw that they were yelling and waving encouragement, though to whom he could not tell.

They circled the field once. Gideon pressed his legs against his horse's belly for balance. He still hung on her neck, and was jouncing or wobbling upon her spine. Halfway round the second time Leo himself leaned forward. He brought his knees up and crouched forward on the cob's withers. It was not a style he had copied, or been taught. He cantered past the bay mare and glanced towards the spectators, for he hoped the master's daughter was watching. But, riding hard, he could not pick her out in the crowd.

June

The boy's father strode up the track to Little Rats Hill. The boy fell behind, trotted a few steps to catch up. Walked beside his father. Grey sky. Lagged again. Trotted forward. They ascended the track in this manner.

On the hill the boy's father took a plug of tobacco from his pouch, filled and lit his clay pipe. They waited.

Amos Tucker rode his cob across Haw Park towards them. They watched him kick the horse periodically though it made no difference to the beast's laggardly pace. The farmer's legs looked puny beneath the barrel of his body.

'Albert,' Amos said.

'Gaffer,' said the boy's father. The boy took the reins of the cob as Tucker leaned forward on to the horse's neck grasping its mane, and rolled his weight over the saddle and down to the ground.

'What's our reckonin, Albert? Be we ready?'

The two men stood in close proximity to each other. Each studied the earth around him and as far as he could see, turning at intervals to cast his eye in a fresh direction. The sky was overcast, streaked with grey, a little hazy. The boy held the reins and watched the two men. The cob wanted to munch the lush grass but the boy gripped the bridle beside the bit and kept her head up.

'I reckon tis makin its way,' said his father quietly.

Tucker looked around about, as if with these words seeing the scene afresh. He nodded, and spoke in little more than a whisper. ‘I reckon so too. It’s risin, innit?’

The boy’s father frowned. ‘Seems so to me, gaffer.’

Tucker took a step closer. The boy strained to hear him. ‘Let us make a beginnin,’ he said.

They spoke in whispers, as if some malevolent spirit in the upper sphere might overhear and punish their presumption. Or as if words uttered carelessly might dart like arrows upward and puncture the wispy clouds, provoking rain.

‘Go forth, Albert,’ Tucker said. ‘Make ready.’ He clambered aboard his mare, took the reins from the boy and steered back towards the farmhouse in the bed of the valley, kicking the cob’s flanks on occasion, to no discernible effect.

Albert Sercombe set off down the track. The boy could see the village in the distance and the families returning from church to the farms on the estate. Pilgrims walking home. He heard a sound, turned and scanned the air searching for its origin. The song of a skylark. He could not see the bird but its chirping liquid song teased him. He stared. His cousin, son of Enoch, elder brother of Herbert, was a soldier. He had been home on leave one month before, shunned by his elders, dandy in red tunic and round cap. the lads and boys gathered round him. While he hid they closed their eyes then tried to find him but they never could. He also stripped naked then wagered he could reclothe himself entire, fit for parade, in the time it took a lad to hold a lit match. Thus he took their pennies.

The boy looked about him patiently, the skylark’s running stream of song impossible to pinpoint, until he saw the bird dropping, plummeting towards the ground, and then before it seemed to reach the grass it vanished. The boy turned and trotted after his father.

The men rose and moved like shades in the dark cottage. His father Albert, his brother Fred. The boy followed them. They stumbled along the lane from the cottage to the farm, dew materialising on their caps and shoulders.

Fred hived off to the stables. At the gate to the pasture the boy's father called the horses. They came up out of the darkness.

Fred had climbed into the loft, poured corn and chaff into the manger. He threw the last of the clover from the year before into their racks as the horses came into the stable, five of them, one after another in the order they observed amongst themselves. Red, the big ten-year-old Shire, then eight-year-old Noble with her foal and the filly, then the old mare Pleasant, then the two black three-year-olds, first Captain, then Coal. They entered their customary stalls one by one.

While Albert prepared the harness and tackle, the boy followed Noble into her stall. He spoke to her to tell her of his approach, that she be not startled as she fed. He speculated as to whether she missed her foal in the daytime while she worked. He told her he thought she would be in harness with her brother, Red, today, driven by the lad Herbert, his cousin, but that when the cereal harvest came she'd be put abreast with the young ones, and he wondered whether when she pulled beside Captain she would know that he was her son. He thought not.

He heard the clatter of hobnailed boots. Then his father's voice addressing the new arrivals. 'Good a you to join us fore the evenin.'

'I see no fuckin light ayet in that sky,' the boy's uncle, Enoch, replied. 'I'm here. Your lad's here.'

'He 'll find Fred's filled the manger.'

Herbert ran in. He geared up Red with chain harness, groping in the gloom, then came into Noble's stall. 'Will you lead her out for me?' he asked.

They led the heavy horses to the stone drinking trough. The boy's father stood in the rickyard by the two-horse mower, cleaned, oiled,

knife-sharp. In the half-light the mower gave the first colour of the day, red and canary yellow.

‘Hup! Back!’ Herbert spoke loudly to each horse in turn until they stood either side of the mowing machine’s pole. He lifted this and Albert strapped it to the underside of the horses’ collars, the weight of the machine on their necks. He fastened the traces to the swinging whipples, and put a wooden coupling stick between the horses’ bridles, fastening it with spring clips.

Albert tied the rope reins with a slip knot to the left ring of Noble’s bridle and the right ring of Red’s. Herbert fetched an armful of old clover and placed it on the iron seat.

‘Think I’m gettin old and soft, lad?’ Albert asked him.

‘I’ve no wish for a sore arse, uncle,’ Herbert said. ‘See no need for thee to have one neither.’

‘We’ll start over Watercress Meadow. Bring a rake, another knife and the file.’ Albert mounted the machine, made a clicking sound by blowing air through his teeth sharply against his cheek, and flicked the reins. The horses moved slowly forward and he drove them out of the yard, past the farmhouse still in darkness, into the lane by Long Close, the boy Leo following.

At the gate to Watercress Meadow, Albert Sercombe waited. He did not look behind. The boy trotted past and unlatched the gate, and swung it open. Albert dropped the bedding of the mower. He pushed the lever at his side forward to pitch the fingers and knocked the gear knob to the on position. He ordered the horses to walk on. The meadow was heavy with dew. Light seeped into the morning, the sky was clear, the boy watched the mowing machine clatter around the outside of the meadow tight to the hedge in a clockwise direction, the long knife cutting the grass on the right-hand side of the machine. Rabbits scuttered to their burrows.

The boy walked back to the yard. He passed Herbert on the way, weighed down with implements. He saw his uncle Enoch riding the

second mower, he guessed to the Berry Fields. The boy's brother Fred followed in a cart.

From the tool shed Leo took a sickle and sharpening stone and returned to the field. He watched the rattling mower. Grass, cornflower, clover, meadowsweet, fell before the agitating knife. Herbert raked the outermost swathe in away from the hedge. The boy walked through the field. He found a wasps' nest and cut around it with the sickle. His father had not asked him to do this but he took it upon himself.

Albert Sercombe drove the horses, the horses pulled the mower, the mower cut the grass. At times he stopped and climbed down and freed the knife that was clogged with wet grass or with soil from molehills. Herbert Sercombe raked the swathe away from the hedge. Starlings gathered and scoured the newly mown grass for worms and insects. Leo Sercombe investigated the long grass. His father brought the horses to a stop and called out to Herbert to bring the new knife. He disengaged the gear and raised the bedding.

Herbert came with the long knife. Albert felt the blade. 'You've not sharpened it,' he said.

'You didn't say.'

'Did you not think, you lazy sod?'

'You said to rake the hedge swathe.'

The boy thought his father might strike the lad, but he did not.
'Where's the file?'

Herbert said nothing.

Albert nodded in the direction of the oak tree at the base of which Herbert had stowed the implements. 'You left the file over there?'

'You said to fetch the knife.' Herbert turned and walked towards the oak, muttering to himself. Albert watched him, shaking his head, as if someone were speaking in his ear pointing out the lad's merits yet he disagreed.

The boy noticed that the first bluebottles and horse-flies of the morning had appeared, worrying the horses. He went to the hedge, reached up and

pulled off lanterns of elderflower. He walked back and laced them into the horses' bridles. His father filed the blade of the new knife. Herbert removed the used knife from the machine, and replaced it with the freshly sharpened one. He squirted oil from the long-spouted can along the blade and between the metal fingers, then he oiled the driving bar, and lastly he filled the reservoir for the cogs that drove the mower from the wheels of the vehicle.

'You know well what to do,' Albert told him. 'So do it.'

They hung their jackets on the hedge and resumed their labours. The boy watched his father circle the field in diminishing irregular loops. Periodically the carter slapped the skin of his neck or arm. From a distance he appeared to be castigating himself.

The boy's sister Kizzie stood beneath the oak tree. She held up a basket. No one knew how long she had been standing there.

'You should a called us,' Herbert yelled.

Kizzie did not answer. She had recently taken a vow of silence. The school monitors had been nominated to go to the Coronation fête, given to a horde of the nation's children at the Crystal Palace. Kizzie could not be spared at this, the busiest time of year. Miss Pugsley and Mabel Prowse had gone without her.

Herbert unhooked the pair of horses from the mower. Leo carried handfuls of freshly cut grass into the shade and the horses munched it, their tails swinging.

They ate the cottage loaf and cheese and onion the girl had brought, drank water, and tea, still luke-warm from the pot.

'Feels like it should be lunchtime,' said Herbert. 'And tis only the mornin break.'

'These are the long days,' Albert agreed. They ate in silence.

Farmer Tucker came walking into the field. 'Mornin, Albert,' he said. 'You've made a good start. Here, I brought you a drop a cider.'

'Welcome, gaffer.' Albert took the flagon and drank deeply, then passed it to Herbert who did likewise.

‘Heard the clatter of the mower as I ate my breakfast,’ Amos Tucker said. ‘What a racket. And it makes no difference how low you set it, you’ll never shave as fine as a good man with a scythe.’

Albert Sercombe nodded slowly. ‘Aye, gaffer, and it took as I recall eight men to cut this meadow.’

The boy and his sister and the lad their cousin Herbert said nothing.

‘Aye, Albert,’ Tucker said. ‘And if I listen now ...’ He ceased speaking and raised his head aslant, ears cocked, alert in the manner of a plump cock pheasant. ‘...I can hear the music of those scythes being sharpened.’

Kizzie passed around jam tarts.

‘Remember, Albert, when the master brought the first mowing machine on to the estate? He’d only just took over, after the old Lord Prideaux died on us.’

‘Was it here on Manor Farm, gaffer?’ Herbert said.

‘No. Home Farm. Albert’s father, Jonas, told me, “The men won’t endure it.” Right enough, they stuck iron harrow tines upright in the grass. Ruined the machine.’ Amos Tucker shook his head. ‘Who was the master to punish? The men or the farmer?’

Albert swallowed a draught of cider.

‘What did the master do, gaffer?’ Herbert asked.

Farmer Tucker cast about him. As if there were a greater, invisible audience for his recollections beyond this small band. ‘One old boy was a bachelor. He was put under arrest, and taken to court in Taunton. Sent down a while in Exeter gaol. Never heard from again, was he, Albert?’

The boy’s father shook his head.

‘Died in the workhouse, like as not,’ said Amos. ‘And the farmer, one Gresley by name, the master moved on after harvest.’

‘Some of they others was lucky, I’d say,’ Herbert opined.

‘Our master is a wise man,’ Albert assured his lad. He rose unsteady to his feet. They stepped out of the shade of the oak branches.

‘Hot for the horses, ain’t it, carter?’ Herbert said.

Albert looked up at the sun, squinting.

Herbert nodded towards Noble and Red. ‘The bloodsuckers is botherin em bad.’

‘We’ll finish this meadow.’

The girl took the basket away. Tucker carried off his empty flagon. Herbert filed the blade. When the time came to replace it he did so. The mower rattled around the field. The boy watched his father ride the mower. A wispy cloud of steam rose from his sweating body. He was like one of those Canaanites who lived in the valley land and had chariots of iron; they were not driven out by the Israelites but lived in the midst of them, and they became forced labourers. They lived thus, still, here in the West Country.

Periodically rabbits ran across the stubble, birds rose from the grass. When the residual clump in the middle of the meadow was cut Albert Sercombe drove his pair out around the outside of the field in an anti-clockwise direction: the grass over which the horses had ridden initially had recovered a little and now itself was mown.

When he reached the gate Albert brought the horses to a halt, raised the knife and fingers of the mower, put them out of gear. The boy saw bloodstains on the blade. His father drove the horses back into the lane. Herbert gathered the implements. The boy turned back into the field and followed the hedge where the machine had most recently mowed. He found the dismembered carcase of a partridge, and a little further on its nest, built by chance in a slight depression of the earth. He counted nine olive-brown eggs, smooth and glossy. Only three were broken. He removed his jacket and tied the ends of the two sleeves together. He looped the sleeves as a collar round his neck, and lifted the nest carefully, entire, and carried it in his jacket like a sling slowly home.

The boy’s mother was responsible for their poultry. She had two hen huts, each housing thirty hens and one cockerel. Annually in March the cockerels were replaced by others of different breeds. Thus she did invigorate her flock of birds. The yard and the orchard were populated by

many different strains, Albion, Brahmin, Dorking, Leghorn, Spanish and Wyandottes clucking and squawking in a confusion of tongues like the doomed builders of Babel.

Ruth fed young chicks with rice. Each spring she sold the two-year-old hens and replaced them with pullets hatched the previous year. The boy searched among them now for the black Minorca hen. She had never been sold; his mother deemed her as co-operative a sitter as she had ever known. The bird believed every egg placed beneath her was her own. He found her in the orchard and bribed her with grain to her nesting place behind the wood shed. He laid the partridge eggs down, still in their nest, and the hen took a turn or two around them then stood and looked about her as if to an imaginary audience of her own kind, to show them this impressive production. Then she sat upon the eggs.

On the day following, Herbert took one of the three-year-olds, Captain, leading the swathe turner to Watercress Meadow. The hot sun had bleached the outermost of the green herbage and was turning it to hay already. The clover in red bloom was now a fawn colour, the yellow trefoil had wilted, and Herbert followed the same route as his carter had the day before, turning the grass, which smelled so sweet a man could imagine becoming a ruminant munching upon it, contented.

Leo had agreed to go to school but he tracked back. At the farm he collected the same implements Herbert had used the day before and carried them past the Meadow to Ferny Piece from where he could hear his father mowing. The boy raked the swathe out away from the hedge. When Albert stopped for his morning break he did not speak of his son's presence, neither to thank nor to berate him, but he broke his bread and cut the cheese and the onion and shared them with Leo, and he shared the water.

The hay in the field gave off heat as it dried. The boy watched birds as they flew through the air above and were unexpectedly disturbed, how their flight was upset and how they responded. Some struggled ill-

naturedly then resumed their intended direction. One yellow wagtail, however, returned to this unexpected thermal and let itself fall and glide. The boy watched it playing with the air.

When they ate again, Leo produced his packed school lunch. The boy pulled his boiled bacon sandwich apart and offered his father the larger part. His father passed him his knife and the boy cut his jam pie in half. His father reached across and ruffled the boy's head and hair; his hand was huge, flattened by labour, the skin callused and tough like hide.

On the morning of the third day Albert paced out a rectangle in the rick yard, thirty feet long by fifteen feet wide, and marked it with old straw.

They began to gather the hay. Albert hitched Noble in the shafts of one waggon and drove it to the Meadow. Herbert hitched Red to the second and towed it likewise.

The boy and his mother and his sister raked the swathes of hay into cocks. The heads of the rakes were as wide as those who wielded them were tall. Their wooden teeth were each eight inches long. Albert stood in the bed of the first waggon. His son Fred on one side and Herbert on the other pitched hay up to him with their long forks. Dunstone led Noble between the cocks of hay. His mother saw the boy watching the horses.

'I know you'd rather have yon job, Leo,' she said. 'Poor Dunstone would take it to heart.'

Dunstone was a vagabond upon the estate. He had no place to sleep but each night chose a new spot. At a glance he could pass for a boy but then one saw his face. Or one might see him stiff and limping in the morning and take him for an old man, and be likewise duped. He was neither young nor old, and he was both. They said of him there was not much up in the attic. His ragged clothes were the cast-offs of other men. Given him by women ashamed for their husbands to wear them any longer. They were ill-fitting upon poor Dunstone. The sleeves of his jacket reached almost to

his fingers. The hems of the trousers had been cut off and were frayed above his ankles. He lifted wisps of hay and fed them to the horse.

The job was short-handed but Albert Sercombe could not abide his brother working in the same field and Tucker put up with the restriction. Enoch Sercombe mowed the Back Meadow. They could hear the machine clattering on the other side of the hedge on the eastern side of Watercress Meadow.

The boy as he raked glanced often at his father. Albert rose by degrees upon the hay he stacked beneath himself, levitating like the Prophet Ezekiel or some ecstatic saint contemplating the mystery of the Lord's harvest. When he nodded, the boy trotted to the farm and entered the stables. Captain had already had his halter put upon him. The boy led him back out to the Meadow. Amos Tucker was at the gate and said to him, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and a child will lead them.” He grinned and called to the boy's mother, ‘See him lead the beast, Ruth. I swear he's no need for the halter. Is it not a wonder?’

Leo did not look to either side and did not acknowledge those who now considered him but led the great black Shire gelding to the waggon, where Herbert hitched Captain to the front of Noble as the trace horse. Dunstone watched, moving from one foot to the other.

‘He talks to the creatures, Dunstone,’ Herbert said. ‘Don't you, Leo? Speak to the dumb creatures more than thou speakest to man?’

Dunstone could not keep still. ‘What shall I do?’ he asked of Herbert. There were no more than half a dozen teeth left in his mouth. He turned to the boy and said, ‘What shall I do?’

Fred tied ropes to the sides of the waggon and threw them to his father atop the load. Amos Tucker wound them around the pins on the other side and threw them back to Albert, and so did they criss-cross the mound of hay and secure the load. Albert stood and looked about him for a moment, enjoying this unusual perspective on the land he knew. Then he came over the side: grasping a rope, he lowered himself hand over hand to the

ground. Ruth raked down the sides of the load and Amos Tucker applauded her neatness.

Leo climbed up and rode Noble side-saddle, his father beside the horse's bridle, holding Captain's long leading rein. He ordered the horses forward. The boy looked back and saw that Amos Tucker was now in the second waggon, loading with a sheaf pike the hay thrown up by Herbert and Fred. Dunstone led the horse, Red, forward when told to. The boy's mother and his sister raked another line of hay into cocks.

The waggon joggled and swayed across the field, through the gateway, along the lane. Hay caught in the hedge and was pulled off the load, decorating the branches like the scattering of some midsummer festivity. As they approached the long slope towards the farm the horses sped up, though Albert Sercombe had said nothing and pulled the full waggon up the incline and into the yard.

Ernest Cudmore the shepherd and Isaac Wooland the stockman were waiting for them. When the waggon was in position Isaac leaned a ladder against it and they climbed on top of the load of hay. Albert unhitched the ropes from the pins and the other two men began to pitch forkfuls down to him, into the foundation Albert had laid at the break of day.

The boy fetched the second gelding, Coal, from the stable and walked him to the Meadow. Herbert walked towards him and they passed each other through the gateway.

The field was quiet. Amos Tucker's daughters had joined the boy's mother and sister in raking the swathes into cocks across the great meadow. Their white smocks and bonnets were smirched with dirt. His uncle Enoch had taken over from Herbert, pitching forkfuls up to Amos Tucker. The boy led the horse to the front of the waggon. Enoch hitched it to the traces. When they had tied the load down, Dunstone led Red and Coal close to the gateway and stood them there. The men slaked their thirst with cold tea. Herbert returned with the empty waggon, standing aboard it, driving Noble and Captain with their separate reins. He brought them to where his father Enoch indicated. The boy held the

horses. Herbert walked to the gateway and took the reins from Dunstone and led the second, full waggon out and along the lane. Dunstone came trotting over and took Red's bridle from the boy.

So they worked through the afternoon and the warm evening. As the light ebbed, the women left the field. The men completed a load in the fading light. They followed the last waggon into the yard, sweat-soaked flannel shirts cooling on their backs.

A second rick had begun. The boy watched his father put the roof on the first rick in the dying light. He came down the ladder. 'Let it settle,' he told Herbert. 'Then top it up a little. Thatchers'll come in two to three weeks, gaffer?'

'Don't ye worry, Albert, I'll have a word with them,' said Tucker.

The boy helped his father groom the horses. Herbert lit the paraffin lamp and hung it on the wire above the stalls. The boy followed each brushstroke with his bare hand, as his father did, to rid the horses' shoulders of sweat marks where the heavy collars had been.

He walked home with his father and his brother. His mother gave them cold ham and eggs fried in pig fat, bread and butter. They ate in silence, then hauled their weary bodies up the stairs to bed.

July

Noble had gone to work each day but returned to the pasture in the evening and suckled her foal. Albert Sercombe took the foal, now a colt, from her one day in July. He led the colt out of the yard. The boy led old Pleasant after. He watched the colt yank and strain on the unfamiliar halter, saw the force his father was obliged to exert to restrain him.

They let them loose in the near paddock, climbed out between the fence poles and leaned upon the upper pole and watched Pleasant graze and the colt scurry and stop. He looked around, cantered to the far side of the paddock, returned to Pleasant, studied her.

‘Her’ll educate him,’ Albert said.

They watched the colt gallop in one direction then stop, as if he had been ordered to, or so commanded himself. He stood still and they watched him, then he all of a sudden took off swerving somewhere else.

‘Is he lookin for his dam?’ Albert said. ‘Is he forgettin, then rememberin? I don’t know. No one knows how the brains of horses reason.’

Pleasant ignored the colt, and grazed.

‘I like the look of him,’ Albert Sercombe told his son. ‘His testicles ain’t fallen but when they do I’m not keen to geld him. I’ll talk to the gaffer. See if the master’d care to come and take a look.’ Albert filled his clay

pipe, watching the colt. In due course he lit it. ‘We’ve not had a stud go from Manor Farm since your grandfather’s time.’

The boy felt his father grip his upper arm with one hand and his wrist with the other. ‘How much muscle you got there, boy?’

The boy remembered one thing about his grandfather: he wore leather straps on his wrists, weakened by a lifetime of working the plough reins.

‘You’s strong enough, I reckon,’ Albert Sercombe decided. ‘How do you fancy bein the one to swing this colt? If you needs a hand, Dunstone will do your biddin. You seen me do it, boy. Don’t touch him. Let the colt touch you.’

On the afternoon following the boy took a halter from the saddle room. He found the old lad walking between Manor Farm and the crossroads, saw him walk along the lane then turn and walk twenty yards and turn again.

When he reached Dunstone the boy said, ‘Will you help me?’ The old lad followed him gladly. Dunstone walked in tiny steps, on his tiptoes, like one child creeping up on another. He spoke of what he had seen. ‘I sin many things this day, Leo. I sin Isaac send his dog to fetch the cows for milkin and that dog he don’t hurry them, you know, he brings em in slow with their full udders swayin, like. That’s a clever dog.’

Dunstone trotted on his mincing feet. Leopold had heard his reports before, as had all who lived upon the estate, for Dunstone ranged across it when he was of a mood to. On rare occasions he witnessed something new and added the account to his repertoire.

They walked to the paddock. The boy bade Dunstone hold the long coiled rope and wait outside the fence. He tucked the halter inside the back of his trouser belt, under his jacket, climbed in and walked to Pleasant, and stroked the old mare, and spoke to her. The colt regarded him from a distance. The boy walked into the middle of the paddock and waited. The colt ignored him and moved away in a circuit, but his curiosity betrayed him and he kept coming nearer.

When the foal was not far away the boy took aniseed from his pocket and rubbed it between his fingers and the colt's head went up. His nostrils trembled. His head went down and he paced slowly, steadily, towards the boy. The boy spoke to the colt and then he reached behind him, released the halter, brought it round and slipped it over the colt's head. He waved to Dunstone to join him. The old lad scampered across the paddock. Leopold clipped the rope to the tie-ring on the halter, beneath the horse's head. He bade Dunstone hold the halter in a firm grip while he made his way slowly, inviting the colt to watch him, to the fence. There he took his time to remove his jacket and lay it over the upper pole, before ambling back across the paddock. He took over once again from the old lad.

Leopold walked backwards, letting the rope uncoil. When it had reached its full extent he bade Dunstone hold the end while he grasped the rope a little way along and they stepped back and took up the slack. The colt felt the pressure and backed away, pulling Leo and Dunstone forward. They dug their heels into the hard grassy ground and strained, and dragged the colt towards them. The colt set his hooves four-square upon the earth and held them. The boy and the old lad held their ground likewise. The young horse and the pair of diminutive humans were well matched. This tug-of-war continued, until the colt could bear the strain on his neck no longer, and jumped forward. The boy stepped back smartly, knocking into Dunstone, who staggered backward until the rope was taut once more.

And so they continued, moving by increments across and around the paddock, until the colt was weary. The boy thanked Dunstone for his help and said that mother would feed him should he care to go to their cottage. Dunstone nodded and turned and made off at his fast shuffling pace. The boy chewed aniseed and spoke to the colt and blew his breath into its nostrils. He removed the halter, and left the paddock.

'Avoid the soap, boy.'

Leo turned to his father, who never usually whispered in this manner. Ruth had left the kitchen, to fetch something from the garden or to visit the privy, and Albert kept an eye out for her return. He stirred sugar into his tea and sipped it.

‘When mother heats the kettles tomorrow,’ he said, indicating the zinc bath hung from a hook on the kitchen wall, ‘you disappear.’

‘How?’ Leo asked.

His father shook his head. ‘You’ll think a somethin.’

The boy looked to his older brother Fred for guidance but he only shrugged. They heard voices outside approaching, Ruth and Kizzie.

‘Why?’ he whispered urgently.

His father looked at him as at a fool. ‘A man should not wash,’ he said, ‘while breakin horses.’

On the second day swinging the colt Leo did not seek out Dunstone but went to the paddock on his own. He hung his jacket on a post and secured the halter inside his shirt, and walked to the centre of the field. He laid the coiled rope at his feet. The colt did not come at first but pranced here and there. The boy put his arms out to his sides horizontally and then he turned, slowly, and the colt stopped and watched him. The boy spun or pirouetted, then as if a spring inside him was unwinding he did so with less velocity and came slowly to a halt facing away from the colt. He lowered his arms. The colt watched and then took a step and walked forwards until he reached the boy and stood just behind him. The boy turned and put the halter upon the colt.

They played out their game. The boy pulled the rope, the colt tugged back, until it could take the strain no more and yielded. The boy was stronger than the day before and needed no help, he was not sure how. He took up the slack and they resumed. He knew he was being watched but did not look to see who it might be. His father valued this colt and if he had shared this assessment word would spread around the estate, for the carter was respected as his own father had been before him.

The boy finished as he had the afternoon before. He spoke to the colt and told him he was the finest young beast in God's creation, and that he, the boy, was his master. He inhaled the foal's lovely scent. A younger smell than that of the full-grown horses but Leo could not say how, exactly. He slipped the halter off the colt then walked back a few paces. The colt turned away in the manner of one insulted, holding himself stiffly, then he shook or sneezed himself loose and galloped away across the paddock bucking and kicking, as if some invisible simulacrum of his tormenter were being thrown off. The boy watched the colt, his young lean muscular beauty in motion, then turned and walked towards the fence. There was but one spectator there, sitting on the top pole, feet resting on the lower, a youth in Homburg hat, shirt, breeches, and riding boots of a sort worn by the master and his kind.

The boy walked slowly with his head down, coiling the loose rope elbow to thumb as he did so. The youth sat beside Leo's jacket where he'd left it draped over the post. When he reached the fence he laid the halter and rope upon the ground and took his jacket and pulled it on, one arm and then the other. He did not look up but saw at the outermost of his vision the brown leather riding boots, diminutive in size.

'Are you not ashamed to treat a foal in so cruel a manner?' The youth spoke in a voice that was unbroken. 'Well, have you nothing to say for yourself?'

Leo reached down and picked up the halter and the coiled rope.

'I asked you a question, boy. Your silence is insolent.'

Leo bent and climbed out between the poles of the fence. His anger made him clumsy and he knocked his head upon the underside of the upper pole. He glanced up at the youth. The master's daughter looked down at him, her torso twisted, one arm gripping the upper pole for balance. Her hair was gathered up above and behind her head, inside the hat that was too large for her, but he glimpsed beneath its brim the same expression on her face as when her father had presumed that she would wish to fondle this foal new-born four months before.

He bent his head towards the ground.

‘Are you shaking your head?’ the girl asked. She raised her right hand from the pole and gripped it with the left instead and swung her legs over and jumped to the ground. The boy kept his head down and stepped aside.

‘Are you walking away when I’m talking to you?’ the girl said. ‘How dare you?’

He heard her footsteps hurry after him. She overtook and placed herself in his path. He stopped.

‘Do you know who I am, boy?’ she said. ‘Of course you do. Shall I tell my father of the carter’s boy’s insolence?’

The boy shook his head. He kept his gaze on the finely tooled seams of the girl’s brown riding boots. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No. Tis not cruel, miss. Yon colt enjoys it.’

The girl released a laugh that held no trace of humour. ‘Yes, of course, do you think I’m blind? Can I not see with my own eyes? He enjoys it ... and the more fool him. He believes it is a joust, a bout between equals. He doesn’t know it to be but the first stage of his submission, in a life of abject ceaseless slavery, does he?’

The boy looked up. Their eyes were level. Hers were brown, though not as dark as his own and those in his family. They were the colour of hazelnut shells. She had freckles too, much lighter brown. He looked back down before he spoke. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I doubt he do.’

‘Good,’ she said. ‘Good. You can speak, and you are not entirely stupid. How old are you, carter’s boy?’

Her boots, though they had been polished recently, were dusty. ‘I be twelve year old, miss. Last month.’ He glanced up, long enough to see the girl smile.

‘We are alike one year older than the century, you and I,’ she said. ‘Born in the last year of the old one. It is a strange privilege, I believe. What is your name?’

Her boots were relatively new. She must have worn them often. ‘It be Leopold, miss.’ He looked up briefly to find her gazing directly at him,

and looked back down.

‘You have eyes the colour of blackberries, Leopold,’ the girl said. She took a step to the side, and walked away, in the direction of the manor. After a while the boy raised his eyes. He watched, keeping his eyes upon her until, two hundred yards or further hence, the curve of the lane took her out of sight.

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July

Ida Tucker the gaffer's wife was a musician. On Sunday afternoons she gathered her family around the piano and all manner of wailing could be heard faintly from the farmhouse. None of her daughters played their upright piano in time but she did not give up; there was surely an instrument to suit each one of them if they could but discover it. She asked Leo Sercombe to ride over to the village of Huish Champflower, where the Rector's wife would give him an oboe in a wooden case.

The boy did not hitch the cart but found panniers, which he secured with straps around the chest, buttocks and abdomen of the skewbald gelding. He attached bridle and reins and rode the pony bareback out of the estate, passing a wheat field in which his mother, sister and other women laboured. All wore bonnets to shield their faces from the rising sun. The wheat was seven or eight inches high. Each carried two implements, the length of walking sticks. One was forked, the other had a blade fixed at its end at right angles to the stick. With them the women and children worked slowly through the corn, cutting thistles.

*

It took Leo time to find the Rectory for unlike those he knew it stood some way from the church. A woman he took to be the housekeeper or cook answered the door. She was expecting him. She turned and picked up

a flattish box from a table in the hallway. It was upholstered in scuffed and faded red leather, and was heavier than he expected. The woman told Leo to wait, and disappeared. She returned with a tall glass, which she handed to him. He rested the music case against the wall, raised the glass and drank in one long draught until the water was gone. It tasted faintly of metal. He gave her back the glass and she gave him a carrot. Then she stepped back inside and closed the door.

The boy rode back by a different route. Flies and gnats accompanied him. A swarm would leave him unmolested for a while, then another take its place. The cob swished his tail and twitched his ears to deter them. Red butterflies too shared Leo's journey for brief stretches. He had the impression they were inspecting him. Then, tired of his company, they fluttered off.

He became lost but not for long. The hills in the distance guided him in the approximate direction of home. He could not go far without seeing someone, in passage or at work, and would ask the way if he had to. Then he entered a wood he did not know. The cob followed a grassy path that was not overgrown at all yet held no foot or hoof prints. They walked through a stand of beech trees whose last year's brown leaves carpeted the ground. The thick, smooth trunks rose to canopies of green leaves.

They rode through the cool shade of the wood. Leo thought they would pass through soon but it seemed to be a forest. They came to a huge leafless oak tree. Branches sprouted from the trunk like great twisting knives. It was dead but looked permanent, as if it had stood there in that state for centuries, in some proud arboreal afterlife.

Leo dismounted and led the pony down towards a steep-sided creek, letting him drink. He mounted up and found a narrow path, branches of alder and birch brushing against them as they walked. He realised that he was hungry and took the carrot out of his pocket and crunched it as he rode. It must be well past noon. They came to another oak tree much like the earlier one, dead but apparently full of force, still. They passed red-

barked conifers, their trunks at the base wide as windmills. He looked up and could not see how high they stood. The boy had never been in a wood like this before. Perhaps it was a part of the original forest of England, before the ships of Empire were built.

Leo found himself in another beech grove. It was strange how little undergrowth grew under beeches. Sweat ran in his eyes and soaked his shirt yet he could feel a chill down his spine. In his armpits. He rode another narrow path between overhanging branches. The sun flickered through the leaves and he tried to use it for direction and thought he had. He stopped the horse when he came to the great dead oak for a third, or maybe fourth, time. His heart was beating hard. What was this place? A maze? A trap?

Leo turned the cob in circles, scanning all around him. Children disappeared, did they not? And were never found again. Then the pony laid back his ears. A sign of aggression, even in a gelding. Could the cob see something that the boy could not? Leo pulled the reins up short and yelled at the cob to go and kicked him hard and rode as fast and as straight as he could, cantering out of the uncanny wood.

August

Amos Tucker rode by cart with Albert Sercombe at his side and the boy sitting cross-legged behind them, next to Tucker's dog. The boy and the dog sat gazing into the dust thrown up by the horse's hooves and the wheels of the cart. They rode from one cornfield to another. Oats, barley, wheat. In each one the men dismounted from the cart and walked into the field. They rubbed the ears of corn between their fingers and eased out grain and bit into it. The boy did likewise, analysing the texture and the nutty taste of each grain. Moisture or lack of it.

'Still taste green to me, gaffer,' his father said in a field of oats. The men's conversation was sparse. Sometimes they merely nodded to each other, or shook their heads, or made odd faces, like-minded connoisseurs of cereals. On these occasions the boy had little to help him interpret their opinion.

His father cracked a grain of barley between his teeth, chewed, and grimaced. Amos Tucker nodded gravely. The men studied the sky. White clouds floated in the west.

Tucker frowned. 'It won't start without us.'

There was wheat in the ten-acre twinned fields of Binnen, and more barley up in the Berry Fields. The men were determining the state of readiness of each crop and thus the order in which the harvest would take place this year. They wrote nothing down. Each time they reached a new

field the dog jumped down from the cart and ran around with great purpose as though his canine reconnaissance were the true reason for this excursion and the human beings merely his chaperones or bodyguard.

In Dutch Barn Field the barley grew waist-high. ‘It do receive a little wind up here,’ Albert Sercombe said.

‘One more day without rain,’ said Amos Tucker. ‘Dear Lord, one more day.’

‘Tis a good bet that tomorrow’s weather will be much like today’s,’ the boy’s father said. ‘But there be no one on this earth knows what the day after tomorrow will bring.’

The farmer sighed and looked heavenward, then shook his head. ‘I hear you, Albert. Begin here tomorrow then, as you wish to.’

Leo Sercombe rose with his brother and his father in the dark. School holidays were timed to coincide with harvest and he could be paid a few coins for the work, his mother would allow it. At the farm his brother Fred put corn in the horses’ cribs then gathered tools and disappeared. The boy watched his father cut five pieces of linseed cake from Isaac Wooland’s cattle room. ‘Fetch three halters,’ he said.

The boy caught up with his father and they walked down to the pasture. His father called the horses up out of the field. Noble and Red and Pleasant the old mare came on out of the gloom to the gate and the two black geldings followed them. Albert fed Noble and Red the cake and put halters on them, and led them out of the field and tied them to the fence.

‘Us’ll yoke them two to the pole,’ he said. ‘Which one will us put in the traces?’ He fed the old mare a piece of cake and patted her rump and she turned and walked away. ‘One a they two,’ he said.

The boy studied the sibling pair. There was naught to choose between them.

‘Ye’ll be riding him all day,’ his father prompted.

Coal was calm, stately, would do his bidding. Captain had energy, more life in his eyes. The boy made his choice. He approached Captain, fed the horse its piece of cake on his upturned palm and then, as the gelding munched the mouthful the boy reached up his full extent to slip the halter over Captain's nose and ears. Despite the bribe the horse lifted his head beyond the boy's reach. The linseed crackled in his mouth as he chewed the cake, regarding the world from the lofty height of his vision. Leo smiled. His father did not move to interfere but waited to see what would happen.

His son turned his gaze to the lower parts of the horse. He studied its anatomy, from one side to the other, up and down. Then he reached under its chest and felt its belly, searching for something there with the tips of his fingers. He looked away as he did so and closed his eyes. Then he opened them and pinched the black gelding at a certain point on his belly or brisket; the horse looked down and the boy, standing up smartly, slipped the halter over Captain's nose and ears, this time all the way, and so secured him.

Fred and Herbert were in Dutch Barn Field with bagging-hooks and sticks, cutting an avenue round the outside of the field wide enough for the binder. Dunstone was with them, making corn bands and tying them round sheaves of barley, which he stacked upright against the hedgerow. The lads were working their way around the eight-acre field. They heard the binder come into the gateway for they looked up, then resumed their labour at a greater pace.

The boy helped his father unlock the iron wheels and pull the binder round. The horses were harnessed in a unicorn formation, Noble and Red hitched to the binder pole with Captain in the traces in front. Leo rode postilion on the leading horse. Albert sat on the iron seat of the Massey-Harris self-binder. The sun was up and the dew dried off the barley as they approached it. The boy rode Captain to the right and into the hedge-side avenue. His father pushed the small lever forward and engaged the

main cog wheel. This was connected to the travelling wheels of the binder. The knife-bar agitated through the pointed sheath that protected it from stones. It agitated more slowly than the knife of the hay mower, for corn cut more easily than grass and the stubble was left much longer. All the interlocking cog wheels set themselves in motion.

The boy kept Captain in his place, following the line of the cereal. The cutting width was six feet. When he could, Leo twisted round and watched the fascinating contraption, its sails turning anti-clockwise, knocking the cut barley onto a canvas platform behind. The canvas looped over two wooden rollers, rotating in an endless circuit, moving the corn up over the machine to the far side, to the canvas packing table. Twine threaded out of a revolving tin box and knotted the corn in sheaves that were kicked off onto the stubble by a mechanical fork. The contraption rattled, the corn rustled, the sheaves swished as they were flung from the binder. His father had told him it was the wonder of the age. He confessed that his admiration for the engineers at Massey-Harris, who had devised this improvement on all the machines that had gone before, was exceeded only by his admiration for Arthur Richardson.

This soldier's praises his father sang many times. During the Second Boer War his company of forty men was engaged at close quarters by a force twice their number. When the order to retire was given, Sergeant Richardson rode back under heavy fire and picked up a trooper whose horse had been shot, and who was wounded in two places, and rode with him out of fire. Arthur Richardson was himself riding a wounded horse. He received the Victoria Cross. When the carter recounted this story to his sons or others it was as if he knew the man, and it never failed to move him.

Herbert and Fred worked behind the binder, lifting the discarded sheaves into stooks, eight sheaves in each, forming aisles of stacked barley. They were joined by Isaac Wooland the stockman. Kizzie brought food and drink at midday. The men ate the bread and cheese and drank the cold

tea then lay on the stubble until Albert Sercombe rose and went to the horses. The others rose and followed him.

Leo approached the black gelding on its nearside. With his left hand he reached up and gripped the top of the hames of the collar. While they ate he had been envisioning the manoeuvre and calculated that he could accomplish it. He placed his right hand on the horse's withers and sprang up, twisting so that he might land in place, neatly side-saddle, but Captain was too tall and the boy merely belly flopped across the horse. He wriggled and scrambled to keep on top of the animal and to right himself. Before he could do so the gelding turned his head and promptly bit him on the arse. Leo found the strength to heave himself up and in a moment sat astride the horse, ready to chastise him, but to his dismay exactly that which he had hoped for had occurred. The spectacle was witnessed by all those in attendance. And they were laughing with a joyful incontinence.

Leo's cheeks burned. His brother Fred laughed as heartily as Herbert. Their sister Kizzie laughed, as did Isaac Wooland, so did his father. Only Dunstone the old lad kept his dignity, frowning, for he had not seen what happened or did not understand it or failed to find it comical due merely to his witless condition.

'Should a given the beast summat to chew, afore he chew you,' Herbert called out for the company to extend their amusement.

Albert stood beside the horse, shaking his head, a man who should not wish to laugh at his son but could not help it. He had tears in his eyes, grinning still. 'Don't you worry, boy,' he said. 'Us have all been nipped on the backside by a horse in our time.'

In the afternoon Fred left to help his carter, Uncle Enoch, in the barley field on Great Eastern Hill, but he was not missed, for every time they brought the binder up the slope from the far western side it seemed there were more people in the field. Kizzie had stayed. Their mother was there, Ernest Cudmore the shepherd, Amos Tucker and his daughters. And as the irregular rectangle of uncut corn diminished to an acre, and less, so

boys and girls of the estate and even from the village appeared. Some had their dogs with them, terriers quivering in anticipation as they watched the standing corn. Isaac, Herbert, Ernest, Kizzie, abandoned their sheaf stacking. They closed in, armed with cudgels and lash sticks cut from the hedgerow.

The horses pulled the binder, its blades cut the ripened barley, knotted sheaves were expelled onto the stubble, and rabbits began to bolt from their precarious shelter. The dogs ran and caught them at their necks. Leo Sercombe watched the slaughter from his vantage point astride the black gelding. Men fell upon the rabbits. Both the laid sheaves and the raised stooks hindered the animals' escape. The boys and girls attacked them with their sticks and some threw stones.

Albert Sercombe finished cutting the corn in Dutch Barn Field before the dew began to fall in the evening. The children headed home with their plunder, for their mothers to make pies or stew for the meat-hungry labourers.

They unhitched the horses from the binder and left the machine in the field and walked the tired, sweating horses home. They led them to the yard, unyoked them from their harness and put halters over their heads. Albert led Noble to the stable, Herbert took Red, Leo led Captain.

They let the horses feed on vetches while they groomed them. When the horses' coats were dry, the lad Herbert and the boy led them from the yard and turned them out in the pasture.

August

The mornings were misty, and still, as they walked the horses to the binder waiting in the fields of oats and barley. Dew revealed cobwebs draped over hedgerows and over grass, the lacework of countless spiders on their farm, though the boy did not see a single insect. They must be resting after their intricate nocturnal labour. Each day the sun rose and burned away the mist and the horses pulled the binder through dry standing corn.

When the rain came, with just the wheat of Ferny Piece and Essythorn to reap, it came unannounced one night, with no warning in the dusk. By morning it had laid the crop. The wheat was spread in all directions. Albert Sercombe yoked his horses to the binder left in Ferny Piece the previous evening and set off, with the boy on the trace horse as the day before. Where the wheat had fallen with ears pointing towards the binder it could be cut, but otherwise Fred and Herbert walked before and lifted the corn with forks. Still the sheaves that came out were misshapen, and awkward to handle for Isaac Wooland and Kizzie Sercombe. They had to disentangle the heavy sheaves, and manhandle them into stooks.

Soil stuck to the travelling wheel of the binder, which got bogged down. Twisted corn blocked the canvas elevator. Fred or Herbert removed such corn and threw it to the ground. Dunstone gathered it into

odd sheaves and tied them by hand with corn bands he fashioned himself. He was the one person pleased with the direction events had taken.

When the binder was stopped it had to be reversed before moving forward once more. Albert ordered the horses back. They did so in the morning, Noble and Red, with old Pleasant now in the traces, obeying his commands. But it sapped their energy and midway through the working day, while others ate, he led Noble and Pleasant back to the stable and returned with the black geldings. He yoked them to the pole and put Red in the traces, and asked Leo if he would go to the stable to groom the two horses there and put them in the pasture when he was done.

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August

One hot afternoon the boy crossed the estate. He went directly to the pheasant-rearing field and there found his brother Sid feeding the young birds in their runs. The brothers did not greet each other. Sid did not ask after their mother or others in the family, but said, ‘Just in time to give me a hand, boy.’

There were forty coops in the rearing field, made by the estate carpenter. Each coop held twenty young pheasants. Sid fed these poult four times a day. The first feed was at six in the morning. Sid cooked the food in a four-gallon pot boiler in the rearing-field hut. Scalded biscuit meal and boiled rice. In between feeds he had to make his round checking the ginns. Small traps took the stoats and weasels, the six-inch ginns took foxes and the occasional badger.

Leo helped his brother with the last feed. Once the birds were all locked up Sid shot a few rabbits and Leo helped him gut and skin and butcher them. He dug a hole for the innards while Sid minced up the meat ready to add to the morning feed. Then Sid slept on a bench in the field hut, and Leo slept on the floor.

The door of the hut was opened in the dead of night. It was Aaron Budgell. Sid rose and went outside. Leo stood at the door and watched them in the moonlight. Sid and his gaffer slid a sack under a coop. They lifted the four corners and tied them, and loaded the coop onto the donkey

cart. They walked the cart away. Leo followed them into the larch plantation. Pheasants liked to roost on their more or less horizontal branches. Aaron Budgell and Sid lifted the coop quietly and placed it on the ground.

The boys returned to the field hut and slept again.

In the morning they took four buckets, a shovel and a hole-ridden tray and set off. Sid knew where he was going for he had taken mental note of the anthills he had seen and remembered their locations. ‘I should mark em on a map,’ he said. ‘Trouble is, if I write em down, I worry I’d forget where they is.’

Sid carried the long-handled shovel over his shoulder. Leo carried the buckets stacked inside one another and listened to his brother’s gamekeeping tales.

‘Last Tuesday, after the first feed, I went to the cottage where Mrs Budgell give me breakfast. Come back to the field and there they was. Seven poults I counted, dead in their run, all with a bite on the top of their heads. What do you think it was?’

Leo suggested weasel. ‘No.’ Stoat? ‘No, not that neither.’ Leo said he did not know. ‘Fox? Badger?’

Sid shook his head. ‘Next mornin I did everythin the same only I didn’t, I doubled back quiet, like, with my gun. Waited and watched, till I saw summat movin. There he was and I shot him.’

Leo asked him what it was.

Sid grimaced, and turned his head to the side to spit as he walked. ‘A flea-ridden bloody hedgehog,’ he said. ‘Folk don’t believe you but tis true. Mister Budgell said one time one of they buggers went for the broody hens. Went for their rear ends, tore em up summat rotten. Before he helped hisself to the eggs.’

The first anthill was at the edge of a grove of conifers, a mound amidst the pine needles. Sid explained that the anthill was composed of rubble from the subterranean colonies. The insects excavated tunnels and chambers and brought the grains of soil up to the top of the hill. He had

watched them, Sid said, and Leo should do the same. A person could learn a great deal from ants. He said that in hot weather like this the workers moved their larvae up towards the top of the anthill. He handed his brother the shovel. Leo dug into the mound and turned over the load to reveal hundreds of white eggs amongst the dry sandy soil. Sid held the tray and nodded in such a way as to indicate that his brother should transfer a shovelful to it. Leo did so. Sid shook the griddle until all the soil had fallen through the holes, leaving only the eggs. Ants that were caught up in these machinations struggled furiously to retrieve the eggs and return them to where they should be. Sid poured the eggs into one of the buckets, and thus the Sercombe boys continued. They filled the buckets and walked back towards the rearing field.

Leo asked his brother if he did not feel sorry for the insects, that their labours which he so admired should be for naught. Sid shook his head and told Leo that he would never make a gamekeeper, he had not the stomach for it. Nor had he the interest in all of God's creation. He should stick to his horses, his jades and screws and suchlike pad-nags, to whose limited array of behaviours he was better suited. Leo told him quietly that he intended to.

August

Albert Sercombe oiled the waggon wheels and greased the turn-tables. He tied a pair of ropes to the back of his waggon, coiled them and dropped them into the bed. Herbert did likewise to the second waggon. Albert laid two-tined forks of varying length against the outside wall of the barn in the stack yard. He called his son over and pointed to the longest one. ‘Do you remember what this one’s for?’

Leo nodded. His father was a tall man and Leo estimated that the fork was as long as him and half as long again. Amos Tucker measured by paces the size of the base of a stack and Isaac Wooland the stockman laid old straw upon the ground where so directed.

Uncle Enoch and the boy’s brother Fred prepared their waggons. All the horses save for Pleasant were hitched. Dunstone was in the middle of the yard though no one had seen him come. He might have emerged from beneath a cart or a nest in the dung-heap. The spinster Mildred Daw studied the two-tined forks against the wall. She selected two and held them together up against her, the tines on the ground. One came up to her nose, the other to her forehead. She replaced the latter and went over to Albert and climbed up on to the waggon. Isaiah Vagges greeted Amos Tucker loudly. ‘Sap’s dried out a the stalks?’ he yelled.

‘Good to see you, Isaiah,’ the farmer said. ‘Glad you got my message.’

Isaiah Vagges slapped Isaac Wooland on the back as Isaac bent, continuing to place straw as the foundation of a stack, and said, ‘Still followin them cows around?’

Isaac lost his balance and stumbled but regained it. Before he could remonstrate with Isaiah the old farmhand had moved on. He was full of good cheer and regaled each person in the yard, coming in time to Leo and saying, ‘Not yet decided to grow, boy?’ He came close and put an arm on Leo’s shoulder. He smelled of turpentine and linseed oil, and something else the boy could not identify, components of some home-made embrocation for his rheumatism. ‘Don’t worry, boy, once ye start ye’ll grow tall as yon old man there.’

He greeted Mildred Daw with some witticism the boy could not make out, and which she ignored entirely. Seeing that she had nabbed by choice or by appointment the job of Albert’s forker, Isaiah chose a fork for himself and joined Herbert.

The boy lay in the waggon behind his father and Mildred Daw, bumping and rattling over the dry ground. The sky was white and empty. He saw but one bird. It flew like an arrow overhead, aiming for its destination. When they reached the far end of Dutch Barn Field Albert called out, ‘Whoa,’ and the waggon came to a leisurely halt. Mildred Daw climbed down, clutching the fork she’d chosen, and speared two sheaves from the nearest stack so swiftly that the boy had to clamber over the far side of the waggon to avoid being hit as she swung her fork and with a jerk of the wrist flipped the sheaves into the bed of the waggon. Albert climbed in. He had his own, shorter fork and shifted the sheaves into the position he desired.

The boy took his place beside Captain, the nearside horse. He watched Mildred Daw fork the sheaves of barley and his father loading the waggon. Each sheaf as he laid it bound the one before. He packed the body of the waggon, then placed sheaves on the sloping sides and across each end. It did not seem that every sheaf overlapped the one below but

the boy surmised that it must have for the load became gradually longer and wider than the waggon as it rose.

He watched his father and Mildred Daw. Neither spoke to the other, nor could he see any wave of hand or nod of head that might indicate a request for where to hurl the next sheaf. He found he could not tell which of the two of them decided the manner in which the waggon was loaded. Albert worked from the front to the back, then vice versa, placing the sheaves lengthways. The ears of barley always pointed inwards, yet the boy could not see his father turning sheaves on the waggon, so it seemed that Mildred tossed them to him facing the way he required. The only commands his father gave were to his son, for the boy to move the horses forward. They made their way across the great field back towards the gate.

When the load was as tall as he was, Albert began to build the ends higher than the middle and the whole load narrower. They had almost reached the gate when, with a single row of sheaves, Albert completed the load. ‘That should do it,’ he called down.

Mildred Daw took the ropes they’d let fall behind the waggon and threw them up to Albert. She walked round to the front and he dropped them to her and she secured them to the hooks below.

The carter slid and clambered to the ground. Mildred walked around the waggon, prodding her fork into a corner, pushing the barley a little tighter.

‘How many sheaves you reckon’s on?’ Albert asked. Mildred pondered. Albert said, ‘Three hundred?’

She nodded. ‘I reckon.’

He smiled. ‘Gaffer’ll count em.’

Albert climbed onto Captain and rode him side-saddle out of the field, watching the load behind him shake and sway with every irregularity in the ground and the rutted tracks along the lane. The boy rode on Coal beside him. Mildred waited in the field. The waggon creaked and rolled.

In the yard Albert Sercombe untied the ropes. Leo pulled them over the top of the load. They fell upon him and he coiled one and then the other. Isaac Wooland rested a ladder against the waggon and climbed onto the load, and straightaway tossed sheaves down to the base of old straw he had recently laid. Amos Tucker laid the sheaves around the outside of his stack.

Albert took the ladder and placed it against the wall where some forks yet unused still rested. Amos Tucker defined the shape of the stack with the first row of sheaves. It was a little wider than the base of old straw. The second row half overlapped the first, moving inward. He continued stacking around until the centre was reached. Then he returned to the outside and worked around it, this time overlapping outwards. Each sheaf he stepped on as he placed it, firming it down with his considerable weight. Suddenly the waggon was empty, and Isaac Wooland was standing in the empty bed. He climbed out. Albert was already sitting on Captain. He did not wait but commanded the horses forward. The boy followed behind, and climbed up into the empty waggon.

They returned to the field. Mildred Daw was waiting for them on the far side. Herbert meanwhile had plotted his own course from one stood to the next and had almost reached the gate. The boy judged that Herbert's load was not as high as his father's but Herbert tied it down.

'Don't worry, lad,' they heard Isaiah Vagges call to him. 'Tis tight's a gnat's arse. This load would carry clear to Taunton.'

Amos Tucker's daughters brought food and drink to the field and the harvesters stopped to rest in the shadows of hedgerow trees. Albert slaked his thirst with cold tea but Isaiah Vagges guzzled cider and Herbert copied him until his carter said, 'Steady, lad.' Isaiah was known as the architect of his own downfall, a fine worker whose weakness for all forms of alcohol had rendered him unreliable. When sober he was such a grafter and an optimist that he'd been given second chances on every farm on the

estate, and beyond, by men and women each one of whom he'd let down. He would be lured by wastrels and by his own nature into drinking bouts and be incapacitated at crucial times. He would disappear for days or weeks on end. His wife took their child and returned to her family in Minehead. He would pick fights when drunk and suffered dreadful injuries. All this Leo had heard when his parents gossiped with each other of a winter evening. There'd been reports of Isaiah Vagges as a young man in the inns of Exeter and of Barnstaple. He was jailed in Okehampton. Whenever he returned all were glad to see him, save for those few who found his friendliness an intrusion. Now he was old.

'I swear,' Isaiah said, as they lay digesting their morning bait, 'every time I see thee, Mildred Daw, ye wears more items a men's clothing than before.'

The spinster turned away, as if to study the far hedge.

'I mean not to offend thee,' Isaiah said.

Albert rose to his feet. 'Well, them waggons won't load their selves,' he said. 'You can sweat some a that cider out.'

Each time the boy returned with his father with a new load to the yard, Amos Tucker had built the stack higher with Herbert's intervening waggonload of barley. Albert fetched a barrow of vetches and placed it for the horses to help themselves. On occasion he brought in buckets of water for them to drink. Amos Tucker built his stacks in the oblong shape of a house, with walls rising at an outward slant. At times Isaac Wooland threw sheaves down to him, at others he tossed them up, and for brief periods the waggonload and the rising stack were at the same height and the two men could have stepped across and swapped position if they had a mind to.

Amos Tucker removed his jacket. His waistcoat bulged like some odd men's corset, his white shirt was wet with sweat and his face some colour midway between a radish and a beetroot, yet he worked with a calm authority. He built the house, then he built the roof, now stacking sheaves

in a ridge along the centre of the stack and laying others out at an angle like the tiles of a house, the last overlapping the stack below.

Returning to the field, Albert spoke to his son. ‘Impressive, the gaffer, eh?’ The boy nodded. ‘He can build a stack and not come down all day. Has his bait thrown up to him. Answers the call a nature with a piss over the side. When I’ve to build one, I’m up and down that ladder to make sure it’s not leanin, I don’t mind tellin you nor no one. And barley what he’s workin with now’s more inclined to slip than wheat. No, boy, I’m glad I’m not doin it. Leave me with the horses.’

They worked until it was too dark to see. The last load they brought to the yard beside the stack and covered with sheets. Amos Tucker felt his way down the ladder to the ground. The boy lit a paraffin stable lamp and held it for his father to unyoke the horses. The work was not arduous for the beasts. They had spent much of the day at ease. As soon as they were stripped of their harness the carters turned them into the pasture for they had no sweat on their bodies and there was plentiful grass to graze on.

Albert and his sons Fred and Leo walked home. Ruth had a meal of vegetable stew enlivened by bacon fat awaiting them. Albert told his wife how the day had gone. He told her Mildred Daw was steady as ever, and that Isaiah Vagges was still a babbling fool. He told her Pleasant would soon be of little use and that the filly would before too long be ready to replace her. The boys ate in silence and climbed the stairs to their bedroom and slept.

August

Ruth Sercombe spoke of her dowry only if another commented upon it. This had happened just once to the boy's knowledge, for visitors rarely entered the parlour. Leo studied the china. 'Staffordshire blue and white,' his mother had named it to the vicar in a tone that assumed he could not fail to be impressed. The boy scrutinised the blue pictures. Of ancient cities or parts thereof, pillars and entranceways to huge buildings that would make the Manor House seem tiny. People outside were pouring water into baths or courting. He put the plate down carefully, muting china on china.

There was a case of books, leather- or board-bound. A Holy Bible with pages made of thin crisp paper. Ruth's husband could not read and her older children had not wished to. Kizzie did everything well at school. Perhaps she would be a teacher. Leo looked through one of his favourites, *Everyman's Handbook*. It was inscribed: *To Ruth Penhaligon from Miss Hare, Penzance Church of England High School, 1889*. He opened it at random and learned that apples are preserved by packing them in sawdust. He read a list of winners of the Derby. A proverb taught that *it is better to ride on an ass that carries me, than on a horse that throws me*.

Leo heard the back door open and his father enter the kitchen next door, greeting Ruth and being greeted by her. The boy breathed silently.

He knew the scene so well he could almost see it through the wall. They had a wooden table, four chairs and one wooden armchair. His father's. Mother used it if he was out. Now she rose, relinquished the chair to him, shifted the kettle to the hotplate. He was back for breakfast. Fred would soon follow. Leo could hear the sounds of preparation.

‘Seen the boy?’ Albert asked.

‘Is he not with you?’ Ruth said. ‘Must be still abed.’

His father said no more. His mother said, ‘What troubles you, man?’

There was a long pause. Then, ‘He never asks nothin.’

The sounds Leo’s mother made ceased. He pictured her leaning back against the rail of the stove.

‘I want to learn him what I know,’ the carter said. ‘Horses trust him, see?’

‘He watches,’ Ruth told him. ‘All the time. Didn’t you tell me you picked it up off of your father the same way?’

The kettle whistled. Leo heard his mother remove it and pour water into the teapot.

‘I want him to have the best job on this estate one day,’ his father said. ‘On the stud farm or in the master’s stable. I don’t want no other bastard’s son to come before ours.’

‘The master won’t live for ever.’

‘Aye, the poor master.’

‘Left with just that headstrong girl a his. What’ll happen when the master’s gone?’

‘It’s naught to do with us, mother. Things’ll carry on one way or another. Naught for us to worry over.’

The boy bent and untied the laces of his boots and removed them. Scarcely breathing, holding a boot in each hand, he climbed the stairs in his socks, step by step. In the room he shared with Fred he sat on his bed and pulled the boots back on. He tied the laces as before, then rose and clumped downstairs to breakfast.

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September

The poorest of the village came to the estate at certain times. One was harvest. As the first field of corn was being carted so they came. Mothers pushing children in prams, widows, spinsters. One of the old women wore a granny bonnet tied beneath her chin. As the last load left the first field of wheat those who had gathered at the gate went on to the stubble. They walked the sun-burned ground picking up single ears of corn. Bent over, they picked with one hand and passed the ears to the other. When each bunch was too large to carry they tied it with straw and put it aside. How each woman knew which bunch was hers Leo did not know. Perhaps the gleaners each twisted their tie of straw such as to scrawl their signature. The old woman in the bonnet said that gleaning was not what it was since the new-fangled binders came and her friend said new horse-rakes cleaned up all but the last few ears of corn. The bunches were gathered in the evening, or when the field had been scoured, into large sheaves in the shape of rosettes of wheat, which they carried home to their cottages.

The boy's mother said it would be good to turn their poultry out in the stubble for the corn. Amos Tucker said his pigs would benefit the more. But neither dared raise it with the master. Albert Sercombe told them both the gleaners had the right to the leftover corn, it was the only right he knew of that had survived the enclosures. The cottagers would rub the corn out from the ears by hand in the evenings and on wet winter days,

and the miller would give them one day of his time to grind their corn to flour.

Rain interrupted the harvest. On wet days, while Amos Tucker fretted, the carters and their lads drew straw for thatching the stacks, stripping lengths of wheat of its foliage and tying them in bundles. This year Leopold joined them. The work was unending for if all went well the yard would be full with ten or more stacks of wheat or oats or barley to be given a rain-proof roof. And it was dreary, for though it required little exertion the discomfort of sitting or standing in the same posture for hour upon hour had a more demoralising effect than hard labour to which their bodies and minds were accustomed.

‘If I were the gaffer,’ Herbert said, ‘I’d ask the master to build a couple or three big Dutch barns for storin my corn.’

‘If you was the gaffer,’ Albert told him, ‘you’d last no longer than the bad steward in the Good Book. It’d be slapdash here and bodge it there.’

Dunstone joined them in the barn for it was work that he could do, if at a slow pace for he measured each strand of wheat and cut it precisely with his knife so that he produced one bundle for another’s ten but each was perfect.

They grew irritable and bored, and welcomed Isaiah Vagges, who like Mildred Daw was paid half his daily wage when it rained if he so wished to help with this chore.

‘I’ll be thatchin,’ he told them, ‘so’s I best keep an eye on you sluggards. Lost in reveries and dreamin a fair women. I don’t want my bundles all a mish-mash. Here, lad,’ he said, addressing Fred Sercombe. ‘Ave you heard of the manner in which Mildred here dealt with her suitor back when us was young? I’ll tell thee.’ He turned to the subject of the story. ‘I’ll tell them, Mildred, for it casts but a fond light upon thee. But do not interrupt me if ye think the details wrong, I beg ye.’

Mildred ignored Isaiah entirely as she bundled the wheat straw. Perhaps she was deaf or had become so.

Isaiah turned to the others. ‘Ye’ll like this one too, lad,’ he said to Herbert. ‘It happened in the summer of ’eighty-eight. Mildred got took to the flower show in Watchet, the evenin grew cool, her friends set off for home, but Mildred stayed drinkin cider with a silk-tongued ruffian by the name a Jasper Huxtable. I knew his brother, a good pal a mine. All ruffians and rogues, the ole family. Look at her now ye might doubt me, but then Mildred Daw was a right comely maid, sixteen year old, fair-complexioned. Were ye not, Mildred? Bowerly, she was.

‘This rogue spoke to her of the great ships he’d seen in Avonmouth and the factories big as villages in Bristol, though I doubt he’d ever bin as far as Weston-Super-bloody-Mare. Excuse my language, Albert. He offered to walk Mildred ome. They dawdled back in the moonlight. A tawny owl called from above them as they walked through Raven’s Wood. Back in a field Jasper suggested they rest a moment on a stuck a sheaves that’d fallen over. He laid is and upon her in a place that made her understand what e was up to. Do you know what she did, lads, have you eard the tale?’

Fred and Herbert shook their heads. Leo did not move.

‘Your fathers know it. Dunstone too, though he may not remember. Well, here it is. First she disabused him of his intentions in no uncertain manner. Jasper lay on the stubble, clutchin his manhood, groanin to himself. But that weren’t all. Mildred intended to leave. She did not plan it, how could she, but some fool loader had left his two-tined fork in the field. It was only when she saw the implement layin there that the idea come to mind. She took it up, went back to her suitor, turned him with her dainty foot over on to his front, and pinned him to the ground with the two tines of the fork either side of his neck. Is that not exactly as it happened, Mildred? She then stood upon the fork and pressed it deep into the earth, leavin scarce enough slack for the lad to breathe.’

Albert and Enoch Sercombe, chuckling, nodded their approval, of the act or perhaps of Isaiah’s telling of the story or of both. Fred and Herbert looked from Isaiah to the spinster and back to Isaiah in consternation.

‘And there was Jasper Huxtable found the mornin following by the harvestin team.’

The boy looked at Mildred Daw. He could imagine her doing such a thing to someone who displeased her. He thought that Isaiah should be careful.

‘They found this poor lad but how did they know what happened?’ Herbert demanded. ‘How do you know, old man?’ He gestured to Mildred. ‘Did she go round tellin all and sundry what she done?’

‘That, lads, is the best thing about it,’ Isaiah said. ‘T’was Jasper himself who sang, so outraged was he by her treatment of him. So used was he to havin is way with the maids of our district. He made imself a laughin stock.’

‘Should a kept his peasel to his self,’ said Fred.

‘So long as Jasper lives, and for a further generation now that I’ve told thee, tis what e ’ll be known for. His bastard children too.’

September

Ruth Sercombe gathered all the eggs that she could find. She inscribed the date 13.9.11 in pencil upon the shells as was her habit, and added them to those laid on previous days. She counted the eggs. There were forty-three in shades of white and brown, and she packed them with straw in two willow-rod baskets. These she asked Leo to carry with great care to the manor. He wondered why she did not ask Kizzie. Was it not girls' or women's work? Though he did not articulate his grievance aloud his countenance perhaps betrayed it. His mother said, 'Your sister is liable to forget what her is carryin, start thinkin silly thoughts and swingin the baskets.'

'I am not, mother,' Kizzie said. 'How can you say such a thing and sully my reputation in my own home?' Her indignation was well acted.

'Would you prefer to carry the eggs?' Ruth asked her daughter.

Leo looked at his sister. Kizzie narrowed her eyes. She saw she could not win, only choose the lesser of twin defeats. 'I concede the eggs' journey might be less perilous in my dull brother's care, mother.'

*

The boy walked away from the cottage. A pair of crows sidled along his mother's washing line like tightrope walkers, of a kind he had seen at

Minehead Fair, a family of tumblers and acrobats who carried in their blood some odd immunity to the pull of gravity.

He walked along the lanes across the estate. Stones beneath his boots clattered as if hollow. Each basket was covered with a white linen cloth to keep the full glare of the morning sun from the eggs. The distance was two miles, give or take some yards, and three times on the journey he laid the baskets gently upon the ground and waited for the ache in his upper arms to fade away, then picked up the baskets and resumed walking.

The closer he came to the big house the more people he saw. Gardeners, coachmen, stable boys. He did not study what they did but kept his eyes down. A butcher's covered cart was leaving, a grocer's arrived. He followed it around to the back of the house. The grocer passed over wooden boxes full of produce, which two maids conveyed through the wide back door. Leo placed his baskets upon the ground and waited. The grocer kept on passing boxes to the maids. They began bringing empty ones upon their return, which he took from them into his waggon.

One of the maids had red hair poking out from beneath her cap, of a redness the boy had not seen before. The other had black hair, dark eyes, and she assessed him as she passed. Eventually she addressed him. ‘What is you, a beggar boy? If you is, you'd best scat. Full house this weekend. Cook's in no mood for charity. Er'll box yer ears.’

The maid hoisted an empty box to the grocer. He installed it behind him and passed her a full one, which she carried inside. When she next emerged she spoke to Leo again. ‘Still here?’

The girls carried many loads. The red-haired one was taller. There was sweat on her forehead along the line of the white cap, and with each full box whose bulk she heaved so she gasped a little more. The dark, shorter one showed no strain and could, it seemed, have performed the task all day. When the delivery was complete the grocer waited. He stood by his cart. He said nothing to Leo, but gazed towards the door. The darker girl came out bearing an armful of empty boxes. The grocer took these and

stacked them in his waggon. He walked around to the front and climbed up onto the seat. He clicked his teeth and the vanner set off towing the cart across the gravel.

The maid stood before Leo and looked down at the baskets. He lifted them and passed them to her. ‘I know you,’ the girl said. ‘I knew I did. Aunt Ruth’s boy. Don’t you recognise me?’

Leo looked at her. He neither nodded nor shook his head.

‘You’re Fred’s little brother,’ the maid said. ‘We was in school together. You and me is cousins.’ She waited for some seconds, then shrugged her shoulders. ‘Tell Fred hello from Gladys.’ The maid turned and carried the baskets into the house. She left the door open, whether for a breeze or because she intended to return shortly with the empty baskets Leo did not know. His mother surely needed them. He stood waiting. Occasionally someone came in or out of the door. A man, a lad, a girl, each in the uniform of their station. All ignored him. He did not budge. When he’d arrived the back yard was in shade but the sun rose over the top of the house and now he stood beneath its glare. The red-haired maid emerged. She walked away from the house towards one of the buildings in the yard. He could hear her rummaging amongst whatever objects existed therein. She reappeared carrying some kind of wooden bat, or paddle. Tool or toy. As she walked past she made to strike him, and giggled. The boy did not flinch.

Shortly the dark-haired girl stood in the doorway, carrying the willow baskets. ‘Meg said you was still here,’ she said. There was a note of complaint in her voice, as if she had been blamed for the boy’s presence. ‘You should a said.’ She waited in the doorway for Leo to come to her.

Leo took the baskets from his cousin, and nodded, and turned and walked out of the yard. He knew where the stables were and made his way to them. He loved the Shire horses that he would work with in his life to come but all horses intrigued him. As well as motley cobs and hacks the master kept half a dozen hunters, for himself and those he invited to ride with him. They were half- and three-quarter bred, with Irish Draught.

The master liked to travel to Ireland to buy them. He hunted with the foxhounds from Dulverton and on Exmoor with the staghounds. He also hunted elsewhere and had his horses transported by train. The grooms and stable lads exercised them daily. By now they'd have been returned to their pasture. One, though, was tethered by its halter to a ring on the wall in the yard and was being studied by two men.

The horse was a chestnut mare. Her hair had been clipped all over save for the shape of a saddle, which remained a darker colour upon her hide.

The older man picked up the mare's off-hind leg and bent it slowly. The mare raised her head and her ears went back. The man lowered her leg and spoke to the lad and walked away. The lad fetched a hose-pipe that was curled up beside a tap. He unwound the pipe towards the horse. Leo walked along the wall of stable doors until he was close enough to see the swelling at the mare's hind hock. The lad went to the tap and turned it on. Water emerged from the end of the pipe and brought it to life like a black snake. The lad was dark and lanky. He trotted over and picked up the spout and directed the water at the swelling on the mare's leg.

Leo watched the mare accept the stable lad's aquatic ministrations, her ears forward, her head bent. She appeared to enjoy the jet of cool water. Perhaps it numbed the pain of the sprained muscles in her leg. She was a fine creature, neither the fastest nor the strongest animal but a combination of the two as was required for a day chasing a pack of dogs. He had seen them. Farm workers stopped and watched when they passed near or distant, a horn blowing, hounds speaking, nobles and gentry galloping like some red chaotic cavalry charging. His father hated it for his carthorses were seized by the urge to join them. Some memory awoken of when they were ridden by giants hunting on the old moors. The memory of an earlier or perhaps an alternative life. 'Hold em,' his father would yell, and all the carters hung grimly on to their Shires until the urge subsided. But once Herbert let go and Red raced away towing a harrow. The horse galloped through a gateway that was too narrow. The gateposts stopped the harrow, and all the harness was torn asunder. The tackle

shattered. The horse continued for a few yards then came to a halt, confused by his own excitement.

Some hunters were thoroughbreds, racehorses retired or failed. His father said the master preferred them tough, with a fine, sloping shoulder and good feet. ‘No hoof, no horse,’ he said, though whether it was his own maxim or the master’s or someone else’s entirely Leo did not know.

He moved closer and studied the mare’s small almost dainty hooves, the elegant fetlock joints that seemed too frail to carry that weight of beast and rider landing from a vaulted fence or hedge.

The stable lad looked lazily about him then. He glanced over his shoulder and leaped and cursed this boy who’d come silently up behind him. He sprayed water over the mare and all around her.

‘Who the fuck is you?’ the lad demanded. ‘And what the ell’s you doin creepin up on me?’

Leo did not answer. The lad resumed directing the water at the hunter’s hock. ‘Get lost,’ he said over his shoulder.

Leo did not move, but continued studying the horse’s feet.

The stable lad glanced back at him. ‘And why the fuck is you shakin your head?’

‘You shouldn’t do that,’ Leo said.

‘Speak up, you little squirt,’ the lad said.

Leo did not know how to raise his voice. He had tried before but couldn’t find the mechanism within his mouth or throat. ‘You shouldn’t put cold water on her leg.’

He thought the stable lad would strike him then, but instead he grinned suddenly and turned the hose-pipe upon Leo, directing it around his body until his clothes were soaked. Leo did not move. ‘I should put it on you instead, is that it?’ the lad yelled. ‘You little twat.’ He directed the water at Leo’s head. Leo closed his eyes. He felt his hair lifting and falling from his skull under the pressure of the water. He did not believe in the efficacy of such treatment for this horse but it might be good for others. The water

ceased beating upon his face. He opened his eyes. The lad was once more hosing the chestnut mare. The groom stood beside him.

‘You’d better ave a good reason for wastin my water,’ he said.

‘This clod come up behind me, gaffer,’ the lad said, petulant. ‘Scared me alf out a my wits. Then he tells me I shouldn’t be a-hosin her hock. Who the little toe rag thinks he is I couldn’t tell ee.’

The groom was halfway in height between the boy and the spindly lad, and was soundly built, beefy. He turned to Leo. ‘We are very busy, boy, and I have no time for pranks nor foolishness, so tell me now why he should not hose the mare and her swollen hock.’

Leo looked up at the groom. He opened his mouth to speak but could not. His jaw trembled, knocking his upper and lower teeth against one another. Cold water dripped from him. He swallowed, clenched his jaw, squeezed a breath through his teeth and said, ‘Her heel is cracked.’

The groom looked at him a moment longer, then looked at the lad and said, ‘Turn it off.’ He stepped towards the horse and lifted her back-right leg as he had before but this time he ignored her knee and studied her foot instead. The lad returned.

‘Look at this,’ the groom told him, pointing to the fine cracks in the mare’s heel. ‘How did we not spot that?’ He told the stable lad to pack the heel with Vaseline once he’d dried it off, and that tomorrow they should apply a paste of Epsom salts and glycerine to the swelling on the mare’s hock and make a poultice. The lad nodded. ‘And you can apologise to the boy here.’

The stable lad frowned. ‘He crept up behind me, gaffer,’ he whined. ‘Give me one ell of a fright.’

The groom said nothing. The lad sighed, and said, ‘Sorry, nipper. You does look like a drowned rat.’ He grinned then, as he had before, but this time the groom turned towards him and as he turned he raised his hand and also swung his shoulder so that with little effort he put some weight behind his fist, which he swung upwards and punched the lad on the ear.

The lad staggered sideways, yelping and putting his hand to the side of his head. The groom paid him no heed.

‘He didn’t mean no harm,’ the man told Leo. ‘I believe I knows who you might be,’ he said. ‘Is you the carter Sercombe’s boy?’

Leo nodded, glancing briefly at the groom.

‘I’ve heard about you,’ the groom continued. ‘Another Sercombe with equine blood in his bones, so they say.’

Leo did not know whether he should mention that he had an older brother, also a carter. Whether not to do so amounted to disloyalty. He glanced around. The stable lad still grimaced, and held a hand to his ear as if trying to listen to the sound of his pain.

‘Come another time, boy, when tis less busy. You’d best get walkin home now, dry out on the move.’

The boy walked away from the stables. He figured to take a shorter route home, over stiles and brooks that might have put his earlier fragile cargo in jeopardy. Within moments his teeth ceased chattering. In the midday sun the water in his hair was warm as sweat. He circled one paddock and walked through a glade of poplars to another, and stopped dead. He stepped to his left behind a tree trunk so that part at least of his body was hid.

Though she wore boy’s clothes as before and a gentleman’s tweed cap he knew at once it was the master’s daughter. Perhaps by her posture. She rode a blue roan pony. The horse trotted, then slowed down. It looked as if it was going to settle into a walk, but just before it did so it began instead to trot again. After some yards the pony slowed once more, and just before it walked it sped up again. Thus the horse and rider crossed the paddock. They did so along a line directly across the boy’s line of vision, as if on display for him. Leo stepped around the trunk of the tree in order to follow them, and stepped back as they came the other way.

When they reached the fence the girl turned the horse and came back in the opposite direction in like manner. It was not easy to see how she asked or ordered her pony to do as she wished. There was no movement of her

hands on the reins, or the reins upon the bit, that he could see. With her legs she squeezed the pony's belly but she did not kick him. Again she turned the horse and took him across the paddock. The boy watched. The girl's posture was upright and unvarying, but he saw that as the horse slowed down and the rider stopped rising off the saddle, so she exerted some downward pressure with her back and her seat and that this too communicated some request the pony understood.

The girl did not speak at any time during these manoeuvres, until she allowed the pony to come to a halt in the middle of the paddock, and then she leaned forward and patted his neck and spoke to him in effusive tones, telling him what a fine boy he was, how clever, how obedient, how marvellous.

After the girl had made much of her horse she raised herself up once more and set off across the paddock. Leo did not know whether she would wish to be observed by the son of a carter as she trained her pony. He did not believe she would appreciate being viewed from the shadows behind a tree. He could walk backwards into the glade and skirt around the paddock in a wide arc, with little loss of time. Instead he walked forward down the slope from the glade, into the late-morning sun. At the fence he placed the empty willow baskets on the ground and watched.

The girl did not see him or else took no notice. She continued suppleing the roan. Having done so from front to rear, now she did so laterally. Moving from the centre of the paddock she took up position on the far side, close to the fence, with the fence on her and the pony's left-hand side. She walked the horse forward some paces, and brought it to the right. But then rather than keep it coming round, in a curve or a circle, she used her right leg to push the pony's forehead to the left, so that he walked forward along a straightish line beside the fence but with his head and neck and spine following a curve centred around the girl's right leg. She walked the horse all the way around the paddock twice and then stopped and congratulated him, once more leaning forward to stroke him. Then she repeated the routine but this time at a trot.

The boy had never seen this exercise performed yet he understood it. The pony's fore-legs followed one line, his hind-legs another parallel to it. The girl kept the roan's hind-legs on the correct line, and his hind-quarters from veering to the left as if to make a circle, by bringing his left leg back behind the girth with her own left leg. The roan's head and neck remained still. Leo judged the two of them had practised this exercise many times. He did not know whose patience he admired more, the girl's or the pony's.

When they had trotted four times around the paddock the girl once more embraced her pony and told him of his unequalled virtuosity, then she turned him and walked him in the opposite direction along the fence, shouldering him this time to the left. Once more she walked him then she trotted him. Leo studied them carefully. So far as he could tell she used so little force as to be insignificant, yet the roan did as she intended. When they passed in front of him he saw the horse was sweating and the girl too.

The girl rode to the gate. She brought the roan beside it. Leo wondered whether he should stay where he was or run the yards along the fence and open the gate for her. He did not know which she would prefer, but he knew that if she chose to remain mounted then he wished to see how she negotiated the obstacle.

The pony was beside the gate, facing away from the post upon which the gate was hinged. The girl leaned forward and lifted the loop of rope off the fence post. She let go of the rope and grasped the top bar of the gate, and heeled the pony's girth. The pony stepped away from the gate and stepped backwards at the same time, enabling the girl to pull the gate open. When the gap was sufficiently wide she let go of the gate and walked the horse through, then turned him round and brought him back and closed the gate in the same way as she had opened it but in reverse.

She looped the rope over the post and walked the horse along the fence to the boy. She looked down at him. He did not look up at her but kept his gaze upon the fetlocks of the roan, and upon his hair, whose colour he had never seen before. Close to, the hairs were a mixture of black and white.

Yet from a distance the gelding's coat appeared to have a tinge of blue. The boy could not quite understand it.

'Is it the purpose of a gentleman's daughter,' he heard the girl ask, 'to provide entertainment for some idling servant boy?'

Leo wished to ask the girl if she spoke to all in this manner. He said nothing.

'Do you not have something better to do with your time?' she asked.
'Leopold, is it not? Did my riding amuse you?'

'No, miss,' Leo answered.

'I doubt you have any idea what we were doing, Embarr and I.'

Leo glanced up, then down. 'You was bendin his spine, miss. It seemed to me he had to flex his hocks, and bring em underneath him. If I may say so ...'

'You may say what so?'

'... most horses would wish to bend their neck only, miss, but this roan a yours put all the parts a his frame at your disposal. He is a rare beast, I believe. I know I have not seen so many horses, but this one is mightily responsive.'

Leo closed his mouth to stop himself from saying more. He could have. He understood how odd it was that he should be able to speak with such garrulity to this girl of all people, even if it was of horses.

'Do you give the rider no credit?' she asked.

Leo frowned. 'You are as fine a rider as I have seen,' he said.

'Of the many riders you have seen.' He glanced up for long enough to see the girl's smile. 'It must be strange for you, attached like most to cruelty, to see a horse trained with gentleness.'

'It is strange to me, Miss Prideaux,' the boy agreed. 'I am much taken with it.'

'My father does not approve,' the girl said. 'He likes the way your father and those on the stud farm break their horses.' Leo could tell from a change in her voice that she was no longer facing him but had raised her head. 'Daddy is old-fashioned in his thinking,' she said quietly, as if to

herself. Then she turned back to the boy and said, ‘I saw what that idiotic stable lad did to you. If I had a whip I would have applied it to him. But you appear quite dry now.’

Leo said, ‘The Lord did guide me, miss, to a scorched place, and He makes my bones strong.’

The girl did not say anything to this. Perhaps she was smiling again. Leo said nothing more, but studied the horse. When she brought him out of the paddock he was breathing hard from the exercise, but already he was calm, his lungs easing in and out, barely registering.

‘When you speak, Leopold,’ the girl said, ‘it sounds as if there is grit caught in your larynx. Perhaps the stable lad should have stuck the hose-pipe down your throat and flushed it out. Indeed, I am thirsty myself.’

The girl turned the roan away from Leo. He knew he should not speak what was on his mind, but if he did not do so now the chance may never come again. ‘Miss Prideaux,’ he called.

The pony had taken a few steps away from him. The girl brought it to a halt. She did not turn him. Leo walked past her and turned and looked up at her. ‘Miss,’ he said, ‘I should love to ride him.’

The girl parted her lips and made a sound at the back of her mouth, a gasp of surprise or indignation, or the performance of such. ‘You would, would you?’ she said.

Leo swallowed and blinked, his eyes watering in the bright sun. ‘More than anythin in this world,’ he said.

The girl nodded. ‘Then one day perhaps you shall, Leopold Sercombe,’ she said. She kicked the horse’s girth with her heels, and rode away into the shimmering noon, until the two became indistinguishable from each other, before they turned into the stable yard and disappeared.

October

The boy passed through the orchard. There was a buzzing all around, he walked through the sound. Wasps gorged themselves on windfall pears, damsons, plums. He prodded apples with the tip of his boot to see if any wasps lurked before picking them up. At other times he picked cob nuts, acorns. They called their pig the Pharoah. Each one was so christened. They called his sty and yard the palace.

Leo tossed the apples into the pig's sty and the animal grunted his approval. His sty was a lean-to against the wall of the cottage. Albert Sercombe had renewed it two years previously. Its walls were thick slabs sawn off the outside of elm butts he'd collected in a cart from the sawmill. The slabs were convex on the outside, flat inside. Their edges abutted one to another unevenly, allowing the draughts Leo's mother believed were necessary for the pig's wellbeing.

When the pig had eaten all the apples he could find in his little yard he came up to the fence. Leo scratched his hairy spine. The pig stood still. It was hard to believe it was the same creature he had carried over his shoulder in a hessian sack less than six months before. They called him the Pharoah because he was a king of sorts and they his servants whose only duty was to feed him.

Waste from the vegetable garden and scraps from the kitchen went into the stock-pot where they simmered to a pulpy mash. Cabbage leaves,

potato peelings, greasy plates, any remnant of cooking or eating, Ruth poured it all into a wooden trough the pig cleaned so well he polished it with his tongue, enough to raise the grain. Leo's father gave the pig cinders or nuggets of coal to crunch, to stimulate his saliva and so aid digestion. Fred cleared away the shit, shook up the straw, added more when necessary. Two weeks ago Ruth announced that the Pharoah was matured, his metabolism was changing and he could now put on the fat the men needed to sustain them working their long hard days. The Pharoah was ready to be fed extra and so Kizzie brought him barley, and potatoes.

Pigs were less complicated or interesting in their thinking than horses, yet the boy had a fondness for them. He scratched the Pharoah behind his bristly ears.

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October

Sid Sercombe took the doe from its bag and held it as Leo attached the muzzle to her head according to his brother's instruction. It was like a tiny bridle whose foremost part kept her jaws clamped shut. The rear strapped around her neck, and was tightened with a buckle. Sid checked it was secure, then he carried the ferret to one of the holes and presented her to it. She sniffed the hole, then looked back around her as if to say goodbye, farewell, to this world of light and space. Her posture was dramatic and comical. Sid told his brother not to laugh as it would put her off, but it did not seem to for she put her muzzled snout once more to the hole, and slithered in.

The second doe the boy held as Sid put on the muzzle, the third likewise, and these too disappeared into the warren. The ferrets' strong musky smell remained on the boy's fingers. They stepped back to where Aaron Budgell stood loading the guns. He gave the boy a small old single-barrel gun fired by external hammer, and placed him between himself at one side and Sid the other. Their wait was brief. The first rabbit bolted out in front of Sid. Leo saw him swing the gun and squeeze the trigger. The rabbit appeared to run smack into an invisible wall. It fell back as if stunned.

So they worked for some time, shooting the vermin as they came out of the burrows. When it had gone quiet for a while Mister Budgell said that

would do it and the boy put down his gun and collected the rabbits. He counted twenty-three. He did not know why they used guns rather than nets. For Aaron Budgell's sport, perhaps. Sid meanwhile took a dog ferret from its bag. He clipped to a collar round its neck a length of cord marked with knots spaced equidistantly along its length. He put the ferret to a hole as he had the muzzled does, and it entered the darkness. Two more he despatched likewise. He tied the ends of their lines to stakes he hammered into the ground by each entrance.

The boy helped Aaron Budgell tie the dead rabbits by their front paws to a pole lodged in the forks of the branches of two adjacent trees.

Before long, the first of the loose-muzzled ferrets emerged, sniffing the air. Sid lifted her, removed the muzzle and returned her to her bag. The other two does soon followed. They each came into the light slowly, imperiously, as if upon a whim, though Sid assured his brother that the dog ferrets had driven them out.

Aaron Budgell said there was no hurry. ‘They line ferrets won’t be goin nowhere,’ he said, and it was a good time for lunch. Mrs Budgell had provided a cottage loaf, which Mister Budgell cut into three with his ancient knife, and a lump of cheese he divided likewise. He and Sid drank mild, from earthenware bottles. Leo drank cold tea, but Sid allowed him some sips of his beer. Mister Budgell said he didn’t mind ferreting in much colder weather than this for then at lunch they would drink old beer, dark and thick, which always warmed him up lovely.

They ate and drank. ‘I reckon, gaffer,’ Sid said, ‘that I likes ferrets as much as any creature.’

The head keeper agreed that as well as being ferocious killers, ferrets were curious and quaint animals who seemed to treasure their relationship with man. In contrast to donkeys, he said, nodding towards the cart they had left standing some way off. ‘I do believe,’ he said, ‘that certain species improve in time, like they say. But if you studies the Bible at all you has to conclude that some, such as asses, do deteriorate in their character and their behaviour. They are nothing like they used to be in the Holy Land.’

Aaron Budgell sat up and raised his great chest. He opened his mouth as if to speak but let out instead a long and fruitful burp. Then he said, ‘Let’s get ourselves to diggin.’

The head keeper explained to the boy that his dog ferrets had sought the rabbits backed-up in chambers and dead-ends of their burrows and killed them. The ferrets would not now come out voluntarily until they were starving. ‘If a man could train ferrets to come to his call,’ Aaron Budgell said, ‘he’d be as popular as he was rich.’

Sid put his ear to the hole by which one of the ferrets had entered the warren. He pulled taut the line that had been tied to its collar. The knots on the string enabled him to measure how far in it had gone, allowing for unknown twists and turns in the tunnels. Aaron Budgell climbed on top of the bank. Sid gave him the figure of twelve or thirteen feet. The keeper judged it and dug the spade into the earth and heeled it in as far as it would go. The spade was an implement of elegance. It was spoon-shaped, and had a long handle made of beech. Inserted into the end of the wooden handle was a metal hook. He bent forward and put his ear to the long handle and listened. He stood back up to his full height and shivered the spade, then pulled it loose with ease, and repeated the procedure. And a third time. ‘Ah,’ he exclaimed. ‘I believe us can hear them scrabblin about.’ He began to dig. Sid fetched a second shovel. He told his brother to stay by the hole.

Leo asked why they did not pull the ferret out. Sid shook his head. ‘He’d rather let hisself be throttled than be dragged out. I loves ferrets, but I ain’t sayin they’s the brightest animals in Creation.’

When they’d dug the last of the ferrets and the dead rabbits out, and returned the dog ferrets to their bags, Aaron Budgell opened his old knife again. The blade had been sharpened so many times it was half the width it must have been when new. He sharpened it again on a stone and paunched the rabbits. Leo told him there were thirty-six. Some had bare

patches on their backs. Mister Budgell said it was where a muzzled ferret had kept scratching the hind-quarters of a cornered rabbit when she couldn't kill it. Sid gave his brother a shovel and gestured hence, and Leo dug a hole. He buried the guts while the keepers loaded the donkey cart.

'See her now, how impatient with us her is,' Aaron Budgell said. 'Can't wait to get back home.' At that moment the donkey arched her neck forward and let out a long braying lament. "'Get a bloody move on," er's tellin us.'

'Er's a contrary beast,' Sid agreed.

'Aye, lad,' his gaffer said. 'What you have to admit is, what er's got is character.'

As they walked back beside the cart to the keeper's cottage Aaron Budgell told the boy that a dealer from Taunton called on a Monday and paid cash for the rabbits, and that Leo would receive his share for a good day's work. He told the boy he was a fine little worker and that he had a calmness that was welcome. He said he'd been considering asking the master if he might wish to raise more birds, in which case he would need a new boy keeper. 'Your brother unfortunately tells me,' Aaron Budgell said, 'that we's lost you already to horses. Is that right?'

The boy looked up at the big keeper, and nodded.

'Yes,' Budgell said. 'I've heard that they does that to a man.'

November

The boy was given a message to convey to the head sawyer. His father kept it terse. Leo walked away from Manor Farm in the hot afternoon sun. He took the track across the valley, down past the high elms. Rooks in the upper branches cackled their disapproval or ridicule of him.

In the bed of the valley the track ran straight as a furrow ploughed by his father. Ploughmen, perhaps, once carved the lanes. He heard Isaac Wooland's bullocks before he saw them. Then he saw them, gathered by the fence on the right-hand side of the track, jostling, pressing against the wooden poles. Heifers grazed across the track and over the brook, half-hidden by a scrawny hedge. The bullocks moaned and lowed and groaned to their female brethren. Leo passed between them. The heifers appeared to ignore the bullocks, or to be deaf to the noise they made.

It reminded the boy of the German brass band who'd toured the villages the previous Christmas, tuning up their windy instruments. Loud farting bleats, trumpet blasts, pipe-clearing coughs of sound. Odd notes. It wasn't music. But then after a pause their leader announced that they would play a Christmas carol. He named the title of it in German. He uttered some further words in their language, nodding his head, and then the band blew in unison. The audience of all ages listened to 'Silent Night' in rapt wonder.

But the bullocks could not pause, and play together, they could only continue each his own lonely tuneless racket.

The estate sawmill was on Warren Farm. A man stood with one foot on a huge log, the other on a length of wood placed upon the log and running from it to the ground outside the sawpit. He pulled the handle of the saw up and let it go back down, pulled it up, each time to the same height. Let it fall to the same depth. The boy watched the slow creeping forward of the cut. The sawyer eyed his chalk-line the whole way. Sweat dripped from his chin. Leo stepped forward until he could see the lad below, sawdust spraying upon his head and face and shoulders. The bottom dog.

Leo walked away, to the second sawpit. It was empty. He jumped down, out of the heat suddenly into a moist, cool tank. The odour of sawdust here. Tangy, sappy. From chinks in the pit's slab-lined walls, yellow frogs peered out at him. He jumped and, scrabbling, hauled himself out.

The top dog called down to the apprentice, 'Yep,' and stopped. He stepped from the pit and bent and picked up a hammer from the ground. He leaned over and from underneath tapped the plank on which he'd been standing. On the second tap it came loose. He shifted it two feet or maybe three along the log and knocked in the nail with a single tap. He dropped the hammer to the ground and stepped back onto the plank, and placed his left foot back upon the log. He grasped the handle of the saw and then, about to resume his labour, looked about him, his eyes darting and head jerking in the manner of a hen or some such creature that is prey to larger ones. Perhaps he had registered Leo's presence at the edge of his vision, or heard him.

The sawyer beheld the boy and raised his chin and eyebrows both. 'Do for you?' he said.

'Father says he'll bring his team tomorrow,' Leo said.

The sawyer stared at him. Working out who this boy was, whose son, to which team he was referring. He blinked slowly. 'Gaffer's up in Hangman's Wood,' he said. 'Go tell him.'

Now it was Leo's turn to stare back at the sawyer. Why could he not tell his own boss later? Did it please him to send this boy on an errand that was not required?

Leo swallowed. 'Tis a simple message,' he said.

The sawyer made a strange movement with his lips. It appeared that he was working something out of the depths of his mouth to the front. A shard of timber, perhaps. He spat it to the ground. 'It's takin us about a week to cut coffin boards from this tree,' he said. 'I'm lookin out for nails, bullets, wire. Keepin the line.' He tapped his skull, to indicate perhaps that it was full. 'Hangman's Wood. Go tell im yourself.'

The boy glanced into the pit. The apprentice peered up at him. His eyes, encircled by sawdust that sweat had stuck to his skin, were round like those of an owl.

*

The boy walked up from Warren Farm to the wood on the hill in the middle of the estate. Four of the six farms abutted its circumference. He passed a gang of men coppicing, cutting shoots with their bill hooks from the stumps of trees. From hardy birch a man was making broomsticks. From willow stools they cut rods for baskets. A lad built stacks of them. A boy collected the remnant twigs and smaller branches and tied them into bundles for fuel. Leo wondered if any of them saw him. He thought they must but none acknowledged him.

He walked through the wood. He had in his time climbed many of the trees. He passed an oak he'd not noticed before. The vertical wrinkles in its bark were spiralled, as if its roots were the handle of a carpenter's brace and some sleepy giant of the soil turned the trunk from below, screwing it as it grew, over years, decades, centuries, rotating slowly up towards the light.

He found the sawyers. A pair of men attacked the base of a great oak with their long-bladed felling axes.

From the trunk of one already felled three men severed the limbs with axes and saws.

Over the trunk of another barkers teemed. One man cut lines through the bark, around the circumference of the tree, every couple of feet. The trunk had been brought down upon another, lying crosswise so that it was raised above the ground along its length. A second man used his light axe to make one longitudinal cut. A third and a fourth inserted heart-shaped barking irons, worked the wooden handles to and fro like the boy's mother paddling bread in and out of the oven, and lifted sections of bark. The men stripped the trees like teams of insects. A fifth man took the shells of bark as they were passed to him and a sixth stacked them in shocks to dry before they'd be sent to the tan yard. This last man was the oldest. Leo approached and when the man came to him he gave his message.

The man nodded. 'Albert Sercombe and his timber waggon and his horses. Tell im us'll be ready. Six trunks to haul to the yard, and a couple a loads a good branches.'

Leo turned to go.

'Wait.'

Leo turned back to the sawyer.

'Do me a favour, boy? Go back by the manor. Find the head groom. Herb Shattock. No one else. Tell him us is in for the meetin. Got it?'

Leo nodded.

'Tell me.'

The boy gazed up at the man. He had grey curly hair and red-rimmed eyes. Perhaps over time tiny specks of sawdust sneaked inside the lids.

'Sawyers is in for the meetin.'

'Good. Here, boy.'

The red-eyed sawyer put his right hand into his trouser pocket and withdrew it in the shape of a fist. He flicked his thumb and a coin spun into

the air towards the boy. Leo caught it in his own fist, then opened his hand so that the farthing lay on his palm. Her old Majesty's bun-head gazed towards the west of her Empire, in the year 1893. The boy looked up to thank the sawyer, but he was already on his way back to the job he'd briefly abdicated.

*

The boy walked through the wood, seeing no one, and walked out of it across fields of sheep towards the big house. In one field crows grubbed the animals' dung for worms and suchlike savoury morsels. The boy counted precisely as many crows as sheep, for each white ewe one black bird, small avian familiars of the beasts, feeding from their excrement. Black hooded goblins. As he walked through the field, sheep bleated and parted for him and crows minced away. Some gave a hop and were airborne, witchlike, in taking to the air, doing what their woolly ovine acquaintances could not.

Leo approached the stables cautiously. He did not wish to meet the lad who would blame him for the thick ear the groom had inflicted two months earlier, and would surely give Leo one the same or worse. He estimated that the lad was both a bully and a coward, and according to his father there were none so dangerous. He wished indeed to avoid all but Herb Shattock.

The boy walked through the back yards of the big house and past outbuildings whose purpose or function he did not know. There were people but he kept his head down and they were no more than figures briefly seen, when he glanced this way or that. One addressed him with a brief – 'All right?' – but the boy ignored everyone and walked on. As he approached the stable yard there was a great clattering of hooves. Sticking close by the wall he entered the yard and saw the master's half dozen hunters being ridden away by lads and grooms.

They disappeared and the sounds of the horses faded. Leo stood still and listened. The yard was empty but not deserted. He knew there was a horse or horses here for he could sense them, he did not know how exactly. Whether he could smell their rich odour or hear their calm deep breathing. He walked along one side of the yard, looking into the half-open boxes. All were vacant. He came to the tack room and glanced through the open door and stepped back. Two men stood close to one another. Neither spoke. The master, and the groom he had encountered before. Leo took another step back and watched them through the window. They seemed to be pondering some question, perhaps mathematical, as if doing so at the same time in the same vicinity might improve the working of their brains.

The master shook his head. The groom said, ‘I’m sorry, sir. He was rollin in the pasture and he wouldn’t stop. That’s why I brought im in.’

‘You cannot keep them all immune from such catastrophe, Shattock,’ the master said. ‘I don’t expect you to.’

‘All I can tell you is, whenever I seen a horse in pain like this, tis no helpin im.’

‘I hear you.’

‘To put im out of is misery, sir, tis the kindest—’

‘I said, I hear you, man,’ the master said.

The two men might have been brothers so alike were they in colouring, and in their mid-size height and stout frame. Leo heard a horse stamping in one of the loose boxes across the yard.

The master stepped out of the door of the tack room and stood there gazing ahead of him. There was perhaps a yard between him and Leo but the boy did not breathe or shift or twitch, so still was he. He did not look at the master and the master surely did not see him. The master spoke to the groom behind him. ‘If I allow you to, I worry that I shall not be forgiven, you see. I would rather the animal suffered than that should happen.’

Leo watched the groom through the window. The groom said nothing. The master waited but the groom would not or was not able to help him. So the two men stood in this manner, facing the same way, Mister Shattock behind the master, each waiting for the other to speak. Leo could not restrain himself. With the slightest movement of his head and the utmost swivel of his eyeballs he saw the master. Lord Prideaux's face was set hard but whether in an expression of anger or pain or fear the boy could not tell.

The master took a deep breath and sighed. 'Destroy him,' he said, and turned away from Leo and walked out of the yard.

The groom did not move. He appeared to be contemplating the empty space that Lord Prideaux had recently occupied, as if it took time for the master's absence to sink in. Then he turned around and, pulling from a pocket a ring of keys on a chain whose other end was attached to his waistcoat, he selected one key and unlocked a tall cupboard. The groom lifted a rifle from a rack within the cupboard and a box of bullets. He took a single bullet from the box and put it in a pocket of his jacket. He paused, then took a second bullet and put it in the same pocket.

Leo heard the sound again of a horse kicking its feet against the ground or perhaps the walls of its box. He walked briskly across the yard towards it. The upper door of the box was open. The blue roan was inside. He stood still, grinding his teeth. Then he pawed at the ground.

The groom came across the yard with the rifle over his shoulder, holding it by the barrel. 'Albert Sercombe's son,' he said. 'You times yer visits to moments of commotion, boy.'

He stood beside Leo. They looked at the pony. 'You ever see a horse shot?' the groom asked.

Leo shook his head.

'Do you wish to?'

The boy began to shake his head again for he had no desire to see any horse killed. Not ever. But if a horse had to be put down it would be an

education to see how it was done. This man would do it properly. He nodded.

The groom handed the boy the rifle and, hissing between his teeth, opened the door of the box and stepped inside. It was a similar whistling sound to the one the boy's father made when working close by the horses, though each man had his own particular tone. The roan had on a halter. The groom tied a rope to the halter and patted the pony's head and led it out of the box. The boy, carrying the rifle as the groom had, over his shoulder, followed behind. They walked out of the yard and around a paddock and into the glade from which Leo had seen the girl riding the roan. The groom must be taking them to some quiet peaceful spot on which to execute the animal. Perhaps also with soft soil to dig a grave. Or perhaps they would butcher the carcase and boil the meat for the master's dogs. There was so much he did not know.

They had entered the glade when he heard a scream behind him and rapid footsteps and, turning, saw the girl dash towards them. There was a figure running behind her whom he could not identify. The girl in a long white skirt, the other in black. He stood still. The girl ran past him and he turned. The groom had not stopped but carried on walking, a further ten or twelve yards. The girl ran alongside the pony and flung her arms around his neck. The groom stopped walking.

'No,' the girl yelled.

'Miss Charlotte,' the groom said.

'No,' she cried again. Then, looking wildly towards Leo, she ordered, 'Take the gun.'

Leo felt the rifle yanked away from him. As he was spun round he grasped tight hold of the barrel with both hands. The maid who had revealed herself to be his cousin had hold of the stock with one hand and the barrel around the trigger with the other and was pulling it. The two of them conducted a fierce tug-of-war. The maid was the weight of the boy and half again and dragged him backwards with her, but he would not let go. The rifle bucked this way and that in crazy ways as if it had its own

vitality and the boy and maid were merely holding on. Leo reckoned that he could keep his fingered grip upon the barrel indefinitely, but that his shoulders and upper arms might not last. He crept forward, allowing the barrel of the gun to point towards the ground, bending his knees and crouching to keep hold of it as he advanced. Coming almost alongside the maid, he swung his foot around and kicked her with all his might at the back of her left knee. She squawked. Her leg gave way and as she sat upon the ground she let go of the gun. Leo walked away with it to a spot some yards distant from the scene and turned and watched.

The groom said, ‘Miss Charlotte, please.’ The girl would not let go of the blue roan but clung tightly to his neck. The groom could have prised her loose but did not have the will or perhaps the authority to do so. He turned to the maid and said, ‘Gladys, fetch Lord Prideaux.’

The maid Gladys sat weeping. She hauled herself to her feet and limped away from them back towards the big house.

‘Here, Miss Charlotte,’ the groom said, stepping towards the girl and handing her the halter rope. ‘Let’s us take him back to the yard.’

The boy did not believe the girl would budge, but to his surprise she took the rope from the groom and, holding the rope where it was tied to the halter, turned the roan and walked him out of the glade. The groom followed. As he passed close to Leo he held out his hand and the boy stepped forward and gave him the rifle, then he walked after them.

The master came to the loose box and explained to his daughter that her pony was in great pain and should be released, but she would have none of it. ‘He might recover, Daddy, he could, you don’t know,’ she said. ‘We must give him a chance.’

The boy stood in the background and either no one saw him or all accepted his presence, for not a word was said to him.

The groom told the girl that the roan had a twisted gut. Torsion or strangulation of the intestine. It could happen to any horse, it was the physical flaw endured by their species just as certain dogs had back legs

that gave out before the rest of their frames and the hips of female humans were barely fit for childbirth. The girl said that if they shot the horse they might as well shoot her for she should wish to die and would otherwise kill herself somehow.

The master left the yard. The groom put the rifle back in his cupboard and the bullets in his pocket back in the box they came from. The stable lads returned from exercising the hunters. The groom sent one of them off to fetch the man on Home Farm who was the castrator of horses on the estate, another to seek a certain old man in the village, a quack who possessed knowledge of horse anatomy that he the groom did not.

Leo explored the stable yard. Lads were grooming the hunters and the other horses. When they passed close to one another they whispered the news of what was happening. Leo kept well clear of the lanky one. He found a stairway to the hayloft above the stables. He took off his boots and carried them, tiptoeing across the rough boards, and lay down looking through the opening into the box below where the girl stood stroking her pony and speaking to him, too quietly for the boy to make out the words. He heard the door open and a man's voice. The master told his daughter how disgraceful it was that even in this day and age a telephone could not be connected to a place like this in the godforsaken back of beyond. They reaped the rewards of their obtuse ancestors for settling here when there were doubtless a hundred places closer to civilisation there for the taking. Be that as it may, he'd had a telegram sent to the veterinary surgeon in Taunton.

The girl said nothing. Her father asked her to come to the house shortly for supper but she refused. He told her he was her father and commanded her to obey him. When she replied, it sounded as if she spoke through tears but the boy could not tell for sure from his hiding place.

'I won't leave, Daddy,' she said, sniffing. 'How do I know they won't take Embarr out again and murder him?'

'I will tell Shattock not to,' her father said. 'I promise.'

'I don't care,' the girl said. 'I have to stay anyway, Daddy. I'm not leaving Embarr.'

No one spoke for some time. Leo inched his body forward until he could lean over the edge of the opening and see the scene below. The master stood in the doorway. Asking himself what a father was supposed to do. Or wondering how much obstinacy or mettle his daughter possessed.

'Very well,' he said. 'I'll have food sent over.'

No sooner had the master left than the horse castrator was brought to the box by the groom. He said there were many kinds of colic, caused by many things. The horse could be constipated and be suffering grass sickness. Or he could have eaten his straw bedding which had impacted in the gut. These were only examples. He said that probably the pony would die but that they could give it liquid paraffin and salt water and this might clear the blockage, he could not say. 'Tidn't my area of expertise, Mister Shattock.'

After he had gone the boy heard horses being led out of the yard to pasture. He wondered where the stable lads went for their tea if they lived in. He thought they would be considered too dirt-ridden to sit in the kitchen of the big house. Light began to seep out of the hayloft and the loose box below. Suddenly the girl spoke. 'Leopold Sercombe,' she said.

He was stunned by what he heard, and did not move. He felt his heart beating against the floorboards where he lay.

'I know you're there.'

Leo raised himself up on his elbows, releasing his lungs that he might speak. 'T'wasn't my idea,' he said.

'Of course it wasn't,' she replied. 'I know that.'

Leo squirmed around half a circle and let his legs drop through the opening and lowered himself into the wooden crib. To his surprise he saw the horse was now lying on his side on the straw. He seemed to be trying to paw or kick at his own belly.

In time two maids appeared, one bearing a tray of food, another flasks and cups. The groom lit a paraffin lamp which he hung on a nail protruding from a rafter. The first maid laid the tray on the straw. The second looked up and saw the boy crouching in the manger like some strange stable sprite, and gasped. The first maid, his cousin, turned. She said, ‘You wait, boy, you just wait. When I catch you, I’m goin to give you such a hammerin.’

The maids left and the girl said, ‘Do you have many friends, Leopold Sercombe? You make them so easily.’

‘Every time I come here, miss, I makes another enemy,’ he told her. ‘I don’t intend to.’

The girl told him that she wasn’t hungry. ‘Come here and help yourself.’

Leo climbed down. The girl lifted the muslin veils from the tray of food. There was a plate of meat and vegetables, a jug of gravy, a bowl of some kind of pudding and another of various fruits, only one of which, an apple, he recognised. What occasion warranted such a feast? The master’s birthday, perhaps, or that of the master’s grandmother, the dowager countess, who lived still in the house, or indeed the girl herself? The boy had not eaten for many hours and had a keen hunger. As he ate, the girl recovered her appetite somewhat and joined him. Between them they cleaned the plates.

‘Em barr won’t eat a thing,’ the girl said. ‘Whatever he’s offered, he turns away from.’

‘Just as well, miss,’ Leo told her. ‘The last thing he want’s a ruptured gut.’

‘Why can’t he just be sick? Why doesn’t the groom give him salted water?’

‘Do you not know?’ Leo asked. ‘Horses cannot vomit. Any food has to pass right through em.’

Some time in the evening an old man was brought into the box. Leo recognised him from church. He was one of those Leo's father would speak with afterwards, outside the lych-gate. The groom told the girl this man's name was Moses Pincombe and that he had helped bring many foals into the world upon the estate during her father and her grandfather's time. The roan lay on the straw. The old man asked the groom to boil some pints of linseed oil and to bring him pure lard. He removed his cap, nodded to the girl, folded the cap and put it in his pocket. He had a walking stick which he leaned against the wall and then with some difficulty lowered himself to his knees by the pony's head. He had some white-ish hairs scattered around the sides of his skull but otherwise was bald. He pulled back the pony's eyelids and examined his eyes.

The old man struggled to raise himself up. Leo helped him as best he could. 'I's awful sorry, miss,' the old man said, leaning a hand still on the boy's shoulder even though he was now standing. 'Herb's told me. I'safeared his eyes is dulled. See how he sweats. He's on the way out.'

While they waited for the groom to return, the roan became animated, rolling in the straw from side to side as if trying to rid himself of a terrible itch within the bones of his spine. Then he ceased just as suddenly and lay still once more upon the floor.

A lad appeared with a pan of lard he said the cook had given him. The old man asked the lad to put the pan upon the straw. Still leaning on Leo with one hand he reached the other towards the lad, who took it, and between them they helped the old man kneel beside the horse's rump. He pulled up the sleeve of the right arm of his jacket and folded it over. He did the same with his shirt. Then he put his right hand into the pan and slathered his fingers with the lard. With his left hand he lifted aside the roan's tail, then inserted the tips of his fingers into the pony's arse. He worked them in further and then his hand followed, and his wrist. The old man lay on his left side, his right arm deep inside the pony's rectum, delving into his insides. The roan did not object. The old man said nothing, either to the horse or to the people there. The groom entered the

box and joined the girl and the boy and the lad watching, by the dim yellow light of the paraffin lamp, the ancient quack immersed in his intimate diagnosis.

At length the old man withdrew his arm and hand and fingers with a sticky sound. Leo thought his hand would be filthy with shit but it was not. The groom handed the old man a towel and he wiped the lard off himself. The lad and the boy helped the old man to his feet.

‘Can’t be sure, Herb,’ he said. ‘I would think his guts is twisted but it could be a section is ridden over a length behind or before it. Either way amounts to the same thing.’ He turned to the girl who still sat beside the pony’s head, stroking him. ‘I’s awful sorry, miss.’

The old man left, as did the lad, and finally the groom. The girl poured liquid from the flask into a cup and drank it. Then she refilled the cup and passed it to the boy. Leo sniffed it. It had a subtle aroma of something that made saliva materialise in his mouth. He took a sip. He felt its taste on his tongue, and threw back his neck and emptied the cup, savouring it as it washed through his mouth. He gasped, and asked the girl if what he had just drunk was nectar. She asked him what on earth he meant and he said nectar was mentioned in the Good Book and in other ancient tales. He didn’t know it still existed. She told him he was talking nonsense, that he had merely drunk a cup of lemon barley water.

A maid brought blankets. Leo climbed up into the hayloft and slept. He woke occasionally. The pony rolled as it had before. Leo went outside to piss. The moon was only just on the wane from being full and cast a silver tinge upon all it illuminated. He knew that he would work with horses all his life but understood as he had not before that there were different ways and places to do so. He doubted whether one life was long enough to know all there was to know of horses. Perhaps that was why the Good Lord gave us many lives. And he understood that as the girl would not forsake her roan, so he would not leave her.

In the morning when the boy awoke and crawled over the floorboards to see into the box below he saw the blue roan was now standing. The girl stood beside him, scratching his withers. Leo clambered down into the manger and then over it to the ground.

‘He’s better, look, do you see?’ the girl said. ‘I think he’s better, don’t you, Leopold?’

Leo said nothing, and the girl said, ‘He’s standing, can’t you see? On his own legs. He has risen from the dead like an equine Lazarus, don’t you see, Leopold Sercombe?’

The boy said nothing but stood on the other side of the pony’s head and stroked his flank.

A servant maid brought a silver tray of food for the girl’s breakfast. The girl carried the tray into the yard where lads saddled hunters and brushed down trap-carting cobs, and flung the tray as far as she could, scattering its contents. Plates snapped into shards of pottery. Food was strewn upon the ground. Bacon. Sausages. Egg yolk. Slices of toast. Silver cutlery lay amongst the debris. The girl returned to the loose box. The maid began picking up what she could.

The girl wept for a time then stopped. The horse tried to kick himself where he stood. He began to breathe rapidly and to expel air through his nostrils, snorting loudly. He did this until the girl implored him to stop, but he continued. The girl cried to the roan and begged him to cease. It was no use. The pony inhaled and exhaled like some furious child engrossed in a tantrum. Eventually he slumped, standing, exhausted, and looked like an old nag, all worn out.

The groom entered the box with a man the girl greeted with great enthusiasm. ‘You’ll save him, Mister Herle, won’t you?’

‘Let us see what we can do,’ the man said.

The groom brought four stable lads in. They surrounded the horse, two on each side, and stood firm against him. The surgeon took the roan’s

pulse. He attached the listening pieces of a stethoscope to his ears and placed the other end upon one part and then another of the pony's body, as if roaming around in search of some quiet thing inside. Some other tiny creature hiding there, subtle and malign, causing the roan all this distress.

'Dear girl,' the surgeon said. 'It would be kinder, dear Charlotte ...' He looked at the girl but did not finish what he'd begun to say. He looked to the door, where the boy saw the master standing, just outside. The surgeon shrugged. 'I shall give him morphia and chloral. It will help to ease his pain.'

The surgeon opened his bag of medicines and filled a syringe with liquid. He attached a long needle. 'Hold him steady,' he ordered. 'I need to hit the vein.' The stable lads pressed upon the roan, but he trembled and shook. The surgeon took aim at the pony's neck, and slid the needle in. He withdrew the plunger of the syringe an inch, or less, then cursed and pulled the long needle out from the pony's flesh. 'Hold him,' he said again, and made a second attempt to find the jugular. Again he failed. The girl shivered, and squeezed her eyes shut each time the surgeon missed. Eventually he drew a little venous blood into the syringe and then he pressed the plunger slowly down and sent the medicine into the pony's bloodstream.

The vet Herle promised to return that afternoon or evening. The pony spent the morning standing gazing at the wall in front of him. He looked like some strange monk-like version of his species who had taken a vow of silence and stood in contemplation of mortality. Of eternal life in the Elysian fields. Or the American plains. Was it not true that horses ran free there? Drove of wild mustang. Following a proud stallion leader. Perhaps he imagined himself allowed to remain entire and be that stallion. Was it not true that an Indian brave chose a wild horse, lassoed it, handled it? He mounted the horse and they rode out on the prairie together. Of such a rider the roan dreamed.

Lunch was brought for the girl. She did not throw this meal away. Again she shared it with Leo. In the afternoon a young woman visited. ‘I thought I should see the poor creature responsible for my inactivity, Lottie,’ she said. She spoke with an odd accent. Whether from another country or some far distant part of Britain the boy did not know for sure. ‘I have a translation for you. Goethe.’ She leaned on the lower door of the box. ‘Everyone in the house talks of your vigil. They talk of nothing else.’

The girl asked what they said.

The woman removed her spectacles and cleaned them with a handkerchief she pulled from a pocket in her skirt. ‘Some say you are foolish and your father he is indulgent. That this here is only a pony while the world goes to hell in a hand-cart. The miners and dockers and railwaymen of your North strike and riot and hold this nation, if not your Empire, to ransom. The suffragettes wish us women to become Vandals and Goths and destroy all in our way. Half the Irish threaten you with civil war unless they receive Home Rule, the other half threaten civil war if it is given. You know nothing of such matters, Lottie, why should you? But this is what they say. At such a time, a child clinging to her dying pony is unseemly.’

The woman asked if it was safe to come in. The girl said it was so she entered the box. Leo saw her limp, though not, it appeared, with pain. One leg looked shorter than the other. Her white shirt was sewn with ruffles down its front. She stood just inside the door.

‘What do others say?’ the girl asked.

‘They say your love for this horse is something rare, Lottie,’ the woman told her. ‘There are not so many of them. Dear child, I came to see if there is any point in bringing books down here. Clearly there is none. I suppose we could practise some German conversation?’

The girl shook her head.

The governess smiled. Her teeth were discoloured. ‘I look forward to resuming our lessons in due course,’ she said, and left.

The roan lay in the straw. The girl and the boy lay down too. ‘You smell of horse,’ the girl said.

Leo sat up. ‘I beg your pardon, miss,’ he said. ‘But if I does, don’t you too?’

‘Yes, but you can’t smell it on me,’ she told him. ‘I can on you and on myself. And I will change these clothes and bathe and then I will no longer.’

Leo did not know what he was permitted to say. He said what came to mind. ‘You are most fortunate, miss.’

‘No, I am not,’ she said. ‘Don’t you understand? I am forced to wash some kind of truth or knowledge from myself.’

They spoke no more, and lay there in the straw.

*

Some time later Leo sat bolt upright from a nap. He did not know the reason only that there was one. The girl dozed. The roan lay quiet. Leo rose and walked to the door of the loose box and opened it a fraction and slipped out. He walked across the yard. It was something he had heard. Or someone.

The tack-room door was open. He stood against the wall outside and eavesdropped on his mother speaking with the groom. She had traced Leo’s steps here, she said, via the sawyers. The groom said her son had given him no message so Ruth gave it to him. He addressed her as Mrs Sercombe, she him as Mister Shattock. The groom explained what had happened to the pony of the master’s daughter. That she would not leave it, and neither it seemed would the boy. He said that Ruth could take her son home, or try to, but that he the groom would not send the boy away. No, he was sorry, but he would not do that.

Ruth said her son could come home when he was hungry. Herb Shattock agreed. Leo walked back to the loose box.

The veterinary surgeon did not return that day, or evening. The pony rolled and twisted in the straw. He tried to kick his own belly as he lay. Not once did he neigh, or whinny. Leo climbed into the hayloft to sleep. He woke and thought that the hunters had come in from the pasture and all were stampeding in the loose box below. Somehow. He woke fully. The girl's voice cried out in the dark. She called to him for help. She was climbing into the hay manger. Leo crouched on the boards and leaned down towards her. She grasped his hands and he pulled and helped her climb up. They lay side by side and watched the roan jump and kick, contorting himself in pain and rage.

Moonlight spilled into the loose box as the groom opened the upper door. 'Are you all right, Miss Charlotte?' he called. 'Are you safe?'

She called out that she was, but perhaps he could not hear her above the cacophony of the dying horse's frenzy, for he yelled louder, 'Are you safe?'

This time he did hear her reply.

The roan jerked and reared, bucked and kicked for longer than seemed possible. Leo held the girl's hand, trembling. Eventually the roan ceased and lay down in the straw. The girl and the boy climbed down. The pony was covered in sweat and panting, his flanks heaving. His mouth was surrounded by bubbly foam. His eyes were no longer dull but open wide, inflamed with some frantic understanding of his plight. The girl lay beside him stroking his damp neck and talking to him. The boy stood above her. Herb Shattock watched from the doorway, his head and torso casting moon shadow across the pony's rump.

The roan calmed. He kicked his legs once behind him. He closed his eyes. He let out an exhalation and the pause before he inhaled grew longer than before. Leo waited for him to breathe. The wait continued until the boy understood that it was over for the roan's heart had finally given out. The girl wept as she spoke to the dead horse. The boy walked past her to the door. Herb Shattock opened the door and let him out. The groom walked across the yard. The boy followed him.

In the tack room was a cot, where the groom must have slept. It explained how he'd reached the box so swiftly when the roan went berserk. 'I've a stove in here,' he said. 'We'll make Miss Charlotte a mug a tea.'

'Do you wish me to fetch her father?' Leo asked.

The groom shook his head. 'Tis only three o'clock in the mornin,' he said. 'We can send word once folk stirs.' He opened the baffle on the little stove. The black coals glowed orange. He filled the kettle from a brass tap above the sink. The room was unlike Albert Sercombe's tack room. It was as tidy as the Sercombes' parlour. As if Herb Shattock expected important visitors. It was not a tack room at all, but the groom's bothy. The cooking grate shone with black lead. An iron saucepan stood on the second hob. On the mantelpiece above were a tea caddy and a jar of tobacco. On the wall hung pictures of horses.

'I do not like that surgeon,' the groom said. 'I never have, to tell the truth. That Mister Herle. He could a come back to give the poor beast another shot. To help out Lord Prideaux. He said he would. He must a took hisself off elsewhere.'

The boy asked the groom if he could ask him something. The groom nodded and the boy said he had tried to work it out but could not. He did not know if what he had witnessed was cruel or kind. Which was it?

The groom shook his head. 'I do not know either,' he said. 'All I know is she went with her horse right up to the gates. The pearly gates or whatever portal our horses go through. She went all the way to the threshold with im. That is what you just seen there, boy.'

Christmas

It was the custom to give the teachers in the village school some gift at Christmas. This year one of the Haswell boys came up with a plan with which most agreed. On the last day of term the children got to school early. Miss Pugsley could not believe one single child was there before her, yet this day all were. They would not let her in, but said they must wait for Miss Pine too and so kept her talking in the yard.

When the junior teacher arrived Kizzie Sercombe as the eldest girl told the women that their presents were in the classroom. Miss Pugsley thanked the children. It was Miss Pine's first Christmas and it appeared that Miss Pugsley had not told her to expect anything and she was clearly delighted. The children made way for the teachers and ushered them in. Then they closed the door, tied the handle to the drainpipe, and ran to the windows to watch.

They had given Miss Pugsley a Christmas goose, Miss Pine a duck. Each was still alive. It would have been churlish to refuse the gifts. The teachers chased them around the classroom. Neither had been brought up with animals, and looked as terrified as their prey if not more so. Miss Pugsley cornered her goose but it hissed and flapped its wings and rushed past her. Miss Pine ran to the door but the children there would not open it. In the end she sat upon a bench and wept, and the Haswell boys went in

and caught the birds and wrung their necks for the teachers, and the last day of term resumed.

At the end of the day Miss Pugsley informed the class that she was off to spend the festive season on the far side of Taunton with her sister's family, whom she was sure would appreciate the goose. She wished them all a Merry Christmas. Then she asked Leo Sercombe please to stay behind.

He stood before her desk. She picked up off the surface a postcard, and studied the double portrait of the King and Queen, George and Mary, on its face. A souvenir of their Coronation. Miss Pugsley turned the card over. She examined what was written thereon then turned it for the boy to see. The card was scribed with fine, consistent copperplate.

'Who else,' she asked, 'would have written this?' She turned it back so she could see the words and read aloud, '*Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.*'

Miss Pugsley lowered the card and looked Leo in the eye. 'It is such beautiful script,' she said.

He shifted his gaze. The floor was dirty. It would surely be cleaned while the school was closed. 'It is from the *Book of Revelations*, miss,' he said.

'Thank you, Leo,' Miss Pugsley told him. 'Thank you very much. Enjoy your Christmas.'

The boy smiled and turned and walked out of the room.

He walked home as night came down like cold, early darkness clamped upon the earth. He bent low to the ground along the avenue and gathered acorns. There was just sufficient light by which to do so. It was his habit to fill his pockets, for not only were acorns a piquant delicacy for the pig but they were poisonous to horses, and if he could he would have cleared them from the ground every autumn all across the county and beyond.

The pig snaffled the acorns. He was grown tremendously obese and could barely move but dragged himself in and out of the shed of his sty and into its tiny yard.

The pig shit the boy's brother Fred piled in a heap at the end of their mother's kitchen garden, with all manner of other waste added to it: soot, ashes, each family member's hair cut by Ruth including her own, their night soil, rotten fruit, mouldy bread, fish waste, seaweed, bloody rags, woollen scraps, residue of Albert's pipe tobacco he tapped onto the heap, human piss, pigeon shit, weeds. Any vegetable matter the Pharaoh disdained ... All was thrown on the heap and turned into black compost to be dug into the garden soil, as manure on the farm would be dug into the fields.

January 1912

The wheelwright's shop was next-door to the smithy. His name was Hector Merry. The boy watched as he walked from the smithy to his shop, from his shop to the waggon outside. Merry's right foot hit the ground pointing outwards, as if he were planning to veer off at a diagonal. But then his left foot did likewise: now he appeared about to strike out leftward. His torso too shifted, following each foot's lead. Yet each time he came back on course, and despite his corporeal burlesque Hector Merry marched straight ahead. He might have given the impression of a vacillating man, one undecided about which direction to take along the village road, along the path ahead of him, changing his mind from one footprint to the next. Yet he did not. Shoulders back, spine straight, Hector Merry looked like a man of purpose and conviction.

After the iron tyres had been heated in the forge and put onto the new wheels, the wheels were rolled into the wheelwright's shop and attached to the new waggon. Then Hector Merry's lads and the Crocker sons pushed the waggon outside.

A number of old men and some women had gathered by now. A new waggon from Hector Merry was something to see. Amos Tucker was there too, it was his waggon, but he stood among the old men in the road, sucking on their pipes, appraising the workmanship, while Albert Sercombe studied it up close, moving slowly around the vehicle. The

great rear wheels were as high as his chest, and he was a tall man. He kept one hand upon the wood, assessing it by touch as well as sight, or getting the feel of it, or simply out of pleasure. All seasoned ash, it was a cock-raved waggon with strouters. The boy kept close to him. Albert ran his hands along the curved timber, the chamfered spindle sides.

Hector Merry followed Albert at a few yards' distance, reliving the glide and flow of his plane, perhaps. Or recalling the knotty struggle of this stock, that joint of spoke and felloe. Jacob Crocker too was a keen spectator for the waggon was a collaboration, not only in the tyres but the iron axles too and other smaller parts for which the boy knew not the name. It was a thing of wonder. Put together like some intricate puzzle, yet the wheels and the body of the waggon would have also to bear great weight and to withstand shocks and jolts of uneven roads and frozen rutted tracks.

When Albert had finished his circular inspection he climbed up into the bed of the waggon and walked around, stamping his boots. Then he jumped down and walked over to the smithy, where Noble and Red were tied up. He brought one and Leo the other to the waggon. The horses already wore their harness. He backed them into the curved shafts and hitched them up. He took longer than usual, as if there were some ceremony to the ritual in this public place.

Albert gave his son a knee-up to Noble on the nearside and he rode her side-on. Albert walked beside them, and they headed back to the estate. Old folks waved them off. The tall hunched Crocker son came out, swinging a dirty empty bottle tied to a length of cord. He swung it against the side of the waggon. It looked as if he wished to play some strange variant of the game of conkers, glass versus wood. But on the second swing the bottle smashed and the spectators cheered for the Crocker lad had launched their waggon on its maiden voyage as was done for boats built in the yard at the Port of Bridgwater.

As they walked out of the village Leo looked back. Hector Merry was following them, with that distinctive gait of his. Perhaps he could not bear

to let his waggon go. He did not close the gap but kept a consistent distance of some twenty yards between them. Perhaps it was required for a wheelwright to follow his conveyance to its farm. Would he seek payment from the master, not Amos Tucker?

Leo watched the wheelwright walk along. Sometimes he lowered his head to his chest. At other times he looked away, off to one side or the other, as if something had diverted his attention. Then he would look back at the waggon, pondering it afresh.

Albert Sercombe glanced up at his son. He saw the boy turn and followed his gaze. He watched a while himself, looking over his shoulder as he led the horse. ‘If it makes a bad noise,’ he said, ‘he’ll have us take it back to the shop to fix it.’

The boy watched again. Hector Merry kept turning his head so that one ear was cocked forward as he walked, listening to the wheels turning and the waggon creaking as the joints settled into one another on the move.

‘You’re more’n likely thinkin what a fine craftsman that Mister Merry is. And you’d be right, boy. But they say he’s nowhere near as good’s his father Josh Merry was. That’s what they old folks will have been whisperin. Take these wheels.’ Albert gestured behind him. ‘Beautiful four-inch wheels. In the days before roads was paved with stone the heavy waggons had wheel-rims nine inches wide. They was so wide the tracks they made formed footpaths in the mud. Think of the skill it took to make them.’

Leo glanced back. Hector Merry was diminishing behind them. The wheelwright waved. ‘Father,’ Leo said.

Albert looked over his shoulder. ‘Reckon us ave got the nod,’ he said, and waved in reply.

February

James Sparke's wife wrote out his itinerary then copied it, each assignation on a separate strip of paper. A name, a place, the date. These she delivered to the farms and cottages upon the estate to which he had sold one of his fattening pigs, plus one or two others who had bought elsewhere. There was a reason the job was done here in the unusual month of February, though none could tell Leo what it was. On the Tuesday allotted to Ruth Sercombe, Leo and his sister Kizzie stayed home from school. Albert and Fred returned from Manor Farm once they'd fed the horses. Fred carried a rough bench borrowed from the gaffer Amos Tucker upside down on his shoulder.

Ruth gathered necessary implements in her kitchen. Kizzie swilled the yard by the back door of the cottage and brushed it down. Drops of water froze instantly and became beads of ice she brushed away. Fred laid a bed of wheat straw in the yard. Leo helped his father fill kettles and pans of water heating on the stove. They conducted their preparations quietly, calmly, for Ruth told them that the righteous have regard for the life of their beast. She told them also that the bacon would cure better if the Pharoah were neither fretful nor fierce at the hour of his death but content as he had been all his life in the palace.

They heard James Sparke approaching. In one hand he carried a wicker basket of knives, hooks, ropes, steelyard weighing tackle, the iron and

metal scraping and clanking. His nose was red. He bore his pole-axe on his shoulder. ‘It wants to rain,’ he said. ‘But it’s too cold to, no?’ Ruth whispered to him, her breath smoking, asking him to set his basket on the ground. He sharpened his knife while she spoke in his ear.

Leo followed his father round the corner to the sty. There was barely room for the Pharoah to turn around in his tiny compound. The boy believed the pig did not feel the cold as they did. Albert talked to him as he climbed over the fence. He slipped a length of plough-string into the pig’s mouth and pulled it tight around his upper jaw. There was no gate for they had no need of one save for this moment. Fred had joined them and he and Leo twisted and heaved a side section of fence loose and removed it.

Albert led the Pharoah out of his compound for the first time since he was dropped into it when they brought him home. He led him round the corner of the cottage and into the yard. Ruth requested of the members of her family that they look away, that they pretend to be involved in other activities, but they could not. Fred dropped some meal onto the straw. The Pharoah ignored it. Perhaps he could eat no more, this day was so timed that such a creature was full and could be made no fatter. Instead he squealed as he had when they took him from his sow and began to pull against the taut string.

‘Steady,’ James Sparke said. ‘Hold him steady.’ He raised the pole-axe up over and behind him, then brought the flat head down on the Pharoah’s forehead. The animal ceased squealing and staggered, but did not fall. Sparke cursed and raised the axe and struck the pig a second time. The Pharoah keeled over. Sparke laid the head of the axe on the ground and took the knife he had sharpened from his basket and slit the pig’s throat. Ruth held a bowl and collected the blood as it poured out, bright red. Kizzie stood by, and when the bowl was full she passed her mother a fresh one and took the full bowl and poured the blood into a bucket. Fred stirred the blood in the bucket with a long spoon so that it would not thicken and clot.

When the blood flow slowed Albert forked straw over the dead pig. James Sparke inserted a bunt into the pig's mouth and another into his arse. He stood and sniffed at the wind. 'Westerly, yes?' he asked Albert, and lit the straw at one end of the pig. The flames hissed and crackled as they travelled along the carcase. Sparke forked loose straw onto the pig. Smoke blew this way and that. The boy ran around as it engulfed him and made his eyes water. The pig was a burnt offering, the straw and the singeing bristles were fragrant incense, James Sparke the ritual slaughterer consecrating their sacrifice. All was as it had ever been or would be.

'Let's turn him,' James Sparke said. Kizzie had taken over stirring the blood. Fred helped his father roll the pig over to his other side. Sparke covered the corpse with fresh straw using his fork then delicately lifted a wisp that was still alight and set it to the pyre. He never left the fire alone but constantly agitated the burning straw with his fork. Twice more they turned the pig, to burn off the hairs upon his back and belly, then Sparke took a broom Ruth gave him and brushed the blackened corpse.

'On the bench now, yes?' James Sparke said. He laid aside the broom. The bench that Fred had borrowed was a form of thick elm plank into which strong oak legs were tenoned. Along the middle of it ran a V-shaped channel, joined by further channels running into it on either side.

James Sparke and Albert took hold of the pig's front trotters, Fred and Ruth the hind. At a word from Sparke they lifted the carcase. They carried it a few steps, staggering with its weight, to the foot of the bench. There they swung it forwards and backwards. 'Count a three,' Sparke said, and on the third swing ordered, 'Yup!' He and Albert lifted the pig's head and trotted along either side of the bench, and at the end of the swing Ruth and Fred set the dead pig's rump on the bench and the rest of his body was lowered along it.

Albert and Fred carried out buckets of hot and boiling water and threw them over the pig's inert steaming body. Leo stirred the bucket of blood. Ruth and Kizzie scraped off any bristles that had escaped the flames. It was known that James Sparke would not scrape a pig. A strange

squeamishness considering all else he did. He did not like it. He said it gave him the crinkum-crankums.

Their black pig the Pharoah became a hairless, mottled brown carcase. James Sparke pulled the horns from off the toes with surprising ease and threw them away. The boy picked one up. It was warm, and had a bowl like a cup. Sparke cut the tongue from out of the pig's mouth and handed it to Ruth. Then he made a cut to the middle joint of one leg after another and turned each hock backward. He opened up the belly with one longitudinal cut of his sharp knife. Delving into the pig's innards, Sparke separated and removed the organs and entrails and put them on plates Ruth held out for him. Liver, lights, heart, chitterlings. They steamed in the cold morning. Some she put in bowls of clean cold water.

Kizzie stirred the bucket of blood. Sparke removed the Pharoah's bladder and passed it to Albert, who drained it and inserted the broken stem of one of his clay pipes. He held the bladder with one hand and the pipe stem with the other for Fred to blow into. Albert told Leo to take a length of string from his left-hand jacket pocket, nodding towards it. Fred blew into the pipe stem, his cheeks reddening. Albert kept saying, 'A little more.' They inflated the bladder to a size it was not possible to believe had ever been done while it was inside the animal. Albert claimed that it would be easier to clean the bladder now, ready to hold the rendered fat, but Leo reckoned that this was not so, that in truth his father found some boyish pleasure in producing this strange balloon.

'Should do us,' said Albert. He took the bladder and, pinching it with his fingers, held it while Fred tied up the tube.

James Sparke inserted a hook into each of the pig's hind-legs, and tied a length of rope between them, then the men lifted the pig and hoisted it onto a spike sticking out of the wall of the cottage. With a hazel stick James Sparke propped the pig's belly open to the frosty air. Then without a further word he picked up his pole-axe and, leaving the basket of other tools in Albert's shed, walked away. Albert and Fred returned directly to the farm. The boy swept the yard, and poured water onto the bloody

surface of the bench and brushed it down. Ruth cut and cleaned the entrails of the pig. Her hands were pink. When she was ready she called Kizzie inside and mother and daughter cooked the first dish from the Pharoah, a Bloody Pie of heart, liver, chitterlings, groats and blood.

In the afternoon the boy harnessed their pony to the small cart and took it to the village. At the shop he handed Alf Blackmore a piece of paper with his mother's order. Three oblong lumps of salt. The boy was not big enough to carry one unaided so Alf Blackmore's lad put them in the cart and Leo brought them home.

On the day following James Sparke returned. First he weighed the pig. While it hung from the spike, members of the family had estimated its weight. So too had other cottagers. None were quite accurate, though Fred was closest. The pig weighed fourteen stone and seven and one half pounds. 'Heavier than any man you'll be familiar with, no?' James Sparke told Leo. 'Save Amos Tucker, I suppose.' Why they measured it the boy did not know, other than to play this game. To see if James Sparke's fattening pigs were improving or in decline? To assess the diet that the family had given the Pharaoh?

They lifted the carcase from the scales and laid it on the elm bench, then as before Albert and Fred, the carters, went back to work on the farm.

James Sparke cut off the pig's head. He divided the head into two halves. He severed the ears, and extracted the eyes. The boy held out a saucer Ruth had given him. James Sparke lifted out the brains and put them in the saucer and Leo carried it inside to his mother. Ruth took the saucer and asked her son if the cold had got to him for he looked wobbly on his feet. He said it was not the cold. He told her he could not believe the Pharaoh, who had been grunting and snuffling in his customary, comical manner the day before, was now no more than this gross profusion of meat.

'He lived that we could eat him,' Ruth said. 'That we can live. Who ordained it? None but the Lord.' She added that it was a mystery and Leo was right to ponder it. He nodded, and went back outside.

James Sparke cut the carcase into halves. He cut the hams, gammons, spare ribs, hazeletts, griskins and rearings. All this he explained to the boy and girl as he did it. They ferried the parts inside.

It was not the boy who noticed Lottie but his sister. Kizzie nudged Leo and whispered in his ear, 'The master's daughter.' Leo looked up and saw her standing a few yards away, watching the butcher at work. Kizzie fetched her mother. Ruth came out, wiping her hands and forearms with a cloth, and asked if the young mistress wanted something or if there was anything they could do for her. The girl said she wished only to stand and watch this dissection, for it interested her, if the carter's wife wouldn't mind. Ruth said she would not and returned inside.

When all the bony parts had been cut there remained only the two great flitches. James Sparke took payment from Ruth and left with his basket of tools. The boy saw that Lottie had vanished as ghostly as she'd come. He and his sister crushed the salt from the blocks he'd fetched the day before and helped Ruth rub it into the hams and flitches and all the rest until they had a good covering to soak in over the months to come. As each was completed Ruth hung it from a hook in the kitchen or the parlour.

March

The boy went with his father to his uncle Enoch the under carter's stable and brought out the two five-year-old bay geldings. Herbert emptied Albert's stables of his horses. Father and son led the geldings to two adjacent stalls and worked on them. They groomed the horses as every day, then wet their hooves and scrubbed them. Albert twisted hay into a wisp and dried his horse's legs, and the boy did likewise. They sponged under their cruppers and when the feather hair dried below the fetlocks they combed it until it hung over the great hooves like silk.

Albert came into the boy's stall. 'You should know this,' he said. 'See how his brown coat shines.' He took a small linen bag from his pocket and untied the string and loosened it. The boy imbued a strong, unfamiliar aroma. Something like rosemary. 'Tansy,' his father said. 'I bakes the leaves dry then rub em between my ands into powder. Sprinkles a little into their meal.' Albert looked over his shoulder. 'Your uncle has no need to know. Your brother neither. My father told me, and I tell you.' He looked around him again, for fear that someone might be lurking in the shadows. 'Don't put too much in, else they'll sweat it out and all the world'll smell it.'

Albert pulled tight the drawstring and returned the bag to his pocket. He said that at a summer show he might rub a horse down lightly with a rag dipped in paraffin, for not only would it bring up a quick shine but it

would also keep flies off and help the horse stand steady in the ring. ‘Wet their chaff with a little piss now and again,’ he said. ‘Keep a good bloom on their hide.’

‘Whose?’ the boy asked.

Albert frowned. ‘Your own, a course.’

Leo shook his head. ‘I never seen you do it.’

Albert grinned. ‘Never will. Not you nor no one. Let’s plait em.’

Albert returned to the other stall. They plaited the black manes and tails of the bay geldings, keeping the twisted patterns in place with straw, tying ribbons into the hair. The horses ate an extra portion of oats, chaff and mangel in their mangers. By the light of the lanterns they checked the horses’ feet, poking the last bits of reddish mud from around the frog with picks. When they were done they put on new halters Amos Tucker had bought for the purpose and led them out of the stalls.

The farmer had by now appeared and he told Albert that he would see them in town. ‘Keep an eye out,’ Amos said. ‘We don’t want some crooked horse coper spoilin or spookin em.’

Albert tied the halter rope of one horse to the tail of the other. He led the foremost gelding out of the yard. The boy walked behind. His uncle Enoch and brother Fred watched their horses leave the farm.

They walked the dark lanes. Others would be going but perhaps they were the first. They heard sounds from neighbouring farms. Whether those carters too were preparing to take their animals was speculation. As a grey and streaky sky became visible above them Albert called his son forward beside him. Leo had been to the town, twice, but never yet to the Fair. His father told him that one hundred years before, fifteen thousand sheep were sold there. But the wool trade died. Now the numbers were pitiful. Carthorses were sold instead, and wild Exmoor ponies herded and driven on the hoof. Others, too. Dulverton Fair had folded when he was a youngster, then Tiverton Fair too, and now all the horses came here. He said that the first horse the old gaffer had asked him to sell was one he had

watched being born, broken himself and worked behind the plough for two years. He would not do that again. ‘I’ll break em and work em but I won’t sell em.’ He had spoken of this problem with Amos Tucker’s father and they had resolved it. He only sold the under carter, Enoch’s, horses. His own were not sold until they were too old to work, and then not for serious profit.

They led the two bay geldings into Bampton. Others were on the road. The boy had imagined there would be one large sale ring, like the show ring at the village fête, when his father competed with other carters roundabout in classes for the best-decorated horse in cart harness or in a pair of plough gears, and the master gave out shining trophies. There were a number of these at home in the parlour.

Instead, the High Street was unrecognisable. It was aswarm with livestock. Cattle roamed, sheep and horses, seemingly unattached to each other or anyone. Moorland ponies and carthorses and also young, unbroken colts and Welsh cobs. The boy stuck close to his father, who led their geldings slowly through the crowd. He stared glassily ahead to demonstrate that he had no concern for the behaviour of his own beasts while all around him was a pandemonium of cattle lowing and sheep bleating, of horses backing up and kicking. Collie dogs slunk around small flocks or else cowered, defeated by the impossibility of herding their charges in this chaos. Farmers shouted at their lads. Lads yelled at their beasts. The High Street reeked of ammonia.

Past the Taunton Hotel Albert Sercombe turned off and they walked through a yard of parked carts and waggons, all unyoked. Behind the hotel was an orchard. In amongst the yet leafless fruit trees, horses stood like a troop of cavalry mounts waiting patiently for battle. They found a vacant tree and tied their horses’ halter ropes to another cord that Albert slung around its trunk.

Albert Sercombe filled his pipe with his old black shag and lit it, and watched the horses that passed them by. Shires in ones and twos like theirs but also droves of others. He pointed out purebred Exmoor ponies to his son. They stood eleven or twelve hands high. He said that Exmoor ponies were superior to those of Dartmoor. The biggest could carry a man of thirteen stone in weight. The boy asked his father how much he weighed. Albert said it must be many years since he had stood on a pair of scales, though he had grown neither heavier nor lighter as far as he knew and so he supposed he weighed twelve stone as he had before. He allowed that he might be surprised. He pointed out a packet of half-bred colts. He reckoned they might fetch thirty guineas each and the moorland ponies half that.

There was a sudden distant whistle and the geldings startled. Albert hushed them and made soothing noises, stroking the more nervous of the two. The boy reached up and did likewise to the other. A breeze blew through the orchard and he smelled the coal-burning smoke of the train.

‘Now you’ll see it busy,’ his father said.

They came into the orchard on a spree. Auctioneers had their own sites and set up. His father pointed out dealers, Exeter buyers of dray horses for the railway and breweries and mills. There were farmers, farm suppliers, veterinary surgeons, gentry, town dandies. Men wore tight breeches, cloth leggings, coloured waistcoats. Bowler hats, flat caps, some straw boaters as if it were a summer’s day and not a grey March morning. One or two carried long whips, perhaps for the horse they intended to buy. There were no women present, none at all.

‘Here he comes,’ Albert said.

They saw Amos Tucker barrelling his way through the crowded orchard towards them. It was as if he knew which tree was theirs.

‘How’s it lookin?’ Amos said.

‘Ripe, gaffer,’ Albert replied.

They untied the halters of the geldings and led them to an open field beyond the orchard. Two long lines of men three deep faced each other across an avenue. Behind those standing, others sat in crowded waggons. Albert Sercombe joined a queue of men with carthorses. When their turn came Amos held the less nervous gelding while Albert ran the other up and down the avenue. Then they swapped the animals and he ran the second horse. Red-faced and blowing hard, Albert took some time to get his breath back. ‘Ain’t used to runnin,’ he gasped. The gaffer and the boy held the horses until he had recovered, then they led them back to their tree.

Now spectators from the field came over to inspect the geldings. They opened the horses’ mouths, rolled back their eyelids. Felt their forelegs, pulled at their hides. The boy wondered that the animals did not jib at these intrusions, but even the anxious one seemed to enjoy them.

Some knew Amos Tucker, some his father. They asked questions of the geldings’ characters or qualities. The answers were not exactly lies but close enough. Both horses were amenable to all work and had no weaknesses. Amos Tucker was very solemn and said that, to be fair, he would rather not sell them but would do so out of foolish generosity only if a fine judge of equine flesh were desperate to have them. The boy’s father said the animals’ condition spoke for itself and all but a blind dawcock could see it; he would not demean a man by describing what he could make out plain for himself, only he did feel obliged to point out this. And mention that.

They led the geldings to a spot which belonged, said Amos Tucker, to his auctioneer. This man stood upon a wooden rostrum, with a counter across in front of him on which he had papers and a hammer. It did not look either permanent or stable. The ring had no fence but was formed by the bodies of those in attendance. Albert led one of the horses inside it. The auctioneer said, ‘Now, gentlemen, the first of Mister Amos Tucker’s geldings. Warranted sound in wind and limb, a good worker in all gears. Free from vice.’

The auctioneer spoke yet his voice had the volume of someone shouting. The boy did not know how he did it. It was as if he had an affliction the opposite of Leo's own, and had found a use for it.

'You couldn't buy from a better farm nor buy animals broken in by a better carter.'

Albert led the gelding around the ring. A man in a velour hat with a blue and black jay's feather in its broad band stepped forward to feel the horse but Albert told him to back off. He'd had his chance. The crowd nodded and tutted their approval of the carter who would not tolerate this breach of local custom or manners.

'Gentlemen. Who will start me at forty guineas?'

A man nodded and the auctioneer spoke suddenly in some breathless hiccupping language the boy could not understand. The men around the ring seemed to, for one would raise a finger, another lift his hat, and each time the auctioneer nodded back at them. Then abruptly he lifted the wooden gavel and banged it upon his counter and announced that the gelding was sold for fifty-two guineas to an Exeter man.

The second, less nervous, gelding was auctioned likewise and sold for fifty-five guineas to a man who knew the gaffer, for he came up to them.

'Good horse, Jack.'

'Better be, Amos.'

They did not shake hands but each struck the palm of his right hand against the other's and both shouted, 'Sold,' for all to hear.

'Luck money, Amos?'

The gaffer extracted from his leather purse a half-sovereign and gave it to the man. This buyer was another farmer, from a village close to theirs. He and the dealer took the geldings, and the men from Manor Farm found themselves unencumbered. Amos Tucker could not stop smiling. He gave Albert five shillings beer money and the boy a shilling too.

'Don't get lost,' Albert told his son. He and Amos walked off talking to each other, the gaffer with his hand on the taller man's shoulder. The boy looked around the orchard, teeming with horses and men. His father and

the gaffer had disappeared into the crowd. The boy turned and made his way back towards the open field. All had changed. There was no longer the wide avenue through the middle of two banks of spectators but knots of men, and horses being run haphazardly. Some being ridden. He joined a group and realised that it contained the master and his groom Herb Shattock. The boy eased his way between the closely jostling bodies of men.

One man spoke to the master. Others listened. ‘A good warmblood horse, sir. She’ll yoke up in anything you put her in, sir. A lovely mane. She’s good to shoe, easy to catch. Nothin bothers this mare, sir. And will you look at the colour of her! Strawberry red she is and with one lucky white ear.’

The gypsy horse dealer sang the praises of what looked to the boy like an ordinary cob. He could not believe the master would wish to buy her.

‘Or this one comin here, sir, I know this one. He doesn’t hot up or get fizzy on you. A huntin man like yourself, you could take him huntin, sir, he doesn’t kick hounds. Lovely stable manners. Sixteen hands high if he’s a foot and he’s Hungarian blood in him, I swear to God on that.’

The groom looked down and saw the boy and said, ‘It’s you, laddie, are you here with your father?’

Leo nodded. ‘Sold two Shire geldings for Mister Tucker.’

‘I hope he got a good price.’ The dealer had stopped speaking and Herb Shattock added, ‘Not from one a these diddy thieves here.’

The gypsy said he would overlook the offence as it came from one so uncouth. Herb Shattock asked the master if he remembered the carter Sercombe’s son and the master said of course he did. The gypsy said they should look at this one now and all turned to watch a gypsy lad run a beautiful white horse.

‘Now has he got good bone, sir?’ the dealer asked. ‘Behold him.’ They watched. The lad ran around the field in figures of eight or perhaps randomly, and the group of men shifted round to follow them. ‘Three-

year-old colt, never been raced but he's all ready to, sir. You could bring him on yourself if you've a mind to.'

The lad sprinted across the field. The horse cantered gently behind him, rather as if he were not being led but was shadowing this spindly youth in mockery of his species' inferior condition.

'How tall do you think he is?' Lord Prideaux asked.

'Fourteen hands, master,' his groom answered. 'A little more, possibly.'

'I should like to see him ridden.'

'I'll tell the lad to hop aboard, sir,' the dealer said. 'Right away.'

'No.' The master turned to Leo. 'How would you like to ride this fine colt?'

Leo opened his mouth to speak but could not. He nodded. The master asked Herb Shattock if he thought it was a good idea. The groom said it was. The boy would probably be thrown but he was light and might escape injury. The master said he would enjoy seeing the colt ridden by one other than its owner. The gypsy raised his arm straight up and made a gesture with his hand and the lad brought the horse to them. The other men in their loose group fell back.

'Help the nipper aboard,' said the dealer. The lad tied the end of the long rope to the ring on the other side of the halter then looped what were now rudimentary reins over the colt's head. He cupped his hands. Leo put his left boot into them and stepped up. The lad tossed him more forcefully than he needed to, perhaps he misjudged his weight, and the boy had to grab the horse's mane to save himself from sailing clear over the colt's body.

'Have you ridden bareback before?' Herb Shattock asked.

The boy nodded for he had, many times. Their cob. The geldings when they'd been half-grown. None though like this white colt.

The boy held the rope rein and turned the colt towards the open field. He saw a way clear to the far fence a hundred yards away, and dug his heels into the horse's flanks. The horse loped slowly forward. Leo did the same again. Still the colt only walked. Leo heard footsteps behind him. He

turned and saw the gypsy lad running after them. ‘Kick the fucker hard,’ the lad yelled, and as he drew alongside he gave the colt an almighty slap upon his rump. ‘Git on,’ he yelled. Leo kicked with all his strength and the colt leaped forward. He accelerated from walking pace to a canter to full gallop in the space of a breath and they flew.

The boy thought he would be hanging on in desperation to the reins, the horse’s mane, anything he could get hold of. It was not like that. He found himself hugging the horse with his whole body from his face upon the mane, his torso on the horse’s neck, his crotch on its spine, his thighs and knees and feet pressing upon the horse’s muscular hurtling form. He was less hanging on than moulding his body to that of the galloping animal. He thought it was a most interesting phenomenon and he wanted to laugh even as he knew that he was terrified. The grass sped by beneath him. He had no control over the horse. It was as if the colt had been told where he should go and the boy was merely following, yet the horse went where the boy wished him to. As if by coincidence. It was inexplicable.

As they neared the fence the colt slowed. He turned to the right and cantered along the fence to the corner of the field, then back again. As he reached the point he had come from so he turned back to the distant knot of interested men, the boy kicked him hard and he accelerated in their direction. He raced towards and then away from the group. He saw space between others and the pair of them made for it at full pelt. It seemed that people were yelling to them, but out of some other realm of existence which he and the colt had left and were no longer attached to. They raced from one point to another in the field as if other men and horses had been placed in position for just this spectacle. Nothing could stop them. The boy did not know that such exhilaration existed, save for in the last days when young men shall see visions, all see wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke.

They turned once more from the fence. The boy aimed for the right-hand side of the men. Whether the colt read his mind or had received some other twitching communication from his limbs the boy was not sure

but they galloped past the group and slowed down, turned and came back around the other side.

The gypsy lad stepped forward and took the rope from the boy. Leo could feel the colt breathing hard beneath him. Lifting his right leg, he swung around and slid off the colt to the ground. He realised that despite the cool temperature he was drenched in sweat, as was the horse. When he stood upon the grass he did not know what to do. There were men around him talking but he could not hear them. The master's tweed coat or jacket was made of a thousand brown twists of living breathing thread. The gypsy dealer's fingers were stained with a nicotine of the same intense brown colour precisely as the new halters the geldings had worn this morning. How could that be? He looked up. The sky was no longer grey and streaked but clear and the deep pale blue of a hedge sparrow's eggs, then all went dark as he heard the words, 'Catch him, man.'

When Leo came round, the master told the boy that he could ride. He really could ride a horse. The dealer said the boy had gypsy blood for sure, look at those dark brown eyes, too dark for a gentile. 'You'll surely wish to buy the colt now, sir,' he said. 'I'll find out how much they want for him but I'll beat em down for you, don't worry about that.'

The master said that he was not in the market for such a beast, fine as he was, but that he had enjoyed the demonstration. He gave the gypsy lad a shilling, and Leo the same. The dealer was about to speak but the master promised that he would not insult him with such a gratuity, and looked forward to doing business with him another time. The dealer said his lordship might not be here again but the master assured him that he came every year. The dealer said that he himself might not come again. The master smiled and said that would be a shame and wished him good fortune. He turned and walked out of the field into the orchard.

The groom said to Leo, 'You should eat, boy. Come with us.'

The High Street was awash with men and horses. The boy saw as he had not before that shops and dwellings were boarded up for the day. They walked past public houses from which the windows had been removed, not merely their glass panes but the entire frames, and through one the boy glimpsed his father's head and that of Amos Tucker amidst the throng. The master took them to one of the tea rooms. Leo thought he could recall being brought here with his sister by their aunts, but he remembered being impressed by brightly patterned carpets and today the wooden floor was covered with straw.

The master asked the boy what he would like to eat but the boy could not say, so the master ordered for him. Then he lit a cigar. The smoke unlike that from a clay pipe was pungent and nauseating. The master repeated to the groom that the carter's son could ride a horse. He truly could. Leo wondered if he should tell the master that his own daughter was a finer rider, though he was not sure that fine as she was she could have ridden that colt as fast as he had. The boy said that he thought there were ten thousand horses in the town but Herb Shattock said it was more like two, and the master nodded. Leo asked why the shops were boarded up. The groom told him that ten or fifteen years past a cow walked into a tailor's shop through the plate-glass window. He said the pub windows were removed as a precaution for when the brawling started later.

When the food came the boy ate in silence. Hot mutton stew, warm bread and butter. Cold pork pies. Greengages preserved in sweet syrup, and shortbread. The master and his groom spoke but Leo did not listen. The food took all his attention. The men drank beer and ginger wine. The boy drank lemonade.

When they rose Leo thanked the master for his food. Herb Shattock asked the boy if he would find his father and he said that he would. He did not go straight to the pub where he had seen Albert but wandered, replete and dozy. The streets were emptying finally of horses as men who'd purchased them took them home. Those who had failed to sell the horses they'd

brought did likewise. Pedlars set up their stalls where auctioneers had been. A few women appeared, here and there. A bearded man walked dolefully up the High Street bearing a sandwich-board that proclaimed the end of the world was nigh. It was time to repent. Now or never. Maids strolled in twos and threes. From a covered waggon a quack doctor extolled the virtues of his liniment. Carters and farmers with their rheumatics or lumbago heard him out. A diminutive man with a thin moustache set up a three-legged table and on it placed three cards. Two numbers and the Queen of Hearts. He turned the cards over and asked for someone to tell him where the queen was. A young man told him and the card sharp asked if he would put money on it. The youth said he would and placed a sixpence on the card. All those watching agreed. The sharp turned it over. The five of clubs. The crowd laughed in wonder. The sixpence disappeared.

The boards came off the fronts of shops, their interiors lit up with lanterns, and the boy realised it was dusk. He heard music. A harmonium. Fiddles. He saw Herbert with some other lads he recognised. He followed them into the orchard where a ring had been set up with wooden stakes and rope. In the ring stood a giant. A gypsy shouted out that Gentle George here would take on all-comers in bare-fist boxing. When the boy looked closely at the giant he saw that he might be a gypsy but a freak one. Herbert and his mates challenged each other to enter the ring, each offering to pay another to risk it. Leo thought that none would do so. He sought the music and saw his brother Fred holding the hand of a maid Leo had never seen before.

He made his way to the pub. On the way a hawker tried to sell him a penknife. ‘Here, boy, does your father smoke a pipe? This one’s got a pick to clean it.’ The boy ignored him but then he remembered the coins in his pocket and went back. The knife had a bone handle and did not look the most robust tool he had ever seen, but he had none of his own, and he thought that the pick might have other uses. The blade could be sharpened. With one of the coins he bought the knife.

In the pub Leo found his father, standing in a corner speaking to no one. Amos Tucker had disappeared. Albert did not see his son until Leo had been in front of him for some while. ‘There you are,’ Albert said eventually. ‘Let me empty this mug and we can go.’ The boy did not know if his father had been waiting impatiently for him, so as to depart this place, or on the contrary was sorry to be obliged to leave so soon. Albert sipped his beer. Leo closed his eyes. There was something he had always wondered. A bird sang for a reason. To alert kith or kin to danger. To warn an enemy off. To woo. Why then did they make their noises when in a flock such that each was indistinguishable from another? Roosting in a tree or in flight. He had often pondered this. Now with his eyes closed he heard the sound of men talking. It was a kind of human song. Men spoke because they enjoyed doing so and so did birds. What they said had little meaning.

‘I’m talkin to you.’

The boy opened his eyes. There stood a man he recognised. The one with the jay’s feather in the band of his black hat, who had wished to inspect the first gelding in the auction ring.

‘Back off,’ his father said, just as he had earlier.

The man made to swing a punch. As he did so Albert Sercombe chucked the remains of his pewter mug of beer in the man’s face. As the man hesitated Albert let go of the empty mug and threw a straight arm at his chin. To the boy’s astonishment it missed and pawed the air beside him. The man tried again. He landed a punch on Albert’s left ear. Albert did not seem to feel it but swung his fist again. The man appeared to stand stock still and wait for it. The boy did not know whether the cracking sound he heard came from the man’s jaw or his father’s knuckles. There was no space to flounder in the crowded room. Instead the man crumpled boneless where he stood and collapsed unconscious to the floor. Albert stepped over him and men parted to let him through. The boy followed. They climbed out of the empty window space and into the High Street, and walked out of the town.

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March

In the evening of the day Albert Sercombe and his lad Herbert took their two teams of horses to the forge and fetched the steam engine and the threshing drum. These belonged to the blacksmith Jacob Crocker, who hired them out along with himself and his crooked-backed son. It was dark when they hauled them to Manor Farm, a noisy caravan with their iron-tyred wheels approaching along the pot-holed road, metalwork rattling, wood creaking. Leo could see the faint glow of his father's pipe when he inhaled. He helped Amos Tucker light stable lamps and hang them in the yard.

They brought the engine with its chimney stack up beyond the last rick in the yard. Albert told Noble to hold up. Tension was released from the traces and the collar relaxed on her sweaty shoulders. Behind her, Red stood back half a pace to rest in his breeching strap between the shafts. Herbert brought up the drum behind the engine, beside the rick. It was covered in a great canvas sheet like some mysterious statuary ferried in secrecy, to be revealed with a flourish on the morrow. The men unharnessed the horses and tended to them.

*

In the morning the boy accompanied his father and brother back to the farm. The earth was covered with a light frost and their boots rang over

the hard ground. While they fed and groomed the horses, Jacob Crocker and his son arrived. They unsheeted the threshing drum and uncoiled the huge leather driving-belt. Young Crocker slipped it over the large driving-wheel of the engine and onto the smaller pulley-wheel of the thresher. Jacob Crocker took a pair of steel-rimmed glasses out of his red waistcoat pocket and peered at the spirit level embedded in the wall of the thresher. ‘That’ un,’ he said. His tall son laid a wooden chock under one of the wheels and stood and kicked it in with his heel. Jacob Crocker studied the level once more. ‘That ’un.’

When he was satisfied that it was true his son broke up hard steam coal with his hammer from a pile the farmer had placed beside the engine. Leo felt the fire box. It was still warm from the day before. Young Crocker shovelled in shining cobbles of coal.

Amos Tucker rolled half a hogshead barrel alongside the steam engine. ‘You’ll find yokes an buckets in yon tool shed,’ he told the boy. ‘Fill em up from the pond.’

Others congregated in the yard. Ernest Cudmore the shepherd and Isaac Wooland the stockman found the long ladder and carried it to the corn rick. They laid it on the ground, its end abutting the bottom of the rick. Ernest walked back along beside the ladder and joined Isaac at the far end. They picked it up one either side, hoisted it aloft and stepped underneath, Isaac holding the end rung just above his head. The stockman was not a particularly tall man but still Ernest Cudmore was six inches shorter and held the third or fourth rung in, his arms fully extended. Together they walked towards the rick, passing the ladder over their heads one rung at a time, thus raising it in the air. The effect of their different heights made the sight comical. Young Crocker looked down at Leo when he heard him chuckling and frowned in disapproval or lack of understanding. Then he turned to the spectacle himself and Leo heard a kind of snickering issue from him.

The higher the two men raised the ladder, the closer Isaac came upon the shorter man in front of him until, as the ladder approached the vertical, it looked as if Isaac meant to crush the shepherd between his body and the ladder. Ernest struggled aside out of the squeeze he found himself in and for a moment the ladder tottered. Isaac floundered, his hands holding a rung far above his head. It looked like if he took one arm off he would stagger backwards. But then he seemed to summon some burst of power from somewhere and stepped forward with great purpose and flung the ladder hard against the corn rick. He and Ernest pulled the bottom of the ladder away from the rick and now it leaned secure against it. Ernest climbed up and Isaac followed. They stepped off onto the roof and began drawing out the pegs from the thatch, still white with frost.

Young Crocker turned to Leo, grinning, and shook his head. Leo carried buckets to the pond. He broke the thin ice there and scooped cold water into the buckets. He put the yoke across his shoulders and attached one bucket to the left-hand hook and the other to the right, and brought them both up. He bent forward under the yoke and set them down. Then he lifted one and poured the water into the barrel. Young Crocker dropped a hose-pipe from the boiler into the tub. He stared at the pressure gauge. When Leo returned with another load he was still peering at it.

Albert and Herbert finished with their horses, Enoch and Fred likewise. Isaiah Vagges the old waggoner appeared, and Mildred Daw the spinster too. The congregants greeted one another and Amos Tucker directed them to their stations. Mildred rubbed linseed oil into the larch handle of her fork. Isaiah massaged a small lump of grease or lard into his hands. Fred laid a net around the corn rick. Herbert passed round lengths of string, which men tied around their trouser legs, just below the knees. The boy copied them. All of a sudden a shrill whistle blew and all turned to young Crocker on the steam engine. He opened the regulator and set the wheels in motion. The leather belt began to turn the drum. Brass knobs rose and fell. Puffs of smoke belched out of the chimney.

Leo delivered more water. The barrel was almost full and he watched the workers take up their positions. His father laid a pile of four-bushel sacks upon the ground and Enoch hooked one under the grain chutes. Fred and Herbert dragged sheets of hessian and set them beneath the threshing drum. Isaiah Vagges and Mildred Daw stood to one side.

Jacob Crocker climbed up to a platform by the drum. He held out a hand and pulled Amos Tucker up easily beside him as if the corpulent farmer were some slender girl and the blacksmith a young gallant. He nodded to his son, who knocked open the engine's throttle with the palm of his hand. The drum rotated faster now and Leo could hear it moaning as it turned, a metal gut calling to be filled. Then Jacob looked up to Ernest Cudmore and Isaac Wooland atop the rick above them and nodded to them too. Straight away the shepherd tossed wheat sheaves down to the platform. Amos Tucker cut their straw bands. Jacob lifted the loose wheat and fed it ears first into the hungry drum.

The first corn went through the empty drum. Its moaning rotation was interspersed by the chattering sound of grain being separated, like hail on a corrugated-iron roof. Riddles separated the grain into two grades. As more sheaves were thrown in the sound of separate grains was lost in a low and constant growl. The grain ran from the drum into the sacks hung there. Leo saw that two of the farmer's daughters had appeared beside his father and uncle. When the first sack was full they sewed it up with long needles and twine in swift crude strokes.

The sheaves of wheat had gone through the drum and came out denuded of their grain and changed thereby into straw. This Isaiah and Mildred forked over to a spot across the yard where a man Leo recognised as one of the other estate farmers, a friend of Amos Tucker, began to lay a new rick.

The chaff flew out from under the centre of the drum and settled more or less in a cloud of dust on the hessian sacks laid there. Herbert and Fred brought up the four corners. These Herbert held in his fists and Fred

helped him lift the gathered sheet over his shoulder and set off for the chaff barn.

Leo looked into the barrel and saw it was already half-empty. He resumed his water carrying. When it was once more almost brim-full he studied the threshing machine. Its engine was an impossible chaos of pistons, cranks, rods and wheels, juddering and wheezing. If anyone spoke he could not hear them above the noise. He could smell the coal in the steam that gulped out of the chimney. The great belt circulated endlessly on the wooden wheels. How it stayed in place was not clear for there were no restraints to its sliding off. It never did. Smaller belts drove smaller pulleys that shook the riddles.

‘You dreamin, boy?’ Leo looked up. Young Crocker, his face and hands already filthy with black oil, pointed with the long spout of his oil can to the barrel. Leo picked up the yoke and the buckets and trotted out of the yard and down to the pond.

The boy’s father and uncle Enoch had the most arduous task, lifting the great sacks of wheat grain. They carried a sack across their shoulders so that the entire eighteen-stone weight was not directly on their backs. Herbert was eighteen and allowed to carry barley sacks of sixteen stone and oats of twelve. The following year he would carry wheat. Fred at seventeen could carry none. Their father had told them of men whose spines were ruined from carrying the sacks when their bones were too young. He and Enoch took them in turn across the yard and up the dozen stone steps to the granary. Each struggling tread of his father those of a farmer up his hill of Golgotha.

They and others too at intervals made brief excursions to the tool shed, to fill their mugs from the nine-gallon barrel of cider Amos Tucker had placed there for them.

By ten o’clock the top of the rick had been pitched through the thresher, and the new straw rick stood waist-high. At a signal from Amos Tucker,

young Crocker blew the steam whistle. He turned the regulator to a gradual stop. The driving belt wound down. The sound of the drum ceased. The yard was quiet again but the noise of the machines rang in their ears like the sound of something there still all around them yet invisible.

Fred and Herbert walked across the yard, fidgeting and stretching and running their fingers in under their collars where the chaff and the whirling dust had infiltrated. It stuck to the sweat of their backs, between the shoulder blades, in their armpits.

‘I fuckin hates this job,’ Herbert said.

They ate their lunch in the tool shed, sat on the benches and any bucket or drum that might provide a seat. They ate bread and cheese and drank the cloudy rough cider. Amos Tucker’s daughters sat next to each other on a single barrel, like a pair of Siamese twins, their dust-besmirched white dresses a single garment.

Isaiah Vagges told Jacob Crocker that his son seemed to know how to run the machine.

‘Aye,’ Jacob said. ‘He’s no smith but he can work that engine. He’d like to work on the trains if I let im, I reckon.’

‘That’s not bad pay, that,’ Herbert said.

Young Crocker listened as they spoke of him, head bowed.

‘Aye,’ said Jacob Crocker. ‘He’s an engineer, but he’s no smith.’

‘Useful machine, though,’ Isaiah said. ‘We used to have to thresh the corn with flails.’ He looked around the room. ‘You young gentlemen think this is hard work, you should a been here thirty year ago.’

Amos Tucker and the other farmer spoke quietly to one another in a corner. When they were silent, Enoch said, ‘Reckon tis time ye got one a them barrows, gaffer? In time for next year?’

Amos Tucker looked blankly at the under carter. ‘Ye puts the sack on its platform,’ Enoch said. He laid his lump of cheese in his lap and used his hands to illustrate what he described. ‘Winds a handle to raise it. The

platform keeps in place with a ratchet. When tis the height you wants ye can roll the sack onto your shoulders.'

Amos Tucker nodded slowly. 'What do you reckon, Albert?' he asked his carter. 'Could we do with such a barrow?'

Albert chewed his bread. 'Some might,' he said. 'My brother is gettin old, a course. But not to worry, my lad'll soon be of an age to carry his father's corn.'

'Yes, and I'll be bloody glad to,' Herbert said. 'Let some other sod carry the chaff. I hates it.'

'Careful what ye wish for, lad,' Enoch said.

'Aye, and careful with your language,' Amos Tucker told him.

Enoch shook his head. 'Others use a barrow. Ask yon Crockers while you've got em here.'

Amos said nothing. No one spoke, but waited for what might happen, for all knew of the brothers' mutual animosity.

'A further device we could do with,' Enoch persisted. 'An elevator what takes straw from the thresher to the rick. All the time Isaiah and Mildred there waste walkin across the yard with them forkfuls a straw over their shoulders, they could lift it easy onto an elevator.'

'He's tryin to do us out of a job, gaffer,' Isaiah said. 'He'll ave you pay us to be a sleepin.'

No one else joined Isaiah in making light of the matter.

'Ask Mister Doddridge,' Enoch said. 'I believe he's got one a they on Wood Farm.'

The other farmer, Doddridge, looked towards Amos Tucker and said nothing. 'We can think on this and talk of it another time,' Amos said, rising to his feet.

'Tis a pity to waste the opportunity to ask yon Crockers' opinion.'

'Someone might wish to tell my brother,' Albert said, 'to shut his rattle.'

Enoch made his hand into a fist and rapped the knuckles against his own skull loudly. 'Like fuckin iron,' he said. 'Nothin can get in through it.'

No ideas. No nothin.'

'Enough,' Amos said.

'That is if he don't wish me to shut it for him,' Albert said.

The boy walked to the door of the shed and looked out on to the yard. The farmer's chickens had come in number and were gleaning the rickyard of loose grain. They pecked at the ground with swift efficiency. Their strutting posture gave the impression they were helping themselves to what was theirs by right, even as they couldn't believe their luck, and must take what they could before their luck ran out. Above them, sparrows snaffled what they could find on the ledges and in the crevices of the machines. Leo ran out of the shed, and the rooster and hens scattered in great and noisy affront.

In the afternoon Dunstone the old lad appeared. 'What can I do?' he asked. 'What can I do?' Amos Tucker told him he could help the boy carry water. Leo found him another bucket and they worked in tandem, Dunstone following close after him and telling him of all he had seen in his peregrinations about the estate that morning. 'I seen horses on Home Farm bigger an your'n here,' he said. 'Bigger an I ever seen. I seen one a the gardeners up at the big house sneakin a fag in the glasshouse. With one a they maids. Smokin away they was. Wouldn't give me one neither.'

Late in the afternoon Amos Tucker's two younger daughters came into the yard with the farmer's terriers. As the corn rick grew smaller so rats began to rush out, into the net Fred had secured there. The terriers caught most of them. Others the girls clubbed with wooden cudgels. One small pink rat Nellie Tucker held by its tail and brought over to Leo. 'Here,' she said. 'Would you like me to put this feller down your shirt?'

Leo looked at her, neither advancing nor retreating, neither smiling nor grimacing, nor saying a word. Then Dunstone saw the baby rat squirming as if a puppet hung from a string. A brief squeak issued from him. He turned around and scuttled off, and Nellie ran after him, caterwauling.

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March

The boy walked home from school. He slowed, let the others carry on ahead, chattering, bickering. None looked back.

A pair of geese came flying low, over the hedge, landing in the meadow by the river. He'd noted a couple there this morning. There were many more now, standing in pairs apart from each other. Waiting. Like celebrants gathering for some country baptism, or mass wedding. Perhaps when the priest of their kind and his cackling acolytes and the matronly geese with the food arrived, the shy creatures would begin to mingle.

He passed Sedge Field with Isaac Wooland's dairy herd of Ruby Reds. Red Rubies. He stopped. The cows, some twenty or twenty-five of them, stood close to one another, jostling, by the hedge where it curved some thirty yards along from the gate. He climbed up on to the second rung and leaned over and watched. They might have been a crowd penned in, yet the whole of the field around them was empty. The cows were silent. Their udders were full. They chewed the cud. Leo climbed over the gate. One of the cows looked at him then looked away but did not move. He squatted and peered in amongst their legs. There was something there, he was unsure what. Some shapeless entity. He stared, waiting for his brain to come to an interpretation, even if erroneous. A conjecture. There were two cylindrical shapes, close together. It dawned on him that he was gazing at the soles of a pair of boots.

Leo rose up off his lean haunches and walked slowly forward. He did not know cows, or have any feeling for their actions or their characters. He couldn't talk to them. As he reached the herd one of them let out a long mewling groan. He had no idea of its meaning. Threat. Lament. They were blank animals to him.

'Git on,' he said. 'Shift it.'

They took no notice. Perhaps they couldn't hear his voice. They smelled of soft bovine ordure and herbage and something sour. He had no stick with him, to beat them on their rumps and force a way through. Then the one that had lowed did so again, and she walked lazily away, past the boy towards the middle of the empty field, her udders swaying. Another followed her example, and a third, and a fourth. Gradually the whole herd dispersed from this odd spot. Leo waited for them to depart. None of them stepped on Isaac Wooland but walked delicately around his prone figure. The last one left stood above him, leaning her long neck down and licking his face of its sweat. She looked up, abruptly startled to find herself alone, faced by this son of man who stood erect, and stumbled away after her brethren.

Leo kneeled down beside the stockman. A strange choice of place to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. He prodded Isaac's shoulder. He lifted the man's hand but when he let it go it fell back limply. Isaac's jaw was half-covered in greyish bristles, inexpertly shaven. The flesh of Isaac Wooland's dead body was still soft and warm. He must have died minutes before. Perhaps he was still dying when Kizzie and the others passed by on the other side of the hedge, all children's gibberish and blether.

They fetched a cart and the boy brought them to the spot. They stood considering Isaac's body. Albert lit his pipe. Enoch looked at the herd of cows who had moved to the far side of the field, and shook his head. They were like a gang of criminals who would protect the guilty one amongst them. Amos Tucker stood by the body and, putting his hands on his knees for support, leaned forward and studied Isaac's face. Leo could see plainly

now where he had been kicked on the left side of his head, for in death a bruise was spreading, yellow, purplish, around his eye and cheek.

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April

The day was unseasonably warm and all life girded and roused its sleeping self. On haw and wild fruit trees blossom sprayed, countless posies offered to the boy's passing sight. The wind brought petals down upon him. On an empty pasture the dew had identified spider webs laid across the grass, an incredible multitude of them, closely packed, each trap its own discrete squarish parcel of territory. Without the dew he would not have seen them. One phenomenon of nature had made another visible. For whom? The passing boy. What if he had not passed but taken a different route across the estate? What then? He did not know. Would the webs not have lain clear but unobserved by man? Birds looked down from on high but he did not believe it interested them unless they wished to swoop low and nick an insect struggling in a web for themselves.

The birds were swallows. They came to and from a barn over to the side of the track. They must be nest-building in the eaves yet they did not all fly off to the woods or down to earth for materials. No, many rose up into the sky. Some he eyed and tried to keep in sight but they grew minute and then were lost to him. Perhaps there existed some other realm up there in the heavens. A mirrored image of this one, with gravity working the other way, and the swallows by going up from this world came down in that one and gathered beakfuls of mud and brought them back again to make nests on earth. Why? He pondered the matter and in time decided

that there were no humans in that otherworld, and so no buildings with their overhanging roofs and jutting timbers creating the places for their habitations such birds preferred. That was why they returned. So Leo amused himself.

They flew too high and fast for swallows. It was too early in the year for swifts yet that they were. Here already. He stopped. They beat their wings in hectic blurs then let them rest, arching out from their bodies like scything blades, and sliced through the invisible wind. They were black in the sky though he knew their feathers were brown. They veered and wove at such speed it took concentration just to watch them. Their brains were minuscule yet they avoided collisions. It was not possible to understand how. They lived their frantic lives and soon were spent. They were no doubt devouring insects but were they also playing, cavorting together in the air at their insane speed? He watched one chase another and to his surprise alight upon it. For some seconds the two became a single four-winged bird gliding. Then they decoupled and with their madly flurried wings were parted and went their separate ways. Would the two of them know each other again? What had he just seen?

*

At the gamekeeper's cottage Mrs Budgell said his brother was not there but that Sid had left something for him. He stayed by the back door while she fetched it. The chains by which Aaron Budgell's spaniels were tethered lay unused upon the ground like the rusty skins of metallic snakes. Mrs Budgell came back bearing a tray made of short lengths of hazel switch interwoven and tied with string. She walked one careful step at a time, eyes on the precious cargo. Upon the rustic tray was the small, delicate skeleton of some unknown creature. She handed the tray to Leo, who took it with equal anxious care.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

Mrs Budgell frowned. ‘Bones,’ she said.

‘Does thou know what creature owned them?’ he asked.

She regarded the fragile skeleton as if for the first time, tilting her head this way and that. ‘It don’t look like nothin I seen.’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t know nothin about animals,’ she said. ‘Don’t wish to neither. My old man knows moren enough about em for the two of us. I don’t bother him about is animals and he don’t bother me about my ouse.’ Mrs Budgell turned and stepped inside and half-turned back again, closing the door behind her. Leo set off, carrying the tray with its delicate cargo. He heard the door open and Mrs Budgell’s voice call to him. ‘Sid,’ she yelled. She must have known he did not carry the same name as his brother but could not remember his and made do with the closest to hand. Leo turned.

‘It come back to me,’ she said. ‘Yon brother said to tell you tis a weasel.’

Leo thanked her. She returned inside once more.

As he walked along the track through the wood Leo studied the skeleton. The leg-bones were bent in a crouch all ready to spring upon its prey, as if animals continued their savage choreography of hunter and hunted in a spectral limbo after death. The weasel’s long spine continued past its pelvis for ten or more vertebrae, diminishing in size into its tail. The ribcage was long and voluminous, slung from the spine. Perhaps weasels had long, thin hearts. The feet, upon which the skeleton stood squarely, were built of thin bones that looked as if they could snap like brittle stalks of straw. The head too was long, the skull moulded back far from the sharp-toothed mouth, as if the brain though small was longer, the creature cleverer, than one would have thought.

If he could draw, Leo thought, he should like to sketch this entity. He wondered whether, before God made the creeping things and the beasts of the earth for Adam and Eve on the sixth day, He had spent much of the eternity preceding this world in idle sketching. Designing the animals that would be there on that day as well as all those to come.

To his relief the boy found Herb Shattock in his tack room. The groom sat at his desk, writing in a small book. He must have been scribbling much faster than he appeared to be for he filled two pages and turned them, and did the same again. The boy stood in the doorway. He recalled the tea room at Bampton Fair to which the master had invited him. A waiting woman had brought them a tray with bowls of stew on it. He felt like a parody of such a waiter, bearing this home-made tray and the bones of an animal with no meat upon it.

Herb Shattock's pencil scraped faintly across the pages of his notebook. As the sun moved the boy watched the silhouette of himself enter the room and sidle along the wall. Shattock turned, pencil in hand. He stared at Leo and blinked, then broke into a smile. 'Come on in there, boy,' he said.

Leo came forward and placed the tray upon the desk. The groom stared at it. 'What's this, then?' he said. 'Pole cat?'

'Weasel,' Leo said.

'Aye,' the groom said, studying the extraordinary bones. 'And what do you wish me to do with it?'

'I'd be might grateful if you could give it to the young mistress, Mister Shattock.'

Herb Shattock frowned. He blinked again. Leo looked at the notebook. The words written in pencil were uncommonly large on the page. PRIDE OF GALWAY. HALF HOUR ON THE GALLOP. LINSEED OIL IN CHAFF filled one side.

'Miss Charlotte?' the groom said. 'What's er want with this?'

'I'm not rightly sure, Mister Shattock.'

The groom put the pencil down beside the notebook. 'Did er ask you for it?'

The boy shook his head.

'I'm not a postman, boy.'

'I don't know no one else,' Leo said. 'Well, I do, but they don't like me. I believe her might have an interest in the anatomy of animals.'

Herb Shattock gazed at the boy. ‘I seems to remember bein told that time was, weasels were bring up tame. Kept in the granaries to fend off mice. Don’t know when that stopped.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘Yes, boy, I’ll do that for you.’

‘You don’t ave to say tis from me,’ Leo said.

The groom nodded. ‘Do us a favour in turn.’ He rose. ‘Come with me, boy.’ The chair scraped back on the stone-flagged floor. Herb Shattock walked over to the far wall and lifted a bridle off its hook. ‘Take this,’ he said. He himself carried a small saddle.

Leo followed the groom into the yard and along the block. A lad brushed a horse down yonder, another carried buckets of water. Leo took them in at a glance and kept his head down. The top half of a stable door was open. Herb Shattock half-opened the bottom half and rested the saddle upon it. He entered the box and spoke to the young horse therein. A filly. He reached behind him. The boy passed him the bridle and watched as Herb Shattock fed the bit into the pony’s mouth and passed the bridle over her head and tied the straps, talking all the while in a litany of odd noises, a language issued through his teeth, akin to that of the boy’s father but distinct from it. To each horseman his own voice. He placed the saddle upon her back, crouched down and reached for the girth straps, and tightened them. The pony stood docile and compliant.

Herb Shattock led her out of the yard and down through the trees to the paddock where Leo had watched the girl suppling her roan. This pony was entirely black save for a white blaze upon her forehead. She was similar in stature to the blue roan. Perhaps a little taller, slighter, more elegant.

In the paddock the groom came to a halt. Holding the bridle with his left hand, he reached for the stirrup with his right and turned it away from the saddle flap. The boy stepped with his left foot into a stirrup for the first time in his life and, reaching for the front and back of the saddle, kicked up from the ground, flexed his left thigh muscles and pulled himself up. He swung his right leg over the saddle and sat upon it. He leaned over to

his right and turned the right-hand stirrup as Herb Shattock had and pushed his right boot into it, then sat up and took hold of the reins lying loose upon the pony's neck.

The groom still held the bridle. He rested his other hand upon the boy's knee. 'Lord Prideaux reckons his daughter's done grievin,' he said. 'I've examined this mare. Her's no defects of sight nor wind that I can see, her ain't lame. Her knees is good. I don't think er's a crib-biter nor a windsucker. Not a weaver, neither. I've had one a the lads ride her but my smallest lad's twice the size a Miss Charlotte. You're a sight lighter an her, I should say, you don't weigh much moren your own bones, boy, but you's closer. Would you ride her for me? Take her round, nothin spectacular.'

Leo nodded. Herb Shattock let go of the bridle and walked to the fence. The boy took up the reins and made a clicking sound with his teeth and heeled the pony's flanks. It felt odd to sit upon the saddle and to feel his feet enclosed in the iron stirrups, yet he liked it. The pony walked forward. He trotted her around the perimeter, then when he asked her to speed up she did so instantly and cantered. She was exceedingly obedient. It occurred to him that if he did not give her an order she would stand all day awaiting one. He stopped her and turned her in circles, then figures of eight, one way then the other. When he galloped her it was apparent that she did not have the fearful speed of the colt he'd ridden at Bampton Fair.

Leo brought the mare over to the fence. She stood, blowing hard. Herb Shattock put his ear to her nostrils and listened. Then he studied them closely. The boy asked him what he was looking for.

'Blood,' the groom said. 'If there's bleedin into the lung. But I can't see none.' He stood back. 'What do you think? Is her as accommodatin as her looks?'

Leo nodded. 'I believe so.' He shook his head. 'She does not have the character of the blue roan.'

'That's what I reckoned,' Mister Shattock agreed. 'Tis no bad thing.'

The boy dislodged his feet from the stirrups and dismounted from the horse as if there were no saddle, pivoting from his belly and sliding to the

ground. He watched the groom lead the pony back through the trees, then turned and walked homeward under the noonday sun.

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April

The wheelwright Hector Merry came to the farm to measure Isaac Wooland's body. A bachelor, Isaac had slept in a room in the attic of the farmhouse but his body was laid out in a shed off the dairy. The wheelwright came back out into the yard and conferred with Amos Tucker. The boy could not forget him walking behind his new-wrought waggon, listening to it. Hector asked Amos what kind of timber he wished for the box, they had all sorts down at the sawmill. Oak was the most expensive, of course, and then there was ... The farmer interrupted him.

‘We’ll not have oak for old Isaac, no chance,’ he said. ‘When we had that landslip as I was a boy, I seen a body barely altered from when it were buried eighty year afore.’ Amos grew annoyed. ‘I heard a one yard where bodies buried in the reign a George the third was in the same condition. It ain’t right, Hector.’

The wheelwright nodded. ‘I’ll get you the softest, cheapest planks they got.’

The farmer grew red-faced. ‘It’s not the bloody money and you knows it.’ The boy had never heard him curse before. ‘Tis what is Christian. Earth to earth. Wrap him in a shroud like what they used to and let him return to the soil.’

‘You’ll not want a stone coffin then, Amos, like the master’s family?’

Amos Tucker looked for a moment like he would get angrier still. But then as if the fire within him had been abruptly dowsed he smiled. ‘Let they rich folk dishonour their dead as they wish,’ he said.

‘Lined with lead and all,’ said Hector Merry.

‘Aye, a slow and sorry putrefaction.’

The coffin carrying Isaac Wooland’s body was borne into the church by four Sercombes: Albert and Fred, Enoch and Herbert. It was customary for six men to bear the box but in such case Ernest Cudmore would perforce be one of them and the little shepherd would have to take the weight not on his shoulders but holding it high above his head. Amos Tucker declared that he’d not have people laughing at the sight nor trying all too clearly not to at his stockman’s funeral.

Behind the coffin, the priest led his curate and servers. They followed as for every service in their customary order up the aisle and walked solemnly to their places like horses into the stables.

The master and his daughter sat in their pew at the front. Her dowager ladyship no longer attended church nor was known to leave the big house. Amos Tucker sat beside his shepherd. Leo sat between his mother and his sister Kizzie. His father and brother joined them.

The priest was a man of ill humour, cranky like a prophet of the Old Book, grimly disposed towards the dim and recalcitrant members of his flock, the villagers’ own Ezekiel. His voice was mesmerising. The boy was obliged to listen. There was no choice. He spoke in his priestly voice. He read from the Good Book: “I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I offend thee not in my tongue. I will keep my mouth as it were with a bridle, while the ungodly is in my sight.

“I held my tongue, and spake nothing. I kept silence, yea, even from good words, but it was pain and grief to me.

“My heart was hot within me, and while I was thus musing the fire kindled. And at the last I spake with my tongue.

“Lord let me know mine end, and the number of my days.””

They kneeled down to pray, and rose to sing a hymn.

*Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord,
At the break of the day.*

The boy listened to the voices around him. His father sang loud and out of tune. Fred trailed off at the end of every line. Their mother sang quietly and sweetly. Only Kizzie sang well, her voice soaring over the heads of those in the pew in front of them, towards the altar.

*Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord,
At the end of the day.*

They buried the box in the graveyard and Ernest Cudmore threw down the first handful of soil upon it. They committed the stockman's body to the ground.

“In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ,” the vicar proclaimed. His voice broadcast across the yard and brooked no argument. “Who shall change our vile body, that it may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.”

Many repaired to the estate and Manor Farm. Amos Tucker's wife and daughters had prepared a feast. Men spoke of the departed. Amos said that when he was a boy Isaac told him how he hated hedgehogs, or fuzz pigs as he called them, for they sucked the milk from cows resting in a field.

Isaiah Vagges asked if they minded the time when Isaac kept a billy goat with the herd, to keep illness from attacking the cows. Ernest Cudmore said that must have been long ago, before his time. He said that when he first tended sheep as a lad, the master and his brother and sister were sent off a morning, before their breakfast, to walk amongst the flock, for sheep's breath was known to ward off consumption.

Amos said that in the past there had been many strange beliefs, for men were credulous. Ernest Cudmore said he still believed it. Amos asked if anyone recalled when the cows got into a field of kale and they had to tip the milk into the river for it was tainted.

'I thought he fed them cattle on kale?' Fred said.

'Aye, and mangels too, in moderate amounts. But the best food turns to poison. Too much of anythin's no good.'

'Don't tell the ladies that, gaffer, for pity's sake,' Herbert said, and the first laughter of the day was heard.

The boy found his father outside, by the wall of Mrs Tucker's garden, conversing with Moses Pincombe, the horse quack or obstetrician, who had attended Miss Charlotte's dying roan. He was the only man outside the farm his father spoke to beyond the briefest repartee demanded by human society. They spoke of Jonas Sercombe, Albert's father, with whom Moses Pincombe had been friends from boyhood. They spoke of horses, of their characters or odd things they had done.

Herb Shattock the master's groom came out and joined them. Each man wore his good black suit. Albert smoked his pipe. Herb rolled a cigarette. He said he'd a horse, a hunter the master had had sent over from Ireland, but it was a bad one. He did not want to tell Lord Prideaux that he'd been had, but he could see no alternative if the horse could not be domineered. Unless Albert would care to take a look, and perhaps Moses too?

The boy saw his father raise an eyebrow and the old man nod, then without a word the men turned and walked out of the garden and onto the track across the estate towards the stables of the big house. Moses

Pincombe limped along with the aid of a stick, and the other two took their pace from his. Albert, the tallest, walked with a rolling gait, swaying all the way up from his ploughman's half-ruined ankles. The boy's father was a broad-shouldered, rangy man, his body hard, bony and muscular. Herb Shattock was shorter, stouter.

The three men walked away, in their black suits. The boy heard his name called from the house. He did not look back but ran after the horsemen.

They stood outside the loose box gazing at the horse. 'He looks so peaceful, don't he?' Herb Shattock said. 'He near enough killed my best young groom two days past. We could a had a pair a funerals this day.'

Leo squeezed between his father and Herb Shattock and looked over the bottom half of the stable door. The horse was a chestnut gelding, tall and hefty, a hunter halfway to being a carthorse, the boy reckoned.

'A course I don't have my waistcoat,' Albert said. He meant that he did not have the tiny bottles and tins hidden in its pockets.

'When I was young,' Moses Pincombe said, 'I would a gone in there with a twitch stick and hit im hard between the ears.' He turned to Albert. 'Can you believe that?'

Herb Shattock said, 'Surely you ain't past it, Moses?'

'I'd never do that now,' Moses Pincombe said. 'Even as I could.'

'I'll deal with him,' Albert Sercombe said. 'If you talk to im while I do, Moses.'

'I don't wish neither a you to get clobbered,' Herb said. 'I'd rather shoot im where he stands.'

'No,' said Moses. 'I'll talk to him.'

The boy felt his father's large hand upon his back, patting him, twice. He looked up but his father was studying the horse, then he followed Moses Pincombe inside. He pushed shut the door behind them.

'Come along now, old fellow. Come along, chap.' Moses did not whistle or blow through his teeth, as the boy's father or Herb Shattock did, but

spoke to the horse as he would to a man, in the English language. Leo wondered why his father did not. ‘There you are, old boy, there you are, no need to fret nor to worry about us, we idn’t goin to harm ye.’

The horse fidgeted and trembled and it looked to the boy as if could it run out it would. It seemed about ready to break into a frenzy: it began to whinny and snicker, and shivered as if the men had brought in with them a blast of cold wind. The old man stood close and spoke to the horse and seemed to calm it, a little, or at least restrain it in its state of agitation.

Albert had meanwhile reached the horse’s flank, on the left-hand side. He had somehow acquired lengths of rope. He took up the gelding’s forefoot and bent its knee until the hoof faced upwards and all but touched its body. He slipped a loop of rope over the knee and up until it was drawn between the hoof and the pastern-joint. He pulled the rope taut and tied it. Moses Pincombe talked to the chestnut gelding the whole while. The horse stood now on three legs, unable to move, nonplussed.

Again the boy felt a pat upon his back, this time from Herb Shattock. He kept his eyes on his father. Albert Sercombe squatted, leaned under the horse and grasped hold of its other front hoof, the right one. He picked it up and lifted it, pulling it towards him as he came back out from under the gelding’s belly. The horse toppled slowly and inexorably over away from his father and came to rest lying on its side.

‘There, there, young fellow, you’s in no danger, you’s in good hands.’ The old man kept talking to the horse, which lay there, trying but unable to get up. It did not seem to understand why it could not do so. After a while the horse ceased struggling and began to neigh loudly. Leo saw his father remove his large handkerchief from his pocket. He folded it carefully from corner to corner then over itself, making as long a bandage as he could. Then he knelt beside the gelding’s head. He closed its mouth, and tied the handkerchief around its jaw, gagging the animal. Moses Pincombe spoke the whole time. ‘There be nothin to worry about, old boy, there be no worries at all. Empty thine head, my boy, and calm yourself.’

Albert Sercombe walked to the door, which Herb Shattock opened for him. The two men stood once more side by side, watching the horse now passive on the floor and the old man leaning on his stick, bent over and speaking soothing words.

'I heard a such a method a castin a horse,' said the groom. 'I never seen it till now, Albert. And to a big un. I wouldn't know as you could do it.'

The boy's father shook his head. 'Neither did I,' he said. 'Give Moses another couple or three minutes, I reckon, and he 's yours.'

Sure enough, the old man shortly stood up and limped over to the door. He nodded to the groom. 'Try him now,' he said.

Herb Shattock walked slowly into the box. He stood over the horse and studied it. He looked back at the men and the boy leaning against the lower door. 'Talk to him in your own tongue,' Moses Pincombe said. Herb nodded and turned to the horse and made the whistling sounds through his teeth that the boy had heard before. Leo looked at the horse. It was strange but in this hobbled and humiliated state the power of it was even more evident than when it was standing. The force of it seemed somehow ready to explode from its supine form. Herb Shattock kneeled down and with trembling fingers untied the gag of Albert's handkerchief. The gelding made no noise. Herb scabbled a foot or two on his knees and untied the rope from around the horse's left front hoof and pastern.

'Do you think he 's part-way tamed?' Leo heard Moses Pincombe whisper. 'You reckon?'

'I wouldn't like to say,' his father replied.

Herb Shattock kept whistling to the horse as he bound up the handkerchief and the rope in his hands and without looking behind him tossed the bundle towards the door. Albert caught it. Leo felt something press upon him and turned to see that one of the grooms and two of the stable lads had joined them in the doorway. He looked across the yard and saw another walking towards them. He turned back to the box.

The horse lay unmoving. Perhaps it did not realise that it was now unshackled or perhaps it had conceived a liking for this pose. Slowly it

unbent its left front leg. It rolled over from its right side to its front, and put both forelegs forward. Its hind legs it brought up under its body when it rolled over. It now pushed itself from its hind quarters, forwards and up. Herb Shattock took a step or two backwards. Perhaps he did so to give the horse the room it needed. He kept whistling and, now that the horse stood upright on its four hooves, stepped towards it. The groom held in his left hand a halter. Leo had not seen him carry it with him nor lift it off a hook on the wall. It was something Herb had conjured. He put the halter on the gelding and the horse let him do so. Then he turned and walked towards the door, leading the horse, who came with him.

Albert opened the door of the box. He and Moses and the boy and the others stepped aside. The lads stood in disbelief. Others had joined them. One shook his head slowly, from side to side. They watched their head groom lead the big savage hunter, now docile as some gentle old cob, out of the yard and down towards the training paddock. Herb said something to one of them, who ran to the tack room. He came out with a saddle and a bridle and trotted after the groom and the chestnut gelding.

One of the lads turned to another. ‘If I hadn’t seen it with these eyes here,’ he said, pointing with the index fingers of both hands at his own eyes, ‘I wouldn’t a reckoned on that in a hundred years.’

April

At breakfast Albert Sercombe asked the boy if he had time before school to lead the two-year-old filly to the stables. This was the older sister of the colt Leo had brought to halter. The morning was wet with a steady drizzle and the boy walked with hunched shoulders to the field. He stood on tiptoe and was able to reach over the filly's ears. Perhaps the rain rendered her docile but she let him slip the halter over her head and tie it and lead her to the yard.

His father was waiting. He took the rope from the boy and backed the young mare into a stall. He removed the halter and replaced it with a bridle of a kind Leo had not seen before. Its bit was made of wood, but with pieces of iron attached. The carter fed the bit into the filly's mouth. Until this moment all she had taken was food and so she chewed the bit expectantly. Albert reached towards a pillar on one side of the stall and took hold of a length of string hanging there. He pulled the string towards him so that it ran through his fingers and he tied the end of it to the bit ring on that side of the strange bridle. Then he walked around the filly and on her other side did likewise.

The boy's father walked out of the stable without a word. Leo watched him from the doorway, already calling orders to Herbert, embarking upon the day's labour. The boy turned to the filly. She was preoccupied with the strange mouthful she'd been given. He watched her champing at the bit.

In time, bubbles of saliva appeared at the sides of her mouth from the lather her chewing provoked. It seemed to Leo that she must have worked out by now that the odd shapes were not edible, but their very presence upon her tongue meant she could not stop steadily chomping at them. He knew he had already watched her too long. He turned, left the stable and trotted out of the yard.

On the morning following, the boy fetched the filly and put her to the mouthing bridle himself, and tied the string to the bit rings. On the third morning he did likewise. The fourth day was Saturday and his father put a normal bridle on the filly and harnessed her with the collar. He tied a light rope to the nose band and led her to the paddock. It had not rained for two days, yet there was moisture in the air still and dew upon the grass and the morning was a cool one.

Leo watched his father stand in the grassy dirt and ease the filly in circles around him. Periodically he changed direction. After a while he gestured to his son with a flick of his head to join him. Leo climbed between the fence poles and walked over. His father handed him the rope and walked away, out of the paddock and back to the yard, without once looking behind him.

Leo walked the filly in circles for an hour or more. Whenever he felt giddy he changed direction. Sometimes he walked backwards and the filly altered course and came with him. At other times he walked towards her, or to one side or the other. Each time she responded. He told her what he was doing, and what he wished her to do, but he did not think that accounted for her responsiveness. What issued from his lips was only sound for her, with the vaguest meaning, but he understood that they were both learning, for this, it seemed, was to be the language in which he wished to speak as a horseman. With words, like Moses Pincombe, along with some occasional whistling and clicking of his teeth taken from his father and Herb Shattock.

There was another whistle. He turned to see his cousin Herbert opening the gate of the paddock, and waving him over. As Leo led the filly through the gateway Herbert said, ‘Don’t get carried away, boy. You know you won’t be allowed to work with your old man.’

Leo nodded. Herbert secured the gate and jogged to catch up. ‘Why he’s learnin you and not me when I’m is lad ...’ Herbert did not finish the sentence. He did not look at the filly, to see how she was taking to the bit, yet his jaws worked as if he mouthed one of his own. ‘You can’t tell im nothin, can you?’ he said. ‘He thinks you’s the bee’s knees, boy. You know why, don’t you?’ Herbert asked. He did not wait for Leo to respond but answered the question himself. ‘You reminds him of himself, that’s why.’

His father was waiting for him. Albert took the heavy collar off and had Leo wash the filly down with salt water, to stop her skin breaking from the friction of the harness.

On the afternoon following, a Sunday, they fitted the collar on the filly again and also reins. Leo watched his father walk the young mare around the paddock, working from behind. He called her forward. He pulled both reins to stop her, or on either side to turn her. This time he did not invite Leo to take a turn but had him watch the whole session. Later they took the filly back to the field and let her out with the others. The carter filled his pipe and watched the horses graze the new grass. The boy watched too.

‘Every horse has its own character,’ his father said. ‘No different from men. Some you’ll have to break, some like this one here you won’t need to. But they all has to have a good mouth. You wants to be able to hold them with light hands. Like this, boy.’ Albert put the stem of the pipe between his teeth and stepped behind his son. He pinched the shoulders of Leo’s jacket, two fingers on each, and tugged gently on one side, then the other. ‘See?’ he uttered between his teeth. He let go of the jacket, and took the pipe from his mouth. ‘Hold them with yon finger. You don’t pull a horse, you guides it.’ He put the pipe on the flat top of a fence post, and

took hold of his son's hands, turning them one way and another, examining them. 'What a young horse needs, boy,' he said, 'is light hands. A man with light hands and plenty a confidence. And that is about all there is to say on the matter.'

On the days of the week following Leo ran out of school and to the yard. He trained the filly with plough-traces then full cart harness, walking her round the paddock. Then they yoked her to a heavy log and had her drag it to get the feel of pulling a weight.

On the following Monday Leo watched his father and Herbert harness the filly alongside Pleasant the old mare, and so begin her working life.

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May

The boy walked from the keeper's cottage. He heard a sound and looked up. Three geese flew idly above. They passed over him and on. The sound they made was like that of old friends talking to one another, sightseers commenting on the view below. Perhaps on the weather, too, for it was the warmest day of the year by far. He cradled the skeleton against his chest with his hands as he walked. He believed it was that of a hawk, but it may have been a kestrel, his brother was not sure. A raptor of one kind or another.

He walked slowly through the wood. The sun forced its way here and there through the burgeoning canopy of leaves. He was certain that she would like this one, though he had heard nothing of her response to the others. If there had been one at all. For all he knew she might have thrown each one away at once. Most of this bird's bones were contained in a ball of ribs and wings. Its sternum hung forward and was shaped like the keel of a boat. He wondered if ducks had sternums in like construction, and stopped to have another look at it. The spine extended from the rib-cage to the head, at the front of which the skull was hooked into a bony beak.

At the opposite end of the bird's skeleton, beyond the long, thin legs, with their femurs and tibias and fibulas, along with a third limb it did not share with humans, were four large and terrifying claws. Sharp talons of bone.

The boy heard the sound of drumming. It seemed to come from inside his skull. Then he realised it was outside, and increasing in volume. Approaching him. Not drumbeats but footsteps. A momentary silence.

The runner launched himself. Leo fell, winded, to the ground. He could not move. He lay on his front. He tried to get his breath back but his assailant lay on top of him, a dead weight. He pushed up from his elbows and purchased a little room for his chest, and was able to inhale in short panting gasps, precious pockets of air into his lungs. For a moment it seemed that his attacker was doing exactly the same, mimicking him for amusement, but then he heard laughter and understood that he or she was giggling.

The boy summoned what infuriated power he possessed and, with a grunt like that of a pig, made an enormous effort to push himself and that other upon him off from the ground. He did so, and got to his hands and knees, breathing hard. There Leo took stock and tried to work out what to do next. He propelled himself forward, a four-footed animal, but the other simply rode him. She found this as funny as before, so he stopped, only to feel himself rolling or rather being rolled over. Now he lay above her, his back upon her front, her arms around his neck, her legs wrapped around his torso. He could feel her chest rising and falling beneath him as she laughed. A chuckling spider. He was a fly, immobilised. Breathing hard. His sweat slid into his eyes. In time she was still.

‘You are so light, Leo Sercombe,’ she said by his ear.

Her arms were tight across his throat. He could not speak, but even if he could there was nothing to say. The master’s daughter unwrapped her arms and legs from around his body and released him. He rolled off her and rose and stumbled over to where she’d first jumped him. The skeleton lay amongst twigs and dead leaves and grassy undergrowth, all in pieces, where between them they had crushed it.

The girl came over and stood beside him. ‘It was you,’ she said. ‘I thought it was. Who else? Shattock wouldn’t say, but I knew it.’

She turned to him and must have seen his desolation. She knelt down and picked amongst the fragments, studying one broken or dislocated bone after another, as if calculating the order in which she intended to glue them together.

‘Hawk,’ he whispered.

‘I think they’re beautiful, Leo Sercombe.’

He looked at her and she said, ‘No, it’s true, I promise.’

Leo looked back down at the shattered skeleton. It was as if the bird had suffered a second mortality in this desecration of its bones. Or that he grieved for it now as he had not before.

‘I promise,’ the girl said again. ‘Come. I’ll show you.’

She took his hand and they walked through the sun-spangled wood. They came out of the trees and crossed a patch of rough lawn towards a brick wall. They were observed from on top of the wall by a peacock, its iridescent feathers draped over the bricks like a long dress. The girl opened a wooden door set into the wall and as they stepped through she let go of his hand.

‘Follow close behind me,’ she said.

The walled garden was huge. Only a small section was tended. An old man knelt on canvas sacking, carefully sowing some kind of seed in the earth, and he did not seem to be aware of them passing behind him. Much of the garden was wild, weeds and long grasses rampant. Fruit trees stood along one wall, their branches pinned there like Miss Pugsley’s insects on display in the schoolroom.

Miss Charlotte led him into a greenhouse. Here the air was twice the temperature it was outside, though some panes of glass were cracked or fallen. The air was pungent too with the smell of soil, and other things – vegetation, turpentine, flowers of which sort he could not identify. Large plants. Leo could taste or feel moisture but that did not seem likely, unless it was his own.

In the middle of the greenhouse were some steps, which they descended. The boy looked up and saw through unclear glass the big

house looming above him, and understood as they went through a doorway that they were now beneath it. The cellars smelled dank and musty. They walked along a corridor off which were rooms on either side. Many were empty. Their walls and ceilings had once been whitewashed but it must have been long ago for the paint was flaked and fallen. There were patches of damp from which tiny flowers bloomed. He could not understand how there could be light, murky though it was, but he looked around and saw a long strip of glass panes so covered in moss or algae that all appeared as if inside a pond.

They passed stacks of bottles covered in dust. A room full of furniture: tables, chairs, chests of drawers, beds. It was as if some branch or generation of the master's family had wished to live as certain animals do, underground, only for their successors to abandon the idea. Or perhaps they hadn't. Perhaps they would see some figure that was half human and half badger scurrying away along a darkening passage.

They came to a small door that gave on to an enclosed circular staircase. The girl told him to take off his boots and leave them there. She ascended and he followed. The staircase was narrow; even his bony shoulders brushed its wooden sides periodically. Miss Charlotte climbed fast and he kept up with her, though the stairs went on for an impossible time, as long as any beanstalk. He became dizzy. He could hear her chuckling again above him. Then his head bumped against the backs of her legs. Above them was a roof of dirty glass. She opened a door and poked her head around the frame. One way, then – around the open door – the other. She turned back and reached for his hand and stepped through the door, pulling him up the last stairs behind her. Bending low, he followed her through the doorway.

The room was enormous, larger than the village schoolroom. As large as the nave of the church. Along one side was a fenced-off strip of floor, at the far end of which lay a number of skittles on their sides.

‘The nursery,’ the master's daughter said. ‘Look.’

He followed her to a bookcase. Along its top were the five skeletons he had already passed to her. In front of each was a folded piece of card on which were written, Weasel, Mole, Hare, Shrew, Adder. ‘You see?’ she said. ‘Pride of place, Leo Sercombe. I’m so sorry about the hawk. Stay there. I’m going to have one of the maids fetch us something to eat. Don’t look so fearful, boy! I shall bring it up myself.’

The girl left the room through a different door from the one by which they had entered, and which he could no longer see. He looked about him. Across the room stood a house. It was a model of the big house itself, about the size of the upright piano in the Tuckers’ parlour. He saw that its façade rested on hinges at one side. Carefully he opened it. Inside were many rooms on five levels, all furnished. At the top in miniature was the room in which he now stood, complete with bowling alley, bookcases, a tiny model of the house.

Leo walked to a window and looked out. He could see past the lawns, over crooked fields, across the estate far into the distance. So gods and masters saw the world. Hawks and other birds likewise. Looking down, he saw two people crossing the shingle between house and lawn, toy-like figures. He turned back to the room. He found a box of lead soldiers. From the Boer War of which his father spoke, or some other? There were dolls in various states of undress. Stuffed animals. A table was laid with a dinner service for eight people, with plates, too many items of cutlery, three glasses of differing shapes. All miniature, and covered in dust.

At the far end of the room was a sofa and chairs, as he had seen once in the vicarage. Huge upholstered shapes, like sacks of grain or squashed-up beds. The vicar had sat in one and half disappeared. It had looked as if it might swallow him up while he sat there, reading his Good Book.

Leo walked past the chairs and sat on the sofa, putting a hand out to each side for balance. He now saw a large, almost human-sized doll seated in the armchair directly ahead of him. It was the doll of an old lady, dressed in white ancient lacy threads. Her powdered skin was too wrinkled to be entirely life-like. Her hands in her lap were little claws. Her tiny feet,

far above the ground, were shod in blue slippers. Her cheeks had spots of rouge upon them, which he fancied the girl had daubed there. His sister had but one small doll, passed down from their mother; its body was porcelain, it had a wig made of human hair, and glass eyes. The eyes of this huge doll were dull, perhaps dimmed by its great age. Then they blinked and the boy's heart stopped.

The wizened old lady gazed at him. Leo felt himself pinned to the sofa. He dared not breathe. She blinked again, assessing him, for which she had all the time in the world, before calling for servants to evict him. Leo heard a noise and turned. Miss Charlotte came through the door carrying a tray and he waited. He did not move nor make a sound but he took a breath. She walked over and placed the tray upon the table that stood between the sofa and chairs. 'Milk and biscuits,' she said. 'Oh, I see you've met Great-grandmama.'

The girl sat down next to Leo and offered him the plate. He glanced down and shook his head, returning his gaze to the old woman. She blinked again.

'Great-grandmama lost her mind a long time ago,' the girl told him. 'No one has been able to find it. It's awfully sad. She's outlived all her children. Can you imagine? My grandpa was her youngest son. Great-grandmama had nine children. I sometimes imagine them playing together up here. They're all gone. She should have followed them, but she doesn't know how to die.'

The girl helped herself to a biscuit. She put it between her lips, then opened Leo's left hand, which was clenched into a fist upon the sofa, and placed one on his palm. She took the biscuit from between her lips and bit into it. As she chewed he could hear it crackling between her teeth. He nibbled an edge of his. On his tongue came the taste of lemon.

'We're no longer even sure which century Great-grandmama was born in. Father says that God has forgotten her. He's rather annoyed with Him, actually.'

There were two glasses of milk. The girl took one and rose and stepped over to the huge armchair. She knelt upon the threadbare carpet and held the glass to the old lady's lips, while she put her other hand on her little head and tilted it forward, speaking all the while. 'There we are, Great-grandmama, a lovely sip of milk for you, fresh from the dairy herd.' Like Moses Pincombe to the horse. 'Lovely milk to keep your frail bones from breaking. That's it, Great-grandmama, a little more.'

She broke a biscuit too and fed it to the old dowager countess in pieces, as she might to a tamed bird.

The boy watched, nibbling on his own biscuit. His mouth was dry but he did not take the milk until the girl offered it to him. 'It's yours, Leo Sercombe. Great-grandmama and I will share this one, won't we? And then you had better leave. My governess was downstairs. I have to study German soon.'

Leo drained the glass of milk in one long draught. He wiped his lips. The girl stood up and he did likewise. 'Thank you, Miss Charlotte,' he said.

'My name is Lottie,' she said. 'I cannot bear the name Charlotte. I have a new pony, Leo Sercombe. I should like to show her to you. You could accompany me on a picnic. Can you meet me in the wood, where the hawk bones are, in one week's time?'

Leo nodded.

Lottie turned to the door by which she had come with the tray. 'Now you must go. I believe I can hear her footsteps.'

The boy looked frantically about him.

'Here,' said the girl. She walked over to a panelled wall beneath the eaves. Balling her hand into a fist, she rapped against the panel once. Nothing happened. She did so a second time, a little higher. The panel swung a few inches into the room. The girl opened it fully and the boy stepped through to the narrow staircase. He heard the door click shut behind him as he descended the stairs.

At the bottom he put on his boots. He retraced his steps carefully through the empty cellars, tiptoed into the greenhouse and out to the walled garden. The old gardener was nowhere to be seen. Leo went through the door in the wall, across the rough grass into the wood, and began to breathe easily once again.

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June

The days were long. In the hay meadows the grass was rampant. Albert and Fred came home for tea. They ate a stew of bacon bones and cabbage. Kizzie spoke to her father of school and how Miss Pugsley was driven wild by Gideon Sparke. He would not stop showing off and acting stupid.

‘He’s already known as a twily lad, at his age,’ Ruth said. ‘He’ll have to travel abroad to find work when the time comes.’

‘If he’s fit to work and wishes to,’ said Albert, ‘which I doubt he does.’

Kizzie said that when at last Miss Pugsley lost her temper, she screamed at him and her voice was like that of a tomcat in the night, it was frightening. They were all frightened. And then Miss Pugsley wept.

Leo watched a daddy longlegs walk along the window sill on its six spindly legs, daintily choreographing itself.

‘I hear your Herbert’s in trouble again,’ Ruth told her husband. She named a girl in the next village. ‘I heard she got herself a bastardy order against him. You never told me.’

‘Aye,’ Albert said. ‘You know I ain’t one for gossip. Obliged to pay her a shillin a week. He’s been bendar my ear at every opportunity with his moanin. I’ve ad about as much as I can take.’

‘Tell him he should a studied the matter and worked out the consequences before he had his way.’

‘Don’t think I ain’t, mother.’

Dessert was plums preserved in suet. Fred ate a mouthful and told his mother it was his favourite and she hadn't let him down. She told Fred that Herbert's behaviour stood as a fair warning, a fine lesson, and that he could invite a certain young lady she had heard about to tea any Sunday she should like to come. Fred nodded. Then his sister Kizzie yelped, and reached a hand beneath the table to rub her shin.

Albert said that he'd run into the master's groom Herb Shattock today and they had spoken of their boy Leo here. Herb had asked if when the boy was ready he might fancy becoming a strapper at his stables. Leo looked up but it seemed his father might not have known that he was in the room or had ears to hear.

'I told him, if I have anything to do with it, when he leaves school in two years' time he will have a number of offers. But Herb's would be a good one, probably the best.'

When the men had finished eating, Albert asked his wife if she might read a little more of the newspaper to him later, then Leo accompanied the men back to the farm. They had left the horses eating their evening bait, which as the grazing was so good was minimal and long since consumed. Herbert brought a message for Fred from his uncle, that Enoch had an errand to run and so Fred should put their horses into the field on his own. Leo volunteered to help his brother, while Albert and Herbert took out the head carter's team.

As the four of them came back into the yard, so they saw in the distance Dunstone approaching, in his customary nervous, bustling haste.

'Here comes our evenin entertainment,' Herbert said.

'T'will have to do for you,' Fred told him. To his father and brother he said, 'Lover boy here's forsown women. Forever, he says.'

'Aye,' said Albert. 'Or till Saturday night, whichever comes sooner.'

'Women ain't worth the expense, uncle,' Herbert said. His face often bore a scowl, occasionally as now a half-grin, as if there were some game going on only he knew of.

Dunstone walked into the yard. He wore a pair of trousers that were far too large for him, turned up at the ankles almost as far as his knees, and flapping all around his skinny legs like sails.

‘What you seen, Dunstone?’ Herbert addressed him. ‘Tell us all what you seen in your travels.’

‘I seen im,’ Dunstone said. ‘I seen im.’ He was in a state of agitation, eyes wide, saliva at his lips, but such was not unusual. ‘He’s goin round ’n’ round. Come see,’ he said, tugging at Herbert’s shirt. ‘I’ll show you.’

Herbert took Dunstone’s wrist and pulled his hand loose. ‘I’m busy, old boy,’ the youth told him. ‘I’d love to else.’

‘Goin round in circles,’ Dunstone said, turning to Fred. Albert had already disappeared into the tack room. ‘Come and see.’

‘Show us, old boy,’ Herbert said. ‘How’s it goin?’

‘Round ’n’ round,’ Dunstone said. He trotted, describing the circumference of a circle in the yard, its diameter twice the length of a man. ‘Round ’n’ round,’ he said.

‘Keep goin,’ Herbert goaded him, grinning. ‘Keep goin, old boy.’

‘Round ’n’ round,’ Dunstone said, breathless.

Herbert tried to encourage Dunstone further, but he could barely do so for laughing as the old lad began to stagger.

‘Round ’n’ round,’ Dunstone gasped. ‘I’ll show e.’

Fred too could not contain himself as Dunstone grew more giddy and the circle he trotted ever less certain.

Herbert stepped forward and took hold of Dunstone. ‘That’s enough, old boy,’ he said. ‘You’ve convinced us. Walk in a straight line and us’ll follow.’

Dunstone looked about him with the eyes of a drunken man, took his bearings and set off out of the yard, only to reel giddily, try to right himself, lurch again and fall over. He sat upon the ground, perplexed at what gravity had done to him. Herbert had to lean against Fred to save himself from falling over too, inebriated with the comedy. The two cousins headed for the tack room, Herbert slapping Fred upon the back,

sharing the pleasure of their amusement, which he had both predicted and brought forth.

Leo had stood and witnessed proceedings. He walked over to Dunstone and offered his hand, and though he lacked the size or strength to yank him to his feet he helped the man up. Dunstone stood unsteadily, warily, a hand on the boy's shoulder, not yet quite trustful of his ability to stand upon his own two feet.

'What was it?' the boy asked him.

Dunstone gazed back at him as if Leo had spoken in some foreign tongue.

'What went round in circles?' the boy said.

Dunstone's eyes opened wider. 'Sheeps!' he said. 'Sheeps. I'll show you.'

They walked out of the yard and along the lane past the field with the dairy herd and on towards the pastures below Little Wood. The evening was advanced but much light remained. In the small field was a flock of castrated rams Ernest Cudmore had fattening. One of them was indeed going round in circles, much as Dunstone had demonstrated. The animal did not bleat but bore his plight silently.

'Round 'n' round,' the old lad said. 'Dunstone seen it. Round 'n' round.'

They found Ernest at the farm. Mrs Tucker was working with her daughters in the vegetable garden and pointed to the kitchen door. Ernest had finished work for the day and was inside the house, for like Isaac Wooland he was a lodger. He sat at the table with Amos Tucker, drinking cider from a pewter mug. Though there were hours of daylight outside, in the kitchen it was dim.

'And for what grand reason do you disturb us at our rest?' Amos asked the old lad and the boy. The farmer looked indeed to be in need of sleep. He had been performing Isaac's labour since the stockman's death.

Dunstone described what he had seen, as before, but now he had Leo Sercombe beside him nodding gravely and so was listened to.

Ernest Cudmore shook his head. ‘One a they wethers is got the Gid, gaffer,’ he said. ‘Sounds like.’ He drank what remained of his cider and put down the empty mug upon the table and rose and went out. He fetched certain things from his bothy but the boy did not know what they were for when Ernest Cudmore emerged, whatever he’d chosen was now in the pockets of his jacket. They walked with him to the field, the boy in the middle. He looked to either side and reckoned their trio stood the same height.

When he saw the giddy ram Ernest said that there was no gain in carrying him, the wether should walk by his own means to the place of his doom. Ernest deftly hooked his crook behind one of the animal’s front legs and tripped him. Then he pulled a length of cord from a pocket and tied it around the sheep’s neck and let it stand. He walked back to the farm and the sheep, on a short lead no more than a yard long, followed him.

Dunstone walked at his usual agitated pace in front. Leo walked beside the shepherd and asked him what was wrong with this ram.

‘Some kind a maggot,’ Ernest told him, ‘or worm, has got in and eaten part a his brains. Won’t be no good for nothin now, poor feller. Won’t know to graze.’

Back at the farm Ernest put the giddy sheep in a makeshift stall he made from hurdles on a patch of grass. He explained to Leo that he would despatch the wether in the morning. The boy wondered why he did not do so now. Was it a mercy to give the doomed animal one last night upon the earth or a cruelty to prolong its suffering, if such it was?

‘Gid don’t affect the flesh,’ Ernest told him. ‘Not so far’s I know. I’ll have time to dress him tomorrow, give the gaffer’s wife fresh mutton.’

When they looked around for Dunstone he was gone. ‘Off to secure his sleepin spot,’ Ernest said. He thanked the boy for alerting him and bade him goodnight, and Leo walked home in the fading light.

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June

On Saturday morning at breakfast Leo's father told him that the gaffer needed certain items for his wife collecting from the railway station in Wiveliscombe. Leo could put the filly in the small cart and take her; she was ready for such light work alone, with the right man driving her.

The boy glanced up. His father did not smile but his mother did, as if her son did not already understand the compliment he was being given.

'I cannot,' he said, and all looked towards him, his parents and his brother Fred and sister Kizzie. Albert Sercombe coloured. 'Said I would help Mister Shattock with a horse.'

Ruth Sercombe put her hand upon her husband's. 'Why, that is good news, is it not, father?'

Albert's teeth had clenched. His mouth remained taut as he spoke. 'Aye, and might the boy not have told me so before?'

'Well,' Ruth said. 'Will you apologise to your father, Leo?'

'Sorry, father,' Leo said in his gravelly voice. 'I should a liked to drive the filly.'

'Aye, well, someone else can do it,' Albert said. 'You can go, Fred, later this mornin.'

The boy trotted across the estate. The sky was a clean unblemished blue all around the earth and the day was already warm. He entered the wood and made his way to the spot where the remains of the hawk skeleton were

scattered in the undergrowth. Some parts, he thought, had disappeared. Perhaps ants had studied them and devised some use for certain bones, as tool or decoration, and had their gangs of workers carry them into their hills. Leo wondered whether he had arrived early enough. It must be shortly before or after seven o'clock. She had not specified a time. The idea that he was late and that Miss Charlotte had come here, waited, given up on him, tormented the boy but he remained. He barely moved, but sat upon the ground. Or she had been forced against her will to do something other. Or she had forgotten their arrangement.

The boy studied insects. He found some dandelions and picked them and sucked the nectar from their stems. He heard occasional voices in the distance, and sounds of waggons and horse gear. Of wood being hammered. He listened to birds in the branches above him and attempted to identify them but could not. Wood pigeons he recognised, but smaller birds he knew only by sight, not sound. A cuckoo called, seeming to mock him.

When she came it was not from the direction of the house, as he'd anticipated, but from the stables. She led the pony through the trees. It was already saddled up and across its rump lay a pannier of two bags.

'There you are, Leo Sercombe,' she said. She turned to the pony as if to present it, or make a formal introduction. 'Her name is Blaze,' the girl said. 'You did not have the chance to ride Embarr, but you shall ride Blaze today.'

'Thank you, Miss Charlotte.'

She told him that unless he addressed her as Lottie she would return the pony to the stable and take the picnic in the saddlebags back to the house and eat it with her great-grandmama. Which she did not wish to do.

They walked out of the wood. Then the girl mounted the pony, and the boy walked beside them. The sun was high in the sky and out of the shade of the trees its heat bore down upon them. The boy wore a cap. The girl wore a felt hat in keeping with her boy's attire. Leo could not help wondering how she came by such clothes.

‘My cousins come down at Christmas. The year before last, they were ready to leave, their luggage packed. I found the suitcase that belonged to Eustace and stole his clothes.’

The boy put his fingers on the cheek piece of the pony’s bridle so that he would at least appear to any who might observe them to have some use, as they walked along. ‘Did no one notice the case was empty?’ he asked.

‘I filled it with skirts and petticoats,’ Lottie said. She laughed as if the event were being re-enacted in front of her. ‘Fortunately my cousin Eustace has a keen sense of humour. He also loves to play charades. We repeated this game last Christmas, to keep each other stocked up with the items we prefer, and shall no doubt do so again. No one else knows of this arrangement. Indeed, Leo Sercombe, you are the first person I have told, so you must keep your lips sealed.’

They walked along the track between Home Farm’s wheat fields and through pasture around the hillocks known as the Burial Mounds and on to the gallops. This stretch of turf and dirt was clear for Herb Shattock’s lads had long since exercised the master’s hunters and racing horses. Here they laid the panniers upon the ground and rode the young mare, Lottie first to show Leo how it was done, then graciously inviting him to take her place in the saddle. He did not tell her that he’d ridden this horse already, before she ever had. He did not, however, trust his ability to dissemble if he tried to act surprised or delighted and so he was merely quiet and grave, nodding at the words of advice she gave him. He walked the pony a long while before he trotted her, trying Lottie’s patience. He trotted Blaze back and forth, back and forth, until eventually after much exhortation from the girl he let the pony canter.

One day, Leo thought, he would be up here on these gallops, riding the master’s horses. He would learn all there was to from Herb Shattock, for he was a man the boy believed he could trust like no other. And one day he would take over from him as head groom on the estate, as Lottie Prideaux would take the estate on from her father.

The girl galloped the pony and rode her hard. She brought her over to where Leo stood, and said, panting for breath, ‘That will be enough for now. Put back the saddlebags, please. We shall take our picnic.’

She did not tell him where they were going. They walked from the gallops down into the valley, where willows lined the stream, and up past grazing cows into the bluebell wood, the flowers wilting and faded now. Beyond the wood was bleak terrain, the least cultivated on the estate, scrubby copses, thin soil on rocky ground. Here and there was evidence of human occupation: a stone wall covered with moss; the ruin of a shack; a stairway cut into a slope, its stone steps scalloped by the tread of generations. All the stone for all the buildings hereabouts and further distant was said to have come from these quarries.

The heat was such that Leo had to keep removing his cap to wipe his forehead. They followed a winding metalled lane. The young mare plodded along but then her nostrils quivered and she looked up and snickered with pleasure or anticipation, though she could not yet see what she could smell. Then the vista opened before them and they looked down upon the great pool.

The track led to the water’s edge and the mare drank. They watched her stretch her neck forward and suck the water into her mouth and swallow. The girl said that when Embarr was a foal and first weaned from taking milk from his mother’s teats he did not know how to drink water. He would plunge his mouth in too deep. ‘Or he would try to bite the water, as if it was food,’ she said, smiling.

On this side of the pool they stood now in the shade of trees. From hoof and claw prints in the mud they could see that other animals had come to drink here before them. There was duckweed on the surface of the water. It smelled dank. Midges hovered, blue-green dragonflies flew above them. This was where Leo had collected polliwogs, which he took in a bucket to the school and left for Miss Pugsley. She had never known it was from him. The class watched the tadpoles develop. Frogs and newts now inhabited the pond. There were many bulrushes and also yellow

flowers – flag iris. Leo told Lottie that he and his sister collected its seeds for their mother, which she roasted and used to make a drink for their father they called coffee, though all knew it was no such thing.

They walked out of the shade and circled the pool. On the far side a huge slab of rock jutted out over the water and here Lottie laid the saddlebags. Leo led the filly back away out of the sun. He removed her bridle and replaced it with a halter Lottie had brought and tied the rope to the trunk of a sapling surrounded by grass, and there left her grazing.

The girl unfolded a rug upon the rock and laid their picnic. ‘It’s very simple, I’m afraid,’ she said. Bread, blue-veined cheese, two cold chicken drumsticks, four hard-boiled eggs, tomatoes. A pork pie Lottie cut in half. A flask of lemonade. They ate greedily, then the girl lay back. The rock was hot from the sun such that they could not rest their hands or elbows upon it without scalding them. They spread their jackets and rested on them and still felt the heat in the rock rise through the material.

‘Do you know what my governess said, after she saw you in the stable?’ the girl asked.

Leo looked towards her. Her light brown eyes were hard to see in the shade of her hat brim. He shook his head.

‘She said, “The carter’s boy has an old man’s face.” She does say such stupid things. I have to put up with her, it is one thing Papa insists on. I would so prefer to have a chic Parisian governess, imagine that. Or a Florentine, to teach me the most musical language. But, no. Papa claims that one can think more clearly in German, so I must put up with that Prussian cripple. Do you know what I told her? I said, “He does have a name, the carter’s boy, Ingrid. And so does the carter. The family is called Sercombe.” I did not indulge her with my theory. Do you know what my theory is?’

Leo appeared to ponder the matter a while, before slowly shaking his head once more.

‘My theory is that it’s because you never laugh.’ She peered at him from beneath her hat, as if studying his physiognomy, or colour,

diagnosing some half-hidden malady. ‘Well? Is there a reason for it?’

He let the question sink in. He clearly had no need to answer before considering it fully. His silence was unnerving. Lottie and her cousins and even her governess were quick-witted. The Sercombe boy contemplated the question, regarding it from all sides, revealing a depth or complexity of which she herself had been unaware.

‘A reason for what?’ he said.

‘Why you do not laugh. Or even smile.’

The boy’s blank expression did not alter. She would have thought that it might, if only to prove her wrong. He did not look at her, but gazed at the sun-dazzled water before them.

‘I smiles from time to time,’ Leo said. ‘You just can’t see it.’

‘And why do I not see it?’ she demanded.

Again he was quiet, and peered into the distance. He might have been considering her question, or some other topic entirely unrelated, or perhaps his attention had been distracted by a passing heron.

‘Do horses smile?’ he asked. ‘There’s some say they seen their dog grin, but I ain’t.’

The girl laughed. ‘Leo Sercombe,’ she said, ‘your voice still sounds like it has sand in it.’

They both gazed at the pool. A cloud passed in front of the sun and the water was black.

‘How deep is it?’ Lottie asked.

Leo stared at the pool, as if his gaze if of sufficient concentration could see to the bottom. ‘Old Isaiah Vagges says his grandfather worked here, as a quarryman, but others say the big pool quarry’s not been worked in a thousand years.’ He turned to the girl. ‘Isaiah says he can recall the quarry as a boy and tis the biggest he ever saw.’ Leo lifted his gaze and surveyed the rocky perimeters of the pool. On the far side were sheer cliffs of stone. ‘Mind you, I shouldn’t reckon he’s sin a great many.’

Lottie looked at Leo’s face for signs of amusement, but it remained as blank and solemn as before. ‘Do you know what I think of when I look at

it?’ she said. ‘I think of Avalon. I imagine the sword rising out of the lake.’

Leo looked at her and waited for her to continue.

‘Yes, I know it’s stupid,’ she said. ‘Of course there was no pool here in Arthur’s time. It was never a lake. But it’s so black it makes you wonder what’s in here. When I was small I had a nanny who told me there was a monster down there, a kind of octopus or squid.’

The boy stood up and undid the buttons of his waistcoat, from the top, one by one, and let it slide off. He removed the cap from his head. It floated to the rock he stood on.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

He yanked his braces off his shoulders. They hung at his sides. He undid the buttons of his shirt, pulled the shirt-tails up out of his trousers, shucked it off and bundled it into a loose cotton ball which, bending, he placed beside the waistcoat. ‘One way to find out,’ he said. He sat down and untied the laces of his boots, loosened them, and cupping the heels pulled off one and then the other, followed by his socks, all different shades of black or grey wool where they’d been darned and re-darned.

‘Are you feeble-minded?’ she asked him.

The boy said nothing but unbuttoned his trousers and let them fall around his feet. He grasped his underwear and, bending his knees, slid the grubby garment down his legs then let go and stood up, and stepped out of the wodge of material around his ankles. His shoulders were narrow, his back was long, his buttocks and his legs slender. He looked taller naked than clothed. His neck and hands were brown but the rest of his skin was pale. He took a step towards the water.

‘Wait,’ she said. The girl took off her hat. Her long brown hair fell loose about her shoulders. Then she stood and as he had done divested herself of her clothes, garment by garment the same, waistcoat, shirt, trousers, until she too stood naked. There was a scribble of hair upon her pudenda. Her nipples were larger than his though she had no breasts. The girl squatted on the slab of grey rock and pissed. The boy looked away.

Then he looked back. The water trickled across the rock, staining the granite a darker grey.

Leo turned back and walked over the hot granite and dived forward off the rock. She saw that the soles of his feet were dirty. She saw his boy's penis like that of cherubs or putti she had seen in paintings but not in life. She saw his hands thrown before him as if he'd leaped forward to grab something on the surface of the water. Then he entered the pool and in a moment was gone and the broken surface of the black water recomposed itself as before.

The sun beat down. The birds of the air and the beasts of the earth had found shelter and were silent. She called out his name. It came back to her off the grey cliffs of the quarry. Nothing moved. She looked up, squinting, and scanned the top of the cliffs, and saw a little old man there. Then she blinked and looked again and saw nothing. Another cloud blocked the sun. She turned back to the water. The boy had disappeared and there was no help for it. No explanation. The still black water reflected nothing, it absorbed the light into its darkness and had absorbed him.

Then Leo's head burst up out of the water. As it did so he gasped, as if shocked by what he found in this world above. He shook his head, spraying water from his hair all about him, which speckled the surface of the pool like a tiny cloud of rain. Then he trod water, breathing hard.

The girl stood. Leo watched her. He looked away and then he looked back to see her jumping. She could not dive but wished to make no more of a splash than he, so kept her feet together and arms by her sides. She slid into the water. It was warm, at first, but as she fell the temperature plummeted with every inch. The buoyancy of her body in the water perhaps slowed her descent. For a moment she hovered, and could feel her forehead warm and her toes cold, as if her body had been dipped in the pool as the gauge of some strange thermometer. Then she kicked and rose to the surface.

Lottie could swim but like a dog, working all her limbs below the surface and her head above, facing the way she wished to go. Whichever

way she faced, so she went. She paddled into the pool some yards, then turned around in a slow arc to see the boy.

They trod water. The girl was shivering. ‘Is it cold enough for you, Leo Sercombe?’

The boy tried to speak but found that his teeth were chattering too much and so he nodded.

They looked at each other and around the rocks of the quarry pool and up at the empty blinding sky and back at each other, like conspirators unsure of their purpose.

Leo gritted his teeth and said, ‘I seen a light.’

Lottie turned and paddled back to the rock. She reached up and grasped it and hauled herself out. Leo followed. Drops of water fell from their bodies onto the hot rock and evaporated. They lay naked on their clothes and in the hot sun they soon stopped shivering and their skin dried, they no longer gasped from the cold and the need for air in their lungs. Their hair dried last.

‘What kind of light?’ Lottie asked.

Leo shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’ He stood. ‘I’ll have another look.’

‘Wait.’

‘I’ll not be long.’ He walked to the edge of the rock and this time jumped in with a splash, bobbed on the surface, took a deep breath then spun his body and dived down. He wriggled like a fish to a good depth then righted himself and turned around. He saw it. White light coming from he knew not where. The boy swam towards it. It was a little further than he thought but soon he reached a wall of rock and the light beckoned him into a breach a little wider than himself. He put his arms in front of him and half swam, half pulled himself into and along the tunnel. In some part of his brain he knew the tunnel was becoming more narrow, yet a stronger part ignored it in the light’s allure. Then he was stuck. By his shoulders. He tried to push against the rock in front of him to ease himself backwards but his arms did not work well, and he could get no purchase.

To die was not the end of it, but it had come too soon. His lungs burned. He writhed and pressed and tried to struggle free but he could not. Then he felt something odd. The creature of the deep that Lottie had been warned of had wrapped its tentacles around him. No. Her hands around his ankles. He felt himself being pulled, and coming free, and flowing backwards through and out of the tunnel. She let go of his ankles and he turned and kicked and swam up to the surface. As he rose he had to breathe and only swallowed water. He broke the surface and gulped air. Choking and coughing, he flailed towards the rock and grasped it and floated there, unable to move.

The girl swam around him and clambered out of the pool then turned and took one of his hands and helped him struggle onto the rock. There they lay, once more drying in the sun.

Neither of them said a word for a long time. Perhaps for hours. The heat of the day spent itself and the sun began to wane from its height above them. Eventually the girl rose and began to clothe herself. The boy did likewise. They dressed in silence. Then Lottie gathered the remains of their picnic. She had brought a bar of chocolate but it was melted to a brown liquid. One hard-boiled egg remained, a crust of bread, one tomato. Blue-veined cheese, which like the chocolate had melted. All the food she tossed into undergrowth for insects to feast on.

They did not speak. Leo fetched the pony, and tied the bags to the saddle. They walked slowly, one each side of the horse, back the way they had come. Up the winding metalled track, across the scrub and out of the quarried land, through the fading bluebell wood, into the valley of willow trees along the stream. Leo walked on the left-hand side of the horse, his hand once more upon the cheek piece of the bridle. They walked along the gallops, across pasture round the Burial Mounds, then through the wheat fields. There at last they stopped, for the stables were not far distant.

The girl walked around the front of her pony. Leo let go of the bridle and stepped back. He found it hard to look at her. She evidently felt

likewise for she fussed with the bridle, checking the straps as if they might have worked loose.

He spoke to the back of her head. ‘You saved my life, Miss Lottie.’

The girl gripped the saddle and put her foot in the stirrup and, flexing her leg twice, sprang up from that foot and mounted the pony. She looked down at Leo from under the brim of her hat and smiled. Then she turned the pony and heeled her and within a few yards they were cantering away towards the stables.

Leo walked home across the estate by the same route along which ten or eleven hours earlier he had run. A light breeze had blown up from the direction of the coast and as he walked below the line of poplars their leaves shimmered and whispered to him. A man he recognised but did not know by name passed him at the corner of Home Farm and walked on.

The boy knew some things and others he did not. He was a carter’s son and always would be, even after he became a horseman of whatever mettle himself. This he knew.

Had God shone that light or had the Devil? This he did not know. Had not God known Leo even before He formed him in his mother’s womb? Before he was born had He not sanctified him, and all others too? Was He not the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last? He wished to show the boy His power and His mercy.

Or had Satan been at work, tempting him with what would most draw the boy, which was not the light but his own desire to see it for himself, no matter what. Or perhaps neither was present at the moment of his deliverance. The light was some phenomenon of nature he might usefully study, a riddle to solve. And it was simply his good fortune that the girl had followed him down into the cold water.

As he approached the cottage Leo saw to his surprise that the big new waggon stood outside, Pleasant and Red in the traces. The waggon was piled high with what? As he came close he could see that it was furniture. And then he recognised his mother’s dresser from the parlour, denuded

though it was of the blue and white china. His narrow bed and that of Fred stacked one upon the other. The kitchen chairs including his father's wooden armchair. He could not comprehend the spectacle. His sister Kizzie came around the far side of the cottage carrying gardening implements, a fork, a hoe. She stowed these in a space in the bed of the waggon. Turning, she glimpsed her brother. Her hand flew to her mouth and she ran into the cottage.

Leo walked through the open front door. The parlour was empty, and but for a broom leaning against a wall the kitchen likewise. The sight was strange, comical. As if someone was pulling his leg. Yet he knew this was not possible. The cottage was larger, empty, than he would have believed it to be. It was dowdy, in need of fresh paint, and the rooms were misshapen. He looked at them uncluttered and saw that walls curved and bulged, timbers were crooked, floors uneven.

The house smelled of dust and charcoal, as if the furniture itself had been imbued with a homely scent, now gone. Leo climbed the stairs. The three bedrooms were emptied likewise. Only flaky debris on the wooden floorboards. If it had not been for the waggon outside he would have thought he'd been hurled out of time, many years into the future.

He heard heavy footsteps on the wooden stairs. His father rushed into the room Leo had shared with his older brother.

'What have you done?' Albert Sercombe yelled, advancing across the boards. 'What have you done, you little bastard?'

He punched his son on the side of his head and the boy went down.

'You little fucker. You stupid little bastard.' He kicked the boy. Leo curled up to protect himself and felt his father's boot on his back, his thighs, his buttocks.

'You ruined us all ... your mother ... all I've done, in ruins,' his father yelled. He kicked his son as if to emphasise certain words.

Leo scrabbled to all fours and stumbled to the door. His father pursued him. He staggered along the landing but at the top of the stairs Albert caught him at the back of his legs and he tripped. The cottage became a

toy flung by a giant. It tumbled about him, banging his bones. At the bottom of the stairs he looked up groggily and saw his father coming down after him, and he crawled into the kitchen. The broom leaned against the wall. Albert grabbed it and struck his son. Leo crumpled and fell once more. He begged for mercy but none came. His father beat him with the broomstick.

There were voices. Whose he did not know, except for his father's saying, 'I'll kill him. I'll kill him.' But he was no longer being hit.

The voices went away. Leo lay upon the floor. His mouth was full of blood. He opened his lips and the blood poured out. He could hear groaning. He realised it came from himself.

Leo heard his mother's voice. He understood that she was weeping and pleading but his father told her to come away, to leave him.

He tried to sit up. He could not see well, for some reason. He saw someone come in and heard himself whimpering. It was not his father. Fred knelt beside him. His father yelled, 'Leave him, I said,' but his brother stayed. He had a jug of water. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and balled it into his fist and dipped his hand in the water. He brought out the handkerchief and wrung it out and applied it gently to his brother's face. With his other arm he held Leo sobbing against him.

'Dunstone come into the yard,' he said quietly. 'All atremble. Herbert asked him what he'd sin. Herbert told Uncle Enoch. Enoch went directly to the manor.'

Fred cleaned his brother's face as he spoke and told him how fast it had all happened.

'The master had no choice, see,' Fred said.

Leo asked his brother to help him to his feet. He stood unsteadily. Some parts of him throbbed, others burned. Were no bones broken? Fred supported him. Leo asked in which direction they were headed. Fred told him that their father knew of a farm on the other side of Taunton where he believed they might find work.

‘That’s east, ain’t it?’ Leo said. The words his bruised and swollen mouth could form came out misshapen. ‘I’ll go west.’

He turned and hobbled out of the open back door of the cottage, and through his mother’s vegetable patch, and into the lane. There he clambered painfully over the stile and stumbled across the pasture and on, into the west.

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June

The boy limped slowly towards the setting sun. The sound of hooves coming from behind made him stop and turn. A horse and rider were approaching through the evening haze, the two indistinct, a single entity in silhouette. What he saw was that figure from mythology, half-man, half-horse. It cantered towards him in the twilight. He felt a shiver of fear tremble through his bowels and understood how terrifying it must have been for people who'd never seen a horse before to have marauders bear down upon them out of the east. The hordes of Genghis Khan.

Had enough not been inflicted upon him? Who was this advancing, to mete out further punishment?

The creature was forty yards away when all of a sudden his anxiety gave way to comprehension. He recognised the straight-backed gait of the rider atop the pony.

Perhaps she did not see him standing in the gloom for she did not rein in her mount until they were almost upon him. The animal seemed to rear up in surprise but Leo knew it was her horsemanship and the animal's trust in her and as the horse stopped and stood, quivering, she slid from the saddle and stood facing him. He looked at her then glanced over her shoulder in the direction from which she had come, as if he should look out for some further figures in pursuit of her, or of him.

Then he turned and looked westward once more. A strip of red lay between the black horizon and the grey sky. The girl walked around in front of him so that she could discern him in the vestigial light. She studied his bruised and broken face.

‘What have they done to you?’ she said. ‘What have they done?’

He reached his right hand towards her, though it hurt to lift his arm, and wiped tears from her eyes.

‘The horse,’ she said. ‘Blaze, she’s for you.’

The boy tried to mount the horse but could not, for his body and all his limbs ached, but then with her help he managed. There was no saddle. She pulled herself up behind him and they rode together in the dark.

‘Will you come back?’ she asked.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ she told him. She seemed to rack her brains for the answer though really she knew it but not how to say it. Then she blurted it out. ‘For me.’

He nodded slowly. ‘A course I will,’ he said.

‘One day,’ she said.

‘One day,’ he agreed. His voice was more constricted and gravelly than ever, for it hurt to speak. ‘Or another.’

She leaned against him and put her arms around his belly. ‘Where are you going?’ she asked him.

He told her he was heading west, and when she asked why he explained that his father had gone east.

‘Ours is a big country,’ she said. ‘A big island.’ It occurred to her how little he must have seen of it. There were those on the estate who reputedly had never seen the sea, so close that on some days you could smell it. ‘There’s not much that way,’ she said. ‘Only the south-west peninsula.’

He asked her if she knew of a place called Penzance. She told him she had heard of it, and he said he would aim in that direction.

They rode towards the sunset in the west. In the dark they came up out of the fields. The western horizon curved across the moor ahead of them like the convex rim of the world itself.

She leaned her head against the nape of his neck. He felt the faint sensation of her breath on his skin and it occurred to him all at once that he, Leo Jonas Sercombe, would one day become a man. That until that moment a boy or youth remained a lifeless form, a sleepwalker, to be animated by the breath of another. Such as this girl, Lottie Prideaux, who would become a woman as sure as he would a man.

He tried to think further on this path but could not do so. The horse walked on. He realised in due course that Lottie had fallen asleep, leaning against him. He prised open her fingers gently clasped and took her hands and laid them by her knees. He raised his right leg, the one least injured, and swung it over the neck of the pony, and slid to the ground with a jolt that hurt his ribs.

She did not wake. He took the reins and put them in her hands. He grasped the bridle at the pony's neck and slowly turned her until she was pointing back the way they had come, and then let go. The horse kept walking, at its own pace, making its way home. The girl did not stir but rode on in her sleep.

Leo watched them disappear into the night, and he stared into the darkness some while more until he could no longer hear the horse's hooves. Then he turned and walked on alone.

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fredarcher.co.uk

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Acknowledgements

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The Lord said, ‘When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’ Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me.’

Genesis, 4: 12–14

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Principal Characters

Leopold (Leo) Sercombe

Arthur, Lord Prideaux, owner of the estate

Charlotte (Lottie) Prideaux, Arthur's only child

Lady Prideaux, Arthur's grandmother

Duncan, Lord Grenvil, Arthur Prideaux's friend

Maud, Lady Grenvil, Duncan's wife

Alice Grenvil, Duncan and Maud's daughter

Adam Score, Lord Prideaux's valet

Gladys Sercombe, cousin of Leo, Lottie's maid at the big house

Herb Shattock, Lord Prideaux's Head Groom

Sidney Sercombe, Leo's brother, under keeper on the estate

Ingrid Goettner, Lottie's German governess

Alf Satterley, gardener at the big house

Patrick Jago, veterinary surgeon

William Carew, Lord Prideaux's estate manager

Gentle George Orchard, gypsy boxer, and his wife Rhoda

Samson and Kinity Orchard, George's parents

Gully Orchard, gypsy horseman, Samson's brother

Edwin and Belcher Orchard, George's brothers

Henery Orchard, Edwin's son

Levi Hicks, gypsy horse dealer

Arnold and Ernest Mann, mine owners

Cyrus Pepperell, mean farmer, and his wife Juliana
Vance Brewer, shepherd
Wilf Cann, stockboy

Rufus, hermit tramp

Florence Wombwell, duck breeder on the estate

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Part One

FLOWERS

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Lottie, June 1912

The girl walked down the wide staircase, through the house all the way to the cellars. She marched along the dank gloomy corridor then climbed up the steps into the bright glare of the glasshouse. The sun was high in the sky. Lottie walked out into the kitchen garden.

What is anger?

It is a fire, smouldering. Memories are pinches of gunpowder thrown into the flames, they ignite and explode. A person's mind, bellows breathing, seething in and out.

The girl strode across the terraced lawns and on through the jungle. She hoisted her long skirt and clambered over the fence and marched across the field. Her passage disturbed bullocks there. It made the beasts frisky. Perhaps it was the dark red of Lottie's skirt. Or perhaps they detected her preference for horses, and affected the spry skittishness of colts. She fancied that they cantered here and there for her approval, clumsily kicking their heels, but they were awkward lumpen creatures, and their ambulation held no beauty. Clouds billowed in the sky and blocked the sun.

Or . . .

Anger is ice, at the centre of a snowbound waste. The frozen core of a heart and nothing will melt it, ever.

Lottie walked through the wood until she came to an area of coppiced hazel. There she slowed and scanned the ground. Soon she found what she was looking for: the wild flowers that resembled nettles at a lazy glance but did not sting. Yellow archangel. A dead-nettle with primrose-yellow flowers, it was easy to pass it by unremarked. You had to look closer to appreciate that each flower was shaped like an angel, its hood curved like a pair of wings.

Lottie picked half a dozen. She possessed little knowledge of flora, but had inherited a notebook in which her mother had pressed certain flowers,

and added her drawings and observations, and these wild flowers the girl had committed to memory. The year inscribed in the front of the book was 1894. Lottie calculated that her mother had been two years older at that date than she herself was now. It stated in the notes that archangel was edible. ‘Mixes nicely on the tongue with tomatoes and cheese,’ according to the young Beatrice Pollard. Lottie sniffed the plant. Both flowers and leaves gave off an acrid smell. She walked on out of the wood.

Anger is pain. It is like some miserable affliction, a headache or gripe of the stomach, except a cure for it is something to be resisted. Rather, the pain should be nurtured.

‘Thou didst march through the land in indignation. Thou didst trample down the nations in wrath.’

The girl strode on beside the stream. On a grassy slope rising from the opposite bank she saw a purple rash in the green grass. A patch of bugle. Another dead-nettle, its flowers a paler mauve than the leaves and stems. In the gloomy afternoon she stood and watched a bumblebee working the patch, floating from flower to flower, buzzing in close like some hovering inspector. In search of nectar. But then drops of rain appeared on the water. If you watched closely each drop seemed not to fall from above but to rise up from beneath the surface. Lottie stepped over the stream and plucked six stems, and walked on.

In the meadow, she found to her surprise some last surviving fritillaries. Their purple chequered bells or heads hung on the tall slender drooping stems, like lanterns. She picked a few. She knew they would not last long once snapped from their roots or pulled from the soil, but they did not need to.

At the side of the lane into the village she spotted meadow cranesbill. Most of the flowers on each plant were still enclosed but some had opened, the five petals forming a shape like a saucer or plate. They were violet-blue, and marked with pale veins radiating from the centre, like paths, to draw the bees in.

In the yard Lottie did not seek a jar but laid the flowers directly upon the earth and kneeled down before the stone.

The vicar came out of the door to the church and stood in the porch looking out at the rain mizzling in the graveyard. He did not see the girl at first. He had been given an umbrella by his brother, but on the rare occasions he

remembered to take it with him the rain inevitably held off. Usually he did not think of it, and the rain caught him out.

Then he saw the girl, kneeling at her mother's grave. He stepped out of the porch and walked over.

'Miss Charlotte,' he said.

The girl looked up. The Reverend Mr Doddridge loomed over her. He was an unnaturally tall man, lean and bony but broad shouldered. He had white hair and whiskers, and craggy features. He issued grim warnings from the pulpit, scolding his congregation, and when the readings were of Old Testament prophets Lottie pictured them as being much like him. She suspected that he had spent years wrestling with temptation in some desert place before coming to this hidden parish in the West Country. The rain did not appear to bother him.

'I was speaking to my mama,' Lottie said.

The vicar pondered the girl's statement. 'I am sure she hears you,' he said.

Lottie nodded. 'I told her that I do not believe she would have allowed it to happen.'

The vicar said he did not doubt it. He said that the rain was falling more heavily, Miss Charlotte was welcome to come to the vicarage. Mrs Dagworthy would give her hot chocolate and cake. A boy could be sent to the Manor for her father's gig to fetch her. Lottie said that she was grateful but would prefer to stay a moment longer here alone, then make her own way home.

'Mama may be able to hear me, Mr Doddridge,' she said. 'But can she help me?'

The vicar opened his arms, hands outstretched with palms up, as if to catch the rain. He looked at a loss. 'Only the Lord can help us,' he said. 'If we trust in Him.'

The girl thanked the priest. He nodded and walked away through the graveyard.

Lottie did not stay much longer. She put her hands to the ground and pushed herself up. She turned and walked away, as if to collect her thoughts from somewhere she had dropped them. Then she came back. She looked down at the flowers. Already they were wet and wilting, their pale colours fading. She should not stay.

‘You know I have a governess, Mama,’ she said. ‘Ingrid. I have told you of her before. Oh, she is not so bad. I might have exaggerated her defects. But do you know what she told me? Something that she had read. “If we lose those we love, where shall we seek them? Where shall we find them? In heaven, or on earth?”’

Lottie sighed, and nodded to herself. Then she turned and walked out of the yard, through the lychgate and into the lane, and back towards her father’s estate.

Part Two

A SLAVE

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1

Leo, June 1912–May 1913

The boy stumbled in the night over dark earth. The land was silver. His steps were heavy. At first light in the waters of a stream he cleaned the charred red mud off his boots, and limped on in a kind of crouch that seemed best to allay the pain that racked many parts of his body. He saw where the sun rose and headed in the opposite direction, hunched over like someone with secrets from the light. He opened gates and closed them quietly behind him. He skulked close to hedgerows though on occasion he crossed pasture from one corner to its opposite. A herd of Ruby Reds chewed the cud and watched him. Where beasts were, so were men, and he wished to pass unseen. In the undergrowth of a copse he made himself a den in which he curled up and slept.

When night fell Leo Sercombe rose and trudged toward the smudge of light left on the western horizon. He struggled up onto and across the moor, every step another into the unknown as he went beyond the limits of the world he knew. Exmoor was less peopled than the farmland and he was glad to reach it, but there was less cover. When he was thirsty he lay beside the moorland streams and lapped the cool water like a dog and filled his belly.

In the evening of the third day he picked bilberries and gorged himself on them, his fingers stained purple and doubtless his lips likewise, still swollen from the beating he'd taken.

In the night he saw flickering phosphorescent lights. They seemed to beckon or entice him. He knew they were not real but could not help himself and began to follow them. These were will-o'-the-wisps, that lead men into swamps. He turned from the sight and hurried away.

Some time during the night of the fourth day the boy came down off the moor. In the village of Hawkridge nothing stirred as he passed through it but dogs watched him. He plodded through a stand of dead trees, bark-stripped, branches snapped, trunks like bleached white bones.

In a field a flock of pale grey sheep parted for him, bleating. At dawn he crawled into a hedge and slept.

Passing by elder trees, Leo scoured the lanterns of berries and stuffed them into his mouth. He could scarce eat enough to quell his hunger, yet in due course his belly gripped and doubled him over. Soon enough he had to squat repeatedly, then wipe his arse with leaves. He needed substance, fodder, but there was none.

In a conifer plantation he came across anthills. These he excavated with his hands, fingers pressed together to form two trowels, and ate the eggs. Ants bit him relentlessly. He ate them too, crunching and swallowing, trusting that survivors of his teeth would drown before they bit his guts. The furious insects scurried up his trousers, along sleeves, under his shirt. When the boy lumbered away his bruised skin throbbed in a hundred places. A vagabond upon the face of the earth. In showers of rain he trudged through the darkness, unsure of his direction.

In the day he dreamed of bread and heard others pleading for it, and woke to hear buzzards crying above him, young ones abandoned by their parents to fend for themselves. '*As a bird that strays from her nest so is a man that strays from his home.*' On occasion on his voyage he spotted human figures and averted his eyes, so that for him they did not exist. Once he heard someone yell, 'Hey! Boy!' He altered his course and stumped along.

In a wood early one morning Leo came across a circle of feathers of some nameless bird. What had killed it? A sparrowhawk? His brother Sid would know. He picked up a single feather. The quill was made of material akin to a human fingernail. He stroked and stretched the delicate blade. It was not possible to comprehend or even to glimpse inside the mind of He who had created such a feather, for the wing of a bird that had flown in the sky. Then been destroyed by another.

The boy chewed the stems of dandelion and grass but they gave him little sustenance. He grew more famished. When before dawn he woke and the darkness became less dense he could not understand what was happening.

What was light for? What was its purpose? He rose and drifted into the morning. He picked a blackberry and paused to study it. The berry was composed of a cluster of sacs. Inside each one was the seed for a new plant, swimming in a purple seminal fluid. The berry held unfathomable mysteries. Unable to reach them, in the end he ate it.

How the boy knew that the trees watched him and wished to speak with him he was not sure, it just became self-evident. He felt a kinship to a smooth-trunked young beech and stood before it, stroking it as he would the shoulder of a horse. He told the tree it was a fine specimen, and he would like to linger, to climb in its branches, but he had to press on for his destination was a town called Penzance.

*

One morning the dew revealed spiders' webs strung between branches, tall grasses, across hedgerows. They were like nets cast by fishermen, not of water but of air. Some were such perfect wheels of silk they might have been woven by the designer of the world Himself. Most were not. They had holes, gaps, panels of differing lengths or shapes. Bodge-jobs. Like people, some spiders were more competent than others. As he tramped, the boy pondered this truth with startled wonder.

On the night of the seventh or eighth day he was traipsing through a wood when a sound stopped his heart. He stood stock-still. Someone not far away from him was suddenly wailing. A grief-stricken howl. In the darkness he imagined what beast it might be and stood trembling. Then he realised. A dog fox was calling to his mate, for she answered with her own otherworldly shriek.

Leo's hunger abated intermittently and he forgot it. Then it returned. At dawn he entered a field of cows, their udders heavy. Even if a cow would allow him to milk her, he had no receptacle. But he had to try. He crept under their bellies, between their hooves. Any one of them might kick him, as such a beast had done to the stockman Isaac Wooland. Through malice or fright or unknowingly. He came up beneath the swaying udders of a red cow and took one of her teats in his mouth, and began to suck. She did not kick or buck him off, but walked slowly away. Leo hung on, waddling on his haunches. The cow stopped and he resumed, but he could not make milk

come. There was merely a tantalising taste of it on his tongue. He grasped the teat and squeezed and pulled at it, and some drops of milk fell upon the grass. He put his mouth open below the teat and the cow walked on. He held on for a few steps but she continued and he let go and lay head down on the grass, until the herd had ambled around him and away. Then he clambered to his feet and limped on. The morning air was straggled with mist, as if odourless fires had been lit in the night. The sun rose and poured orange through the smoky light.

The landscape was open and rolling, with larger fields than he was used to, and he kept close to the thick long hedges of blackthorn and holly.

He slept in the day and walked at night. His head throbbed. He trudged a short distance then found himself sitting down, and waited until the coloured spots dancing on the inside of his eyelids had ceased, then staggered to his feet and stumbled on a little further. The boy licked dew from wet grass. He knew not where he was, only that he was a vagrant, destitute.

In the afternoon he sat under the hedge of a cornfield ripe for harvesting and watched swallows skim the surface. Gliding and dipping in their flight. They did not touch the corn nor did they rise higher than a few feet above but soared through this narrow layer of air. A realm shared with the insects they hunted. Leo did not know what day it was. He decided it was Sunday. He watched the swallows for as long as he would have been in church, this his open air Evensong.

The boy rose and walked on but took only a few paces. He felt his head fill with a light wind. The hedge and the cornfield attempted to take to the air as birds did and wheeled about him, and the earth embraced him with a thumping hug.

*

‘Look, he’s took a hammerin.’

‘He’s a scrap of a lad.’

‘Aye, leave him.’

‘I’ll not leave him,’ said a quiet voice.

Waking, Leo kept his eyes closed. There were three of them, at least.

‘There’s nothin to him.’

‘No, he’s worth nothin.’

‘No,’ said the woman. ‘He’s not worth it. Leave him, George.’ She walked away.

‘He’s a scrap of a lad,’ said the quiet man. ‘I’ll not leave him.’

Leo waited for them to go away and let him be.

‘He’s near dead as dammit,’ said the older man. He walked away, following after the woman. ‘Leave him, George,’ he called back.

‘I’ll not.’

The boy felt huge hands sidle beneath him and lift his bony form. He was carried, and fell asleep again in this giant’s arms. When he woke he was being put in some cart or waggon. He rolled into deep sleep. Then he woke and was given warm milk by a woman, and boiled carrot mashed like the sop for a baby. He was aware of many eyes watching him.

On the days following Leo was fed by children. They plaited his hair as he lay there, and scrawled tattoos upon his skin. Little by little his strength returned.

2

The gypsies travelled with five waggons they called vardos, and two trolley carts. Leo recuperated in the vardo of George and his wife Rhoda and their many children. He looked out of the open front of the waggon. He had seen nothing like them. They were not travelling homes but rather cupboards on wheels, containing the gypsies' possessions, and items for sale. Some had cages filled with songbirds hanging off them. The gypsies walked beside the vardos. Dogs accompanied them, mongrels and curs of all kinds but each one spry, with its own ideas, a pack of opinionated hounds.

The men wore long waistcoats and trousers high up the back, wide at the waist, narrowing to the ankle. The older men's were lined with swan's down. One man wore Luton boots of black and brown leather but all the others had hobnailed boots. They wore white shirts and red calico scarves, and hats of different kinds. The women wore brightly coloured clothes and wide, flat-brimmed hats like plates. Each woman had her own smell, a pungent mixture of sweat and woodsmoke and some musky perfume made from personal ingredients. Children seemed to call all the women Ma, though perhaps there was something defective about Leo's hearing. He thought also that all called the man with black and brown boots Grandpa. One other older man they called Uncle.

Keziah, the eldest daughter of George and Rhoda, brought Leo food and sat beside him. As the waggon rolled along she told him who was who in their travelling band of the Orchard family. 'That vardo belongs to our father's father Samson Orchard and our father's mother Kinity. The one there's our father's uncle Gully, and his wife Caraline.'

The girl told Leo of her family as if reciting less from memory than liturgy, an incantation of her lineage. 'The fourth vardo belongs to our father's brother Edwin and his wife and children. The last one there belongs to our father's other brother, our uncle Belcher and his brood.'

Keziah told Leo that he had the dark eyes of a gadjo. It was a pity that his hair was brown and not black. Perhaps he was half-gentile, half-gadjo. His skin was too pale but a season or two on the road with them would improve it.

*

They meandered south for some days, along lanes bordered by full-leaved, thick high hedges, like winding tunnels. At gateways they would pause and stare as if surprised to see corn growing or beasts grazing in the hidden fields. The lanes undulated up and down and around the irregular landscape. The gypsies appeared to be in no hurry and journeyed at an easy pace. At night they did not sleep in their vardos but in temporarily erected bivouacs.

As soon as he was able, Leo rose from his bed and walked beside the waggons as the gypsies did. Each vardo was pulled by a single draught or dray horse, smaller than a Shire. There were many ponies too. At times the children rode these, bare-backed, but when they came to a hill the ponies were hooked up to the sides of the vardos as trace horses and helped pull them. On such inclines George walked behind his vardo, carrying chocks of wood. If the horses faltered, he dropped these chocks beneath the wheels to prevent them rolling backwards. Then he threw his own substantial weight behind the waggon. As it moved forward, Leo picked up the wood and followed after.

None spoke to the boy, nor much to each other. The weather grew warmer. Flies bothered the horses. They passed a field of rich grass in which a herd of cows had sat down, every one, and was chewing the cud in the morning sunshine. The beasts looked as if some bovine branch of the Agricultural Labourers' Union had persuaded them to go on strike. The gypsies did no work. They stopped at nightfall and heated up a vegetable stew that had some faint trace of meat in its gravy, ate and slept, then without great enthusiasm moved on in the morning. Leo was bemused. It seemed to the boy an inexplicable life. They passed through tiny villages whose scruffy inhabitants stood and watched them pass like some suspicious summer mirage. The pace slowed and Leo thought that the draught horses might simply come to a halt, and the people too, in immobile stupor, only the dogs still sniffing around the grass verges and hedgerows.

One morning he heard a cuckoo, calling from somewhere in the distance. It called again. It felt like the distance not only of space but also time, as if the bird were calling from the past. He thought of Lottie and imagined her riding her elegant pony, the one she had tried to give to him. He wondered what his mother was doing. He wondered when he would see his home again. The estate was his home no longer. He knew this but could not accept it.

*

One afternoon Samson Orchard brought them to a halt on a wide verge beside a road.

‘Hear me, you all,’ he said. ‘We’ll stop here and we’ll stay us a while.’

They unharnessed the horses and drove stakes into the ground, to which the beasts were tethered. Uncle Gully tended to the horses but all the other men and older boys disappeared with their dogs. The women gathered wood and lit fires and put up semi-permanent tents. These were benders, made from bent hazel or chestnut poles covered with canvas painted with the smelly tar used on roads, or sometimes with old coats. With the horses unharnessed, wooden steps were placed between the shafts of each vardo, leading up to the door or open front. A woman Leo had not noticed until now climbed down out of Belcher’s waggon, in which she must have lain on the journey while others walked, and made her way into one of the benders, holding her greatly swollen belly before her.

Leo asked George’s wife Rhoda what he should do. ‘Wood and water,’ she said. ‘Water and wood. See in the trees up yonder’s plenty a scrap. That stream there’s good for washin. And in the wood’s a spring for drinkin water. We’ve stopped here before, see.’

Uncle Gully meanwhile led the draught horses one by one to the stream and let them drink, and then the ponies. Some were thirsty, and whinnied to let the old man know this, but he made them wait their turn. Gully wore a three-piece suit that looked to have been tailored for his frame, but many years ago. It was faded at the knees and elbows, frayed at the hems, yet it conferred upon him a certain elegance nonetheless. His felt fedora was less impressive, for the brim had long since lost whatever firmness it might once have had and fell down around his head, covering his eyes. It made him

look furtive. Perhaps he was. He smelled of horses and of something else, some aromatic oil that Leo recognised, but from where he did not know. Then it came to him that he had detected it on another man, the old horseman Moses Pincombe.

Gully did not speak but whistled to the horses. Between carrying buckets of water for the women, the boy watched him and listened. With his whistling he ordered one horse to be patient, he told another it would be his turn next, he informed a third he would take her to the water soon. All this by whistling. Leo had not known there could be such variety in the sound. He stood near to Gully. Up close to the animals, he spoke to them by clicking his teeth. Perhaps he was a mute.

The first of the men came back carrying pheasants. These they passed to the women, with the pride of hunters. One of the lads, Henery, son of Edwin, was surrounded by dogs and they too strutted, high off their paws, shoulders up, though the women grumbled that pheasants would need to boil or to hang overnight and would feed no hungry children's bellies now.

The other men and lads returned with rabbits. Some of the boys carried sparrows, netted or shot with catapults. These they and their sisters plucked and skewered and roasted over the fires. There was no sign of George. Grandpa Samson Orchard leaned against a wheel of his vardo, lit a pipe and called the boy over.

'Leo, is it?' he said. 'You're travellin with us now, boy, and a band of vagabonds is what we are. We'll not stay long in no place. Myself and me Kinity, we wouldn't even stop for you. Our boy George, though, is a soft-hearted man who's saved your life. But you'll pay us back now, won't you, Leo?'

The boy nodded. Samson Orchard was a stoutly built, ruddy and glowering man. He had black hair, though his walrus moustache was nearly white, and black hooded eyes. 'Let me tell ye, Leo, people will treat ye bad while you're with us. You being a gentile, t'will make no difference to them. You're one of us now as far as they're concerned.' He sucked on his pipe then removed it and it was as if he had a stove inside him that he'd lit with his pipe for he seemed suddenly to glow with heat. 'I've been done for drunk and riotous,' he said. 'I've been done for disorderly conduct. For breach a the peace in four counties. For assault. I've never laid hands on no one who didn't ask for it, do ye hear me, Leo? Look at this.'

Samson Orchard gripped the stem of his pipe between his teeth and undid his jacket. Instead of buttons it had sovereigns, holes drilled into them to take the thread. He opened his shirt. ‘Will ye look at that?’ he said. Leo came closer and saw that the letter D had been branded on the old man’s left breast. ‘I’ll bet ye thought there’s no man alive carried a brand like that, Leo,’ Samson said.

The boy had never heard of such a thing on any man, alive or dead.

‘Must be nigh on thirty-five year ago,’ Samson said. He refilled his pipe.

The women skinned the rabbits and butchered them with long knives and threw them in big pots over their fires, and cut vegetables they’d pilfered from fields along the way. They scraped a little salt from the large blocks each possessed, and threw in handfuls of barley. The warm day waned. The sparrows the boys had caught were readying. Children tore the roasted carcasses apart and ate the flesh off the bone. The smell of roasting meat made Leo salivate, but no one, not even Keziah, invited him to join them and he did not ask. Pheasants hung at the side of Samson’s vardo. Blood dripped from their beaks onto the dry grass.

‘The Battle of Majuba Hill,’ Samson said. ‘We occupied the hill, see, Leo, and for what reason? There was none. And who were we? Most of us was raw. Even the few old soldiers had seen little action since the Crimean palaver. When the Boers came forward we still could have held the hill, but they wouldn’t engage, see, Leo, they wouldn’t come hand-to-hand with us. No, boy, they kept well back, didn’t they, and picked us off one by one. They was only Dutch farm boys but, by God, Leo, they was good shots.’

The old man yelled something at one of his sons a good distance off. Some words Leo did not recognise. The aromas of the food cooking made his stomach grumble, and it occurred to him that he had fully recovered from the beating his father had given him.

‘I don’t know who ran first . . . it wasn’t me, honest to God, Leo, but then we all did. We fled. It was a rout. We fled for our lives, Leo. Afterwards a few of us was shot by firin squad, they’d to make an example, but they couldn’t shoot all a what was left of our company. And we was all out of the Transvaal by the end a the month and on our way back home, Leo, the lot of us. Why they branded me a deserter, I believe it was a joke, Leo. They thought it comical to brand the gypso. So they did.’

Samson puffed on his pipe. Again it seemed to stoke the bellows of some fire inside his ample chest. ‘We came to this country from Hindustan. Over

five hundred year ago.' He paused. 'Six hundred now. The first king a the gypsies was a man by the name a Zindl. I wear the golden sovereigns on my jacket, Leo, but I'm no king a the gypsies, no matter what anyone says . . . don't believe them, boy. We've not got one now. I'm only the shero of my tribe. We're vagabonds, that's what they call us. Priggers and pilferers.' He opened his shirt once more. 'Have a good look, Leo, you'll not see it again. I was told I'm the last man alive from the British Army to carry this brand, and I believe it.'

*

It was dusk when George came out of the wood, his two rough-coated dogs barking about him, carrying what looked like a bundle of grey fur. In a moment all stopped what they were doing and looked to the big man coming into the clearing. George's wife Rhoda stood up beside her fire and said in a loud voice, 'There's my man, isn't he, there's my man. Truly I've married meat and bread. And don't you all worry, there'll be a piece a meat for every pot.'

They gathered around the fires in the dark. They had to wait longer than they would have if George had not caught the badger but George and Rhoda's children assured Leo that it would be worthwhile, for the rich dark meat of a badger was far superior to rabbit or pheasant, almost as good as that of a hedgehog.

When they'd finished eating, the women washed their cutlery and plates and other implements. The men gathered around Samson and Kinity's fire. They passed a bottle round. What it contained Leo had no idea. The old woman and then the old man sang songs unaccompanied. Edwin produced a fiddle. He was almost as tall as his brother George but thin as wire and nervous where George was calm. Yet on the fiddle he played lilting lullabies. Children crawled into the benders and slept when they chose. The women came over to the fire. Some smoked clay pipes with longer stems than Leo had ever seen before. Edwin upped the tempo on his fiddle while his wife Arabella beat a tambourine and a lad who was perhaps his son set a dinner plate upside down and danced upon it.

When the tune ended the lad who'd danced stepped off the plate. He bent and picked it up and backed away from the fire.

Of the three brothers, Belcher most resembled their father, Samson, thickset and swarthy. He stared at the fire, then spat into the flames. ‘He’s not broke the plate, Edwin,’ Belcher said, ‘and that’s good. He can step-dance to yer fiddle, but it’s only single-steppin.’

‘Aye,’ said Edwin.

‘I could dance the double-steppin to yer fiddle, could I not? I danced the nails out a my boots to yer fiddle, brother. I licked em, didn’t I? I beat em all. There was none so light on his feet as me.’

The women smoked their pipes and the men gazed into the flames.

‘Now listen here, Leo,’ Samson Orchard said. ‘See yon brother a mine.’ He nodded towards the horseman, old Gully. ‘He was born in the sawdust and brought up on the back of a horse. Our parents had a travellin circus, see. They trained me in vaultin and globe jugglin, and then the boxin after. Young Gully there was a trick rider. Bareback and all. There was no money. Circuses got bigger, see, people could watch all manner of amazement of an evenin. Why’d they go to a teeny family circus like ours? But what I’m tellin you, Leo, is my brother yonder could ride a horse . . . he could make a beast do things you wouldn’t believe. I’ve seen none since as good.’

‘What stopped you dancin, then?’ Edwin said. He addressed his brother. ‘If you was so fuckin good? If you was so fuckin better’n my son.’

‘I don’t know, brother,’ Belcher said. ‘Yer fiddle playin, was it? Did it lose its soul there? You played it out of tune, did you?’

Edwin stood up and stepped across to Belcher and raised his violin and brought it down upon his brother’s head, shattering the delicate instrument. He walked away towards his tent. Belcher removed his crumpled hat and rubbed the crown of his head, grinning, his teeth bared in the firelight.

The boy grew sleepy, but he saw Gully rise stiffly from the ground and turn and walk away from the fire and disappear into the dark. Some little while later Leo heard one of the draught horses neigh. He rose and followed the sound. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he was able to see all that was not in shadow for there was sufficient moonlight. He followed the sound of hooves and saw Gully lead one of the big horses towards a high hedge. It was Samson’s, the largest, sixteen hands high by the boy’s reckoning. Gully did not stop or turn but walked on into the hedge. He disappeared. The horse did not hesitate but followed the man leading it and the hedge swallowed the great horse too. Leo stared. Gully soon re-emerged

alone. He fetched another horse and led it in the moonlight through the hedge as he had the one before. He left them grazing in some farmer's field.

Leo stood waiting for the old man to request his help but he did not do so. When Gully had taken all the horses and ponies into the field he returned to the fire. Leo took his blanket and laid it on the ground beneath George and Rhoda's waggon and slept.

*

In the morning, with much yelling and commotion, the gypsies went to work. Now they had a base women gathered certain objects and implements about them and, with their baskets, headed off along the lane; others remained in their roadside camp making things. Old Kinney, Samson's wife, carved walking sticks. Edwin cut withy saplings and from them two of his children made clothes pegs. Girls gathered wild flowers and strung them into bouquets using bramble twine. It was as if all awoke from a dream of indolence to fanatic industry. Leo watched in amazement. All, even young children, had a job to do. One of the girls filled her basket with boxes of matches and shoelaces stored in the waggon, and set off. Gully gathered two ponies and led them away by their bridle straps.

Edwin's son Henery told Leo he must be shown the best way to collect firewood. He said that he had seen Leo twisting saplings and bending branches full of sap that made smoke when they burned and he felt pity, that's what it was. Henery was a young version of his father, a lean and jittery youth not many years older than Leo but able to grow a thin moustache. He applied some kind of pungent pomade to his black hair and plastered it down close to his skull. His dogs were never far from him. He told Leo to watch. He slid a long pole with a hook on the end off the side of his father's waggon and led the way into the nearby wood. 'You look around,' he said. 'This is you.' Henery leaned his neck forward and adopted an imbecilic expression so that he resembled a backward member of some jungle race other than man. He walked in deliberate circles, saying in a slow, deep voice, 'Wood. Wood.'

Henery resumed his normal posture. 'You're gropin in the wrong direction, see,' he said. He lifted his head and Leo did likewise. They looked up into the branches above. 'There,' Henery said. 'That'll do us.' He

raised the pole and hooked a length of dead wood from where it had been caught, and tugged it loose. Leo jumped back as it fell at their feet, breaking. ‘The trees store their rejects up there for us, see, ready-dried and all,’ Henery said. He handed the pole to Leo and walked back to the encampment.

Leo collected wood in this manner for the campfires and left a stack beside each one. He then took buckets, emptied them of any residue, and refilled them from the spring Rhoda had told him of. He understood what he now was. A hewer of wood and drawer of water. This was how he should repay the favour of having his life saved. Otherwise none enquired where he came from, who were his kin, how he’d come by the bruises that were almost healed now. A lack of curiosity or a surfeit of discretion? The boy did not know but he was glad. He did not wish to speak of Lottie, or of his mother, for he missed them too much.

*

The gypsies returned to the camp in twos and threes throughout the afternoon. The man of each vardo took the money that was handed over but gave his woman some back. Gully appeared without the pair of ponies he’d left with but one other instead: a squat and muscular chestnut cob Leo reckoned fit for pulling one of the trolley carts.

In the evening they ate the pheasants, which, hung overnight, had been boiled for much of the day. A layer of yellow fat was lifted off and new-caught rabbits put in along with onion, carrot, potato, swede. In her pot Rhoda made dumplings too and when it came time to eat Leo thanked her and said he had never eaten such tasty food.

‘It’s not me,’ she said. ‘It’s bein cooked outside that does it. I’d never cook inside if I’d a choice. George’ll tell you, it needs to be bloody cold for me to use the stove in there.’

*

On the morning of the day following Leo rose early and helped Gully open up the gap in the hedge and retrieve his horses from the farmer’s pasture before the sun came up. The new chestnut cob stood some way off. Gully

brought the draught horses one after the other through the hedge and, attaching a rope to their halters, the boy took the ponies alternately. They left the cob till last. A little light had come, enough for him to see as they approached that the cob was injured. A triangular flap of skin had been ripped from his hindquarters. When they got too close he took fright and turned and trotted away across the field.

'They've turned on im,' Gully said quietly. They were the first words Leo had heard him utter. 'Gyres will do it to a stranger sometimes. One a them's give him a good kick.'

'One a the big horses?'

'More likely the ponies.'

'Why?' Leo asked.

'I've wondered that myself many a time,' Gully told him. 'I've not quite worked it out.' He watched the frightened animal come to a halt and stand still as before. 'Strange beasts,' he said.

Leo walked across the field. Some yards short of the cob he stopped. 'It's all right, young feller,' he said. 'Don't be afeared a me. I won't kick you and you don't have to kick me neither.' The boy did not know whether his gritty voice was capable of calming a frightened horse but he spoke to the cob anyhow for it felt natural to him to do so. 'I'm a comin over to you now, old boy, and I'm goin to come and greet you.'

The sun was rising and the sky was blue but with the last stars still visible. Gully had disappeared. Leo put his hands behind his back and walked over slowly to the horse, speaking all the while of his intentions, and of his wish for the cob to trust him and to be not afraid. The cob stood still, shivering as if cold. When he reached him, Leo leaned forward and blew softly into the pony's nostrils and stood back. The cob raised his head towards him and Leo blew into his nostrils once more. The animal was still trembling but the boy spoke to him and in time raised one hand and stroked him. 'It's all right, old feller, you're all right now, they've had their fun. You're good again, old boy.' The horse trembled less. Leo tied the rope he'd been using to the cob's halter and led him across the field and through the hedge.

Gully had rekindled his campfire. In a pan of boiling water he was sterilising needles and gut. Leo held the cob steady. Gully poured some anaesthetic solution over the wound, then threaded a needle. Leo spoke to the cob. He told him quietly what the old man was about to do and that if he

felt a twinge or two of pain he should abide, for they intended only to heal him and could do so if only he let them. Then Gully lifted the loose flap of skin and began to suture it back in place.

Afterwards, Gully told Leo that it was good to have someone else with a feel for horses. ‘None a this lot do,’ he said. ‘They’re my blood, but they don’t have it.’

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3

On the morning of the third day in that spot Gully harnessed one of the draught horses to a trolley. Henery told Leo to help him lift a strangely configured contraption onto the trolley. They could not. It was too heavy.

‘Wait up, lads,’ someone called. George strode over. Most of the gypsies were shorter than the average man. George was six inches taller. He was like a being from a different race walking amongst them. Leo and Henery stood aside and let the giant lift the machine on his own, with little apparent effort. It resembled a bicycle in that it had a frame and seat and pedals. There were no wheels, but rather a stand, and the chain was attached to some other axle, on each end of which was a circular stone. Gully led the horse and the lad Henery accompanied him. Leo looked around the camp, where those who had not yet left bustled around as on each day. There was wood and water stored. Leo ran after the trolley cart.

On the outskirts of a village they came to the rectory. Henery knocked upon the door. A woman answered and the gypsy lad told her they had the finest grinding barrow in England here if she’d cleavers or cutlery or carving knives to sharpen.

‘You’ll know us from last year, missus, we’re the best in the west.’

‘It’s you,’ she said.

‘Hedge clippers and cutters,’ he told her. ‘Shovels and spades, all your gardener’s tools. Your cook’s finest knives . . . where is she now? She’ll be wantin to see us. Your husband’s razors we’ll edge for him, don’t worry about that.’

The Rector’s wife sent them round the back. Old Gully and the lad and the boy lifted the grinding barrow off the trolley cart and set it on the ground. Gully filled a bucket of water from a pump in the yard and poured some into a can attached to the machine. When the maid brought the first implements out of the house, Henery climbed onto the seat, put his boots in

the stirrups, and began to work the treadle. The shaft turned. On each end was a grindstone, one fine, the other coarse. Gully held a coal shovel to the rough stone. It made a screech like that of an angry seagull. Henery pedalled a little harder. Sparks flew from the shovel blade. The maid reappeared with a tray of small tools she must have collected from around the house. Scissors, penknives, razors.

Henery pedalled at a steady rate. He began to sweat. Gully held each implement with his right hand and pressed it to the stone with his left. Water dribbled onto the fine stone. Periodically the old man felt the tip of each blade with the callused nub of the index finger of his left hand. After a while Henery climbed down and said, ‘Your turn.’ Leo took his place. It took a little time to find a rhythm, and the speed Gully wanted. ‘Faster,’ he said. ‘Slower.’ A gardener wheeled a barrow full of tools into the yard.

In due course a woman came out with a tray of knives. She greeted Gully and told him she was glad to see them, twas about time. All her kitchen knives were blunt, she could no longer get an edge on them with her steel. Also upon the tray were three glasses of rosehip cordial and biscuits, which the gypsies and their gentle consort stopped working to consume. The cook spoke with Gully, telling him of the problems she had.

‘Talk about the taste a bread,’ she said. ‘My old mum says German flour ain’t the same as ours and never will be. No one never ate white bread in the old days.’ She leaned forward and glanced behind her before continuing, more quietly, ‘And you’d think old Ed was still on the throne . . . oh, yes, the Rector and the missus do crave their patisseries. Out a fashion in London, I heard, but down here we takes years to catch up, don’t us? I likes to bake but does they have any idea how fiddly they patisseries is?’

The cook rambled on in this manner. Then she asked Gully about him and his tribe and where they’d been. ‘Here and there,’ he said. ‘All over, mostly.’ He resumed sharpening the knives. The cook watched while hers were done then took them back inside upon the tray, along with empty plate and glasses.

*

In the afternoon they called on smaller houses around the same village. As they travelled from one to another Henery spoke. ‘We’re hawkers of

brushes and baskets, Leo. Peddlers of ladles and pots. We're sellers of matches, and laces for shoes or boots. Gully here's a horse trader. Me father's a chairmaker and mender. He'll bottom a chair for you, no problem, any kind. Take it away and bring it back like new or do it on the spot, it makes no difference to him. Me . . . I love dogs, don't I, Gully? I'm a dog clipper. Catcher or killer. I'll destroy a litter if it has to be done, but me, I'm a dog fancier, am I not, Gully? A dog thief. He'll tell you, Leo, that's what I am and no mistake.'

The old horse plodded along pulling the trolley cart. The boy came to the conclusion that amongst the gypsies some spoke and some did not. Those who did could not stop. Henery orated with a cadence akin to singing.

'We're drain cleaners and chimney sweeps. We're goat trainers and pickpockets. You wait till we get to Okehampton Fair in the spring, you'll see. Our women are midwives. Me Grandpa Samson's a ballad singer a the old school. We've been a buskerin from Barnstaple to Brixham. Me uncle Belcher'll make you a beehive fit for a queen. We're clairvoyants and clowns, Leo. Me uncle George is a fairground boxer like his father before him, only George is twice the fighter Samson ever was – Grandpa will tell you so himself. We change our names to stay one step ahead a the law, but we're all of the Orchard tribe, Leo, don't you fret about that.

'Me aunt Rhoda's duckerin through the villages now, she's readin palms and givin out zodiac advice. The girls'll be with her learnin, but you can only learn the talk. You can't learn the gift. You've got it or you've not. Foresight. Me aunt Rhoda has it, Leo, it's uncanny – I've seen it. What she tells comes to pass, good or bad, she can't help it. She'll not tell fortunes for the family, no, she won't look into our futures. No, boy, she won't. She won't do it.'

So Henery spoke as they walked along the lanes. He kept the stub of a pencil behind his ear and on occasion took it and made a swift inscription on a door or gatepost. He did so when they were turned away from a house by a woman who said she wanted nothing to do with scoundrels such as they, and if they did not leave forthwith she would call the constable. As if some such were waiting on her word in the vicinity.

Gully turned the horse and led the trolley out along the drive of the house. Henery told the woman they'd be on their way, then. They'd be taking their leave, if she didn't mind. Going out into the lane he scrawled a

sign on the gate, the letter X. ‘No good,’ he told Leo. ‘Warn the others. No good at all.’

When they returned to the camp, Samson called the boy over. ‘Ye went out, Leo. Ye went out with my brother and the lad there. But be careful, boy, we keep an eye on you, all of us. Do you understand? You’re ours, aren’t you? With your debt to pay. You’ll be with us till your debt’s paid, won’t you?’

The boy nodded. He did not know how long such repayment would take.

‘No ideas now, Leo, you don’t want any a them. We saved your life, we can take it back any time.’

*

The pregnant woman went into labour. Leo had taken her for Edwin’s wife or one of her sisters. But Keziah told him that she was one of Belcher’s daughters, by the name of Augusta, and that the father-to-be was Augusta’s cousin, Henery. While the girl wept and yelled, the camp grew quiet. The older women went in and out of the low bender. A boy was born in the night. In the morning his grandmother took him out and washed him with dew. When on the day following Augusta emerged from her confinement, the men avoided her. They burned the bender, and moved on.

The boy got to know the horses, though none had names. He spoke to them. His favourite was the chestnut cob that had been attacked. When he entered a field where the horses were grazing it always spotted him and came over. Leo kept an eye on it but it did not seem to suffer further. The others had accepted it. They were a small draught breed, cobs with broad chests and powerful hindquarters, strong pulling horses. Most of them were piebald. They seemed even-tempered, unbothered by the children. ‘We bred them from cast-offs,’ Gully told Leo. ‘Can you believe it? We used to use mules . . . my grandfather told me that, I never saw it. He was a boy then himself. Then coloured horses went out a fashion. Overnight, gentiles that owned their coloured horses sent them to the knackers, Shires included. We took them, interbred the Shires and Clydesdales with Dales ponies. To make these good pullers, see, strong but small. You don’t have to feed em tons a food.’

When they settled in one place for some days, the boys rode the ponies bareback. Leo did not ask to ride, and no one invited him. Gully would stand and watch. He seemed glad to have Leo beside him, someone who was interested in what he saw. This pony's effortless flowing movement. That one's abundant feathering. He pointed out a heavy and clean bone in the leg. He'd lift a horse's foot to show Leo the strong walls on its hoof, the well-shaped frog.

'Me,' the old man said, 'I like a cold-blood horse.'

*

In one village when it had not rained more than a feeble spattering for weeks they jacked up the vardos and rolled the wooden wheels into the pond to soak.

On what he announced was the first day of October Henery sharpened an old rough-handled knife on the grindstone. He told Leo he'd one small dog, akin to a terrier but with some other unknown breed in him, who waited all year for this. He found a canvas sack for Leo, and a single, left-handed glove made of leather. Before they left, Henery informed his family he was taking Leo with him so none should abuse the boy for his absence from the camp.

They set out into the fields, keeping close to the hedgerows. There was dew on the grass, on sloes in the hedge, on fallen crab apples. The leaves of maple and sycamore were turning from green to russet and yellow and falling from their branches. The dog was an odd little beast, with a terrier's snout but slighter body and long thin legs. He was neither as strong as a terrier nor fast like a lurcher, but eager. Henery called him Strip. He explained that hedgehogs decide about now to hibernate.

'He drops his prickles, see, and drags his self along and spikes up a heap a leaves and grass all about him. Then he'll scrat his self up a hole and roll around in it, and you won't see him all winter. Only Strip here can sniff him out, Leo. Every dog shall have his day and this be his.'

The dog might have had a nose but he needed his master, for Henery studied the ground as they walked. 'Here, see,' he said after some minutes. 'I reckon there's been one here.'

Leo looked hard but could see nothing but the leaf-strewn ground. Then he could. A line where the leaves lay differently, less thick or uniform or some such.

'Find, Strip,' Henery said, putting his foot to where the faint track began, and the dog followed it and pawed at the earth in the hedge, barking. Henery kicked him out of the way and reached his gloved hand into a mulch of leaves and grass and soil and brought out the hedgehog curled up asleep. He slit the animal's throat with his knife then held it up by one leg and with the same sharp knife scraped off the bristles.

Leo opened the sack he'd been given. Henery dropped the hedgehog inside and they set off searching for the next one, and so continued. By the end of the morning they had a dozen animals and returned to the encampment. Edwin greeted his son and asked where he'd been. Henery said that a hedgehog had laughed at him.

Edwin nodded. 'That's a good sign,' he said. 'You'll find luck today.'

'I already have,' Henery told his father. 'I caught the bugger and half his mates and the boy's got em in his sack here.'

Henery burned off any obdurate stubble and when all the hedgehogs were thus singed he scalded them in a pot of boiling water and skinned them. The process took hours. He told Leo that this was the method he had been taught, though there were others. While waiting patiently for certain parts of the process to be completed he prepared long hazel sticks, and when the hedgehogs were ready he skewered each one and placed it over the fire. They began to roast. Beneath them Henery placed tins and soon fat began to drip from the carcasses. Leo asked what this was for. Henery told him that he would give most of this lard to Gully for the horses' harnesses, but that his mother would keep some for she believed it to be a balm for children's earaches, and he would keep a little for himself to use as a hair oil. Of course if his Augusta wished to have a bottle, he must give it her.

They'd nick a chicken from a farm. The women carried long knives in their skirts, ready to kill a stray goose or lamb. One evening Samson said, 'I've a taste for pork. Will you give me some a your pig juice, Gully?'

The horseman climbed into his vardo and came out with a small bottle he gave to his brother, who put it in his jacket pocket and disappeared into the night.

The next day when the women set off hawking, Samson went with them. He came back with a dead pig on a trolley cart, a large castrated boar, fattening nicely. The boy did not understand.

'I asked a farmer, Leo, if he'd any dead calves I could take off his hands,' Samson told him. 'That I could skin for the hide, to make vellum for banjos. Would you believe it? The farmer said he had a pig must have ate summat poisononous and died overnight, and I was welcome to the whole bloody carcass, for none could eat it now.'

Leo still did not understand. Samson told him that farmers were fools. The boy did not agree but held his tongue. Samson said, 'I have a taste for pork, Leo. I like my rabbits fried in pork fat. I like mushrooms fried in pork fat with a pinch a salt when you take em out a the pan. And tonight my juval's goin to fry me some pork chops, are you not, Kinity?'

*

George's wife Rhoda wore long boots, laced to the knee beneath her ankle-length black dress that had deep embroidered pockets on the outside. She wore a stook around her neck, a brightly coloured square of silk, as did all the women. She was strong and stout. Her black hair was shiny with a pomade made of hedgehog fat and she cleaned her teeth with soot and salt.

One morning Rhoda asked the boy to light her fire, for her hands were full with Keziah and Lewesa, the younger girl, ill. He did so. The act was witnessed and Leo was soon given to understand that this was henceforth to be added to his chores: stoking or relighting each of the six campfires in the morning.

One damp December day he struggled to ignite kindling. Edwin's wife Arabella was outraged to find her drinking water bucket not yet replenished. She picked it up and tossed its remaining contents, yesterday's water, over the boy. Her children, Henery's younger brother Thomas and sister Priscilla, were gleefully amused.

At mealtimes Edwin and Belcher both ate first, before their wives and children. They did not like to be watched. Only after they had wiped their plates clean with bread were the others served. George did not obey this custom. He and Rhoda ate together. She cooked all manner of dishes in her pot. A black pudding made of the blood of a goose. Gypsy cake of flour and

dripping, baked in the fire's ashes. When her man went out to graft she sent him off with onion sandwiches flavoured with brown sugar, vinegar and salt. Leo tried to guess ingredients by smell or taste, and Keziah told him right or wrong. It became a game between them. Rhoda used dandelions to flavour soup. She and her daughters searched for snails on walls and trees and cooked them into a broth, or boiled them and then fried them in herbs. Leo could not believe how tasty these oddities were.

'My juval here worked in the kitchen of one a the big houses,' George told him. 'I was hired by his lordship to fight one of his men on the lawn at a party they held for the Coronation. She saw me and run away with us, is that not so, sweetheart?'

'Don't believe a word of it, Leo,' Rhoda said.

'She only became a gypsy when she married me. Don't make my mistake, Leo,' George advised the boy. 'Never choose a wife by candlelight.'

Rhoda shook her head in reproof, trying not to smile. She cooked whatever game George brought to her and any vegetables filched from the fields. She used nettles like cabbage or kale. Her sons caught pigeons and she made a pie. Lewesa found watercress in a stream and her mother was overjoyed, for she said it was the perfect tonic for the blood.

One morning George whittled pegs while Leo oiled harness nearby. The big man looked across the clearing at his wife, and sighed. 'She walked so light, Leo, I thought she was a wind passin over the field.' He shook his head. 'She was quick as smoke. She's the most beautiful gypsy woman I ever saw. I don't mind. Let other men lust after her. Let them stare themselves blind, Leo, she's my woman.'

It was not easy to imagine Rhoda years younger and slighter. Once beautiful. She and George already had five children. Usually they all slept together in the bender, but some nights George and his wife climbed into the vardo and Leo heard them above him endeavouring to make one more.

'Have you a larkin yourself somewhere, Leo?' George asked him one evening.

'Leave him, George,' Rhoda said. 'He's too young for all that nonsense.'

'One day some girl'll stir his loins, and it might a happened already.'

'Will you leave him, I said, the poor boy. Ignore him, Leo, he's a big fat puddin with a brain no bigger than his mouth.'

George laughed, and so did their children within earshot.

There was a girl, but Leo would not speak of her. Not to these folk, nor any other. One day he would see her again, he did not know when.

*

Of all the women in the camp Arabella treated Leo most harshly. She expressed the belief that a gentile would bring them bad luck. Others told her they did not know of such a prohibition and she said they should not blame her when he did so, that was all she had to say. The boy lit her fire and refilled her water buckets and stacked her wood before anyone else's, but she discovered errors. The water was not clear. If wood was too young, she beat him with it. Her daughter Priscilla enjoyed such chastisement and though a year younger than Leo administered it herself. She whipped him with a switch of hazel. He resisted the temptation to take it off her and withdrew, but she pursued him round the encampment. No one came to his aid. He tried to steer clear of her. She tripped him up or came up behind him and pushed him over. Leo did not respond. Priscilla explained to him that there was plenty more where that came from, and offered to sort him out whenever he so wished.

Priscilla's brother Thomas was a further year younger. One evening as Leo walked past their family, Thomas leaped to his feet claiming loudly that the gentile had passed between him and the fire. 'I'll call you out for that, you bastard,' Thomas said in his childish voice, removing his jacket. Then he took off his shirt. He was a small, thin boy but he'd been taught by his father Edwin to fight since the day he could stand, and he put up his fists. 'Come on then,' he said, 'we'll do it here and now.'

Leo was mystified. There were many strictures in the gypsies' daily life but none told him what they were. Here was another rule he had broken. He looked to Edwin in hope of a reprieve but was only told that he'd best put them up himself.

Leo wrapped his arms about his head, with his fists up by his ears and elbows out in front of his face. He could see between his arms the bare-chested child coming for him and closed his eyes. Thomas's small fists pummelled him, first about his head and then the body. Leo did not know what to do. If he fought back and hurt the child he feared the consequences. More likely the child would hurt him anyway for though Leo's father was a

fighter of sorts he had never trained his son to emulate him. Nor had Leo wished to.

The blows he now received to his midriff decided for him. He doubled over and the child Thomas rained blows to either side of Leo's head until he went down. Thomas stood above him and said in his thin unbroken voice, 'Let that be a lesson to you, gentile. Mess with me again, you'll get more a the same.'

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4

So the gypsies and their unindentured servant travelled in the autumn of that year, 1912, and on through the winter into the next. They journeyed south, along the Teign valley, then headed west and up around the edge of Dartmoor. One day Henery and other lads came back from hunting with their dogs and said there were troops out on manoeuvres on the moor. Rhoda took the girls of the tribe, laden with all the sweets and fruit they could find, and followed the army. When the soldiers fell out for a rest the girls sold them what they had. Henery told Leo it was called troop-hawking and never failed.

That was also the day deemed sufficiently distant from childbirth that Augusta posed no danger, and she and Henery were married. Kinity baked a loaf of bread. She gave it to Samson, who told the assembled company that bread was God's food. It kept away evil spirits. He broke the loaf open. Kinity took hold of each lover's thumb from their right hand and made a small incision in them with a sharp blade. She held them over the bread and their blood dripped onto the loaf. They ate the bread where the other's blood had mingled with their own and so were married. They were invited to kiss, which they had not done before. Though as Leo overheard Edwin tell his brother Belcher, they had done a good deal more.

*

When the weather was bad the Orchards stayed wherever they found themselves and emerged from their tents only for the barest necessities. They as good as hibernated in their benders. When the weather improved they came out and put in the hard graft hawking and moved on to another valley in their peregrination around the county of Devon. Leo lost all sense

of the calendar. One day it occurred to him that Christmas might have come and gone. The gypsies ignored the date. They made no mention of months, or of days. The boy felt as if the calendar and the clock, the normal measurement of time, even time itself as he had been taught to understand it, had been left behind. It still existed, elsewhere, but he had joined the gypsies in their waggons as they moved into a parallel time of no past or future but only an ever on-rolling now.

*

Leo spent whatever time he could with the old horseman. He saw that Gully Orchard was known to certain grooms and carters, and traded his good horses for their lesser ones, taking the difference in value in cash. In this way his troop became one with a variety of equine defects. In Chagford he acquired a carthorse that had the staggers. The farmer shook his head as Gully led the horse away, perhaps amazed to have outdone a gypsy. Back at the encampment Gully told Leo to give the horse no food or drink for twelve hours. He invited the boy to enter his vardo and watch him mix and roll six cricket-sized balls of liquorice powder, ground ginger and castor oil. Leo inhaled the musty sharp smell of herbs, and a more aromatic odour of oils, with which the very wood of the waggon seemed to be infused. The following morning they fed the mare one of the balls. Gully told the boy to repeat the dose three times a day, with nothing else to eat, but plenty of warm water on hand at all times. The horse recovered.

Leo had never heard his father speak of gypsy horsemen. ‘Do you want to know the secret, Leo?’ the old man asked. ‘It’s not the medicine. Yes, I’ll bleed em or purge em. But the medicine don’t cure a horse. It’s me givin it encourages the beast in the healin of itself. Do you see?’

Gully spent hours with the horses at their pasture, clicking his teeth or whistling softly to them. He moved slowly so as not to frighten them. Though he was old now, Leo suspected he had always moved at that speed around his animals.

*

One afternoon Belcher sickened and took to the bed in his vardo. There was no apparent cause for his condition but it appeared grave. His wife Betsey lit the stove in the waggon and sat beside her man, who lay with his eyes closed and a frown of pain or perplexity upon his face. Rhoda took him medicines of her own devising made from herbs. He sipped a little.

In the night Leo was woken periodically by cries from the direction of Belcher's waggon, whether from the man or his wife he was not sure. In the morning the sick man was no better. Leo asked George if they would fetch a doctor from the town.

'A crocus can't help him,' the big man said. 'Old Allace Penfold put a grudge on him. Them Penfolds is always after us Orchards.'

The boy did not know of whom the big man spoke. Neither could he understand why if this were so she would have picked on Belcher and not his father, the chief, Samson. Or indeed George himself.

George nodded. 'Aye, she no doubt did. A curse is no different to a germ, Leo. Some people it infects, some it don't.'

As the day wore on members of the family gathered around Belcher's vardo. They did not speak more than a few words but leaned against the wheels or sat upon the damp ground, whittling a stick or smoking or gazing at no particular object, like those desert monks who sat in contemplation of the fragility of life.

In the afternoon Betsey's sisters and sisters-in-law helped her down out of the waggon and accompanied her to her bender. Edwin went to find a priest. Henery was sent to order an oak coffin from the local carpenter. Little was said. No one spoke aloud the name of the deceased. The women washed the dead body and dressed him in fresh trousers and a clean white linen shirt. They pulled his old dancing boots onto his stiffening feet.

That evening the adults fasted. Children ate their meal in silence. Dogs did not bark. Leo lay down on his blanket beneath George's vardo in a camp unnaturally silent.

On the morning following George went with Henery, the horse and trolley, to fetch the coffin. They carried the dead man's body out of the waggon and placed it in the coffin on the trolley. Samson put a sovereign in one of his dead son's trouser pockets. 'Buy yourself somethin to eat,' he said. 'Wet your whistle on the way there, boy.'

George and Edwin sifted through the waggon with the help of their wives, removing things that belonged to Betsey or had been acquired during

their marriage and would be useful to her and their children. They removed also certain possessions of the dead man and placed these beside him in the coffin. An extra suit of clothes, a handkerchief, the hammer he used for splitting stone. His favourite knife they put on his right-hand side. The coffin was left open. Members of the family placed tokens such as a flower or a leaf upon him. Leo watched the gypsy children climb up on the trolley to peer down upon their father or uncle.

In the afternoon, under a light drizzle, Gully harnessed Belcher's draught horse to the waggon and led it into a nearby field, accompanied by the men and boys of the family. Leo followed. Gully cut some hairs from the horse's mane. He put these in his pocket. He unharnessed the horse. Then he took a rifle from the waggon where he'd hidden it and pointed the barrel at the horse's forehead and pulled the trigger. The powerful horse's four knees buckled and he collapsed.

George and Edwin climbed inside the vardo and set inflammable material alight and came out again. Samson said in a loud voice, 'Look, all you people, the countryside weeps. The hedges, the trees, the stones. All is weeping for the death of a good man. His woman there is weeping sorrow. My son is dead. My God, look down upon me.'

Then the flames began to rush and crackle and soon to roar as they caught the wood of the waggon. The harness was thrown inside. The men and boys stood and watched. When the roof of the waggon fell in, the men lifted the dead horse with strenuous difficulty and awkwardly added him to the pyre.

In the evening the adults still fasted and were quiet. Gully sat alone, weaving a plait from the hair he'd cut from the carthorse, weeping silently to himself, whether for the horse or for his nephew Leo could not tell. When it was done the old man rose and went over to the trolley and laid the plaited horse hair in the coffin. Then he lifted the lid up off the trolley and slid it over the coffin and nailed it shut.

Early in the morning Samson and Gully, and George and Edwin, took the trolley to bury the coffin in the local graveyard. The women followed behind, consoling Betsey, who cried unrestrainedly in a manner indicative less of grief than of insanity. As soon as they returned the women cooked, and all ate a hearty breakfast. None spoke of their deceased relative but much was said of where they would go next, and who they hoped to see. Then the gypsies packed up their belongings and pulled out of the clearing.

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5

As they approached Okehampton in March of the year 1913, Leo asked Gully what he planned to do there. The old man said that he would sell some horses and maybe buy one or two. He would watch George in the fighting booth. And he would see some races. Leo asked him about these races – were they a part of this Okehampton Spring Fair?

Gully laughed and said no. These races were run with other gypsy families, who would meet up some days after the fair was over. Some came up from Cornwall, others down from the north of the county. There were two kinds of race. ‘Horses trottin, one leg after the other.’ Gully put his hand out shaped like a claw and twiddled the fingers. ‘One, two, three, four. Pullin a sulky – a two-wheeled cart. It’s an odd way a racin to my mind, Leo. Trottin’s a slow gait but the horse is trained to do it awful quick. It’s unnatural if you ask me, but there’s many swear by it. They go mad for it in America, there’s money to be made with a good trotter there, dollars aplenty. And I’ve heard tell that on the island of Iceland the ponies strut about like that all the time.’

Leo asked Gully what the other kind of race was. The old man said there was a single competition, a series of heats between each family’s nominated horse. With a final between the two fastest. ‘Which is when the big money will go down.’

Leo looked around. He studied Gully’s ponies, unable to decide which one was qualified for such a competition.

Gully shook his head. ‘I wouldn’t put tuppence on one a my horses,’ he said. ‘The Hicks are bringin a fine horse. They’re a family that’s a part of our tribe.’

‘Do they bring the rider?’

‘No, the deal is we provide the rider. We’re the Orchards. The obligation is on us.’ Gully stopped speaking. He raised his head and studied the sky.

Perhaps searching for signs of impending weather. The boy wondered if the conversation was over, but then the old man said, ‘It’s Henery. He’s not a bad rider, Leo, he’s the best we’ve got . . . only between you and me, he’s no good. He’s good but he’s fearful.’ Gully explained that Henery possessed a modicum of dread. He could not rid himself of it. ‘You can see it in his eyes. He’s got a decent seat but he can’t trust a beast with his life. You have to. He’ll ride but he’d rather not, do you see what I’m sayin?’

*

At the beginning of April they reached Okehampton. ‘The Hicks will be there, Leo,’ Samson told the boy. ‘We’ll have a good rokker for sure.’ He repeated that the Hicks were members of their tribe. They would meet them where they always did, away from the town. ‘There’s a little lonely, out-of-the-way place. I don’t even know how the Good Lord found it before he put his plants and trees there.’

Leo laughed. He told Samson that he was learning to like their way of life. He could see it had advantages over the one he had grown up in.

The lane was a crooked dead-end track with high hedges either side and a large space at the end, and the Hicks were encamped already. Rhoda and the other women rushed forward to greet their brethren. Children followed, the men after them. The boy helped Gully stake out the ponies. ‘Do you see that, Leo?’ the old man asked. ‘By yonder tree? You see a white horse in the morning, you’ll have good luck all day.’

The boy had already seen the horse. It was all he saw, for he knew it, of that he was certain. It was the colt he had ridden for Lord Prideaux one year before at Bampton Fair. A horse he had ridden and known what speed is. A horse that flew like the wind.

Through the afternoon the gypsies set up their tents and campfires. Leo gathered wood and collected water. Gully intended to sell some of his ponies and these Leo brushed down and groomed. Gully fed them chaff as he did not usually do. He took his wife Caraline’s block of salt and scraped a handful into each bowl and mixed it, and he tethered each animal within reach of the stream that ran between their camping ground and the high hedge. Beyond the hedge lay a field the farmer let them use for the duration of their stay, in return for Rhoda telling the fortunes of his wife and all her

family. Gully planned also, he said, to sell an old Suffolk Punch. He'd bought it for chicken feed yet the farmer who sold it could not hide his glee. Leo was not surprised. He wondered who on earth now would pay one penny for such a nag.

'When a gentile buys a poor horse,' Gully told him, 'he shouts blue murder. Me, I'll keep my mouth shut, and pass it on to another fool.' He grinned. 'One such as I,' he added.

Leo groomed this carthorse as he had his father's Shires. Gully looked over periodically from his own labours to watch. The horse stood dumb and grateful and perhaps, it seemed, a bit surprised for she was not used to such tender treatment. When Leo had brushed the horse's tail and was washing the implements he had used, Gully came to him and said that it had not been unknown for a gentile to become a member of a gypsy tribe. There was a ritual.

The old man wished to share some arcane knowledge. Leo asked Gully to tell him of this ritual. Gully said he could not remember it in detail. He shook his head. Perhaps to loosen some mechanism inside. 'The chief of the tribe, my brother Samson, or his wife Kinny, they'd slit your arm for you and mingle your blood with two or three of us. Such as myself and George and Henery, do you see?' He lifted his floppy hat and ran his fingers through his hair. 'You'd need to fast some days.'

'I believe a person could do that,' Leo told him. 'It is not pleasant but it is possible.'

'You'd still be an outsider, though.'

Leo understood that Gully was addressing him directly.

'Until you married a gypsy girl. Some girl like Keziah.' The old man put his hat back on and smiled. 'And there'd be a task or two before you could get near to that.'

Leo's lips moved. 'A task?' How could he tell Gully that this was the last thing he wanted.

'Aye. Set by the girl's father. George.' Gully considered what he had said. He pondered what he might say next. Then he nodded. 'If the task was of my choosin, Leo, you'd need to steal a horse before you could have any daughter a mine.'

In the evening when all had fed, Henery told Leo that there would be a trip to a certain public house forthwith, for the purchase and consumption of

alcohol. ‘You should come along with us, Leo, I’ll see you get a bottle a pop or two.’

They walked back along the lane and on to the outskirts of the town. All came, every member of the Orchards and of the Hicks, and soon were strung out. The men strode forward, their thirsty women matching them. The old men and women and the young ones such as Augusta, carrying their babies in their shawls or dragging dawdling toddlers, fell behind, like some tribe wandering in the wilderness. Had the gypsies done something to kindle the anger of the Lord or had they chosen to live the way they did? Leo did not know.

The public house was empty as if cleared for this jocular influx. They crowded into the bar. Most ordered beer but Kinity demanded a mixture of claret and whisky, which she said she savoured as had the poor old lady herself – and hadn’t she lived over eighty years, most of them on the throne, and many alone?

Samson raised his mug of beer. All were quiet and he said, ‘Here’s to thy health, you Hicks, may you live until a walnut shell will make a coffin for you, every man, woman and child.’

They cheered Samson Orchard, then the Hicks’s chief stood and raised his mug and said, ‘Thank you, Samson. And here’s to prosperity for my wife’s husband.’ There was silence for a moment, then much laughter. In the midst of it Leo heard someone say, ‘Nippers outside,’ and found himself bundled out.

The gypsy children milled about. Some were brought a drink by older kin. Leo was not. They found things to do to impress one another. One Hicks boy could throw a stone an unlikely distance. Others tried to match him but could not. A girl sang a song at a higher pitch than anyone else could equal. Each time the door to the house opened the noise in the bar, of raucous talk and laughter, escaped with a roar. Then the door opened and Gully came out, and Leo ran after him and walked back to the encampment beside him.

‘I saw you through the glaze,’ Gully told him. ‘Stood there on your own.’ They walked back in the cool darkness. ‘I’m not one for the crowds, boy,’ the old man said. ‘My Caraline’s happy as a sandpiper with the rokker back there. It’s too loud for me.’ He stopped and looked up at the stars in the black sky. ‘I just have to get the noise out a my ears.’ They walked slowly

on. ‘They say a gentile’s ear is so full a noise in the towns, Leo, that when he’s in the forest he can’t hear the trees speakin.’

The boy asked him if the family had ever been, or were likely to go, to a town by the name of Penzance.

‘I heard of it,’ Gully admitted. ‘Way down in Cornwall. We don’t go there and we never have done. We’re Devon gypsies.’

When they reached the camp Leo went directly to the white colt. The old man came with him for Leo wished to introduce Gully to the beast. There could be no doubt this was the one the Hicks had brought for the race. The horse was tethered close to a hedge. His silvery form stood out in the moonlight. Leo spoke to him. ‘Tis good to see you again, my friend,’ he said. ‘I never expected it. That was some ride you give me.’ He blew into the horse’s nostrils and stroked him and inhaled his lovely tart smell. The colt stood perfectly still, poised, attentive to the boy. Leo knew the horse could not remember him. It was not possible. Yet did he? Did each know the other? Then he told Gully what a horse this was, for his size the swiftest Leo had seen or could imagine.

‘He is a fine beast,’ the old man said. ‘I can see that, even in the darkness.’

Another man’s voice spoke from behind them. ‘It’s you, ain’t it?’ Gully turned to acknowledge this member of the Hicks family, but he was facing Leo. ‘I thought it were. Yes, and I were right, weren’t I? I knew twas you.’ He turned to Gully. ‘Have you seen this nipper ride? You must have. Why else would you bring a gentile among us?’

It was the lad who had been riding the colt at Bampton Fair, who on Lord Prideaux’s orders gave way to Leo. The man and lad and boy looked at each other in the pale moonlight. It was not possible to make out the expressive features of each other’s faces, it was like looking through a veil of milk. But the lad could see enough.

‘You’ve not, have you?’ he asked Gully. ‘You don’t know what we have with us here? I thought I could ride, Gully, but this nipper can *ride*.’

‘You still haven’t sold him then?’ Leo asked the Hicks lad.

The lad laughed. ‘He tells jokes as well,’ he said. ‘A course I sold him. I’ve sold him near enough a dozen times now. He will keep makin his way back to me, though, won’t he?’

In the morning at first light the boy went back to the horse. He spoke to him quietly as he ran his hand over the colt's body, pausing at the joints, checking for any swellings or lumps. He found none. The horse became still under the boy's fingers. He felt under his palm the pulse of the veins between the animal's skin and flesh beneath. So far as Leo could tell there was nothing wrong with this horse anywhere in his conformation. He stepped back and beheld him. He figured the colt to be full-grown now, and wondered at his parentage. He was not tall as a racehorse or a big hunter. He was thick-boned, and strong, yet possessed a certain elegance, though perhaps that came only from Leo knowing the speed of which he was capable. Perhaps this colt was the miraculous white offspring of a gypsy horse and a thoroughbred of some kind. It was a mystery the depth of which he had not the knowledge to fathom.

Leo made his way back to the Orchards' vardo. The mood in the camp was subdued. Many slept, for they had not done so all night, coming back from the pub and drinking more and telling stories around the campfires. Those who emerged from their benders were grim, scowling. Leo thought it must be the alcohol, but Gully said there was more to it. 'The Penfolds are here, the bastards. Okehampton is ours, always has been. They know that. They're lookin for trouble and they'll find it soon enough.'

Leo asked who the Penfolds were. The old man explained that they were related to the Orchards and the Hicks, not to mention the Isaacs and the Smalls. All were once of the same tribe, but the Penfolds had broken away. He could not, he admitted, remember why, his brother might, but it was a terrible thing for sure, whatever it was. A grievous offence.

'They follows us around like fuckin cuckoos,' Gully said, unusually vehement. 'We get glimpses a their ugly mugs, but they've never come out like this. Samson will be thinkin hard on it, Leo, thinkin hard.'

*

That afternoon Gully told the boy he wished to show him something. They walked down the curved, sloping way into the town. There were many people, on the pavement and the road. Gully said it was so busy on account of the Fair taking place tomorrow. He entered the shop of James Wright, ironmonger. Out front were baskets, brushes, buckets, brooms. The boy

followed him inside. Receptacles of zinc, tin, copper, hung from hooks on the ceiling joists. There were shelves of nails and screws of every sort and size. A back room full of tools. Gully bought eight twelve-bore shotgun cartridges and a pint of linseed oil.

Back at the waggon Gully extracted the black shot powder from the cartridges and mixed it in the oil. Leo fetched the old Suffolk Punch out of the field. He did not believe that anyone would buy her. She was on her last legs. When he brought her back Gully had uncoiled a length of rubber tubing. Leo held the horse and Gully fed one end of the tube up her left nostril. ‘You has to get it down the gullet,’ he said. ‘Not the windpipe. If I put the tube down her trachea and then the oil into her lungs, I could kill her. Drown her.’ He continued to feed the tube up the carthorse’s nostril. She remained calm, as if this strange procedure were an everyday ritual, some part of her equine ablutions. ‘I think I got it,’ Gully said. He told Leo to blow down the tube. ‘If I did put it down the windpipe in error, you’ll get her breath back from her lungs.’

Leo tried to do as he was asked, but he could not. There was a resistance.

‘That’s good,’ Gully said. ‘It’s about in the right place.’ He asked George to join them and to hold the end of the tube up in the air. ‘Put this funnel in. Higher! Over here.’ Gully climbed on to the nearest wheel of his vardo. Once he was stood steady he poured linseed oil into the funnel. When the oil had all gone he pulled the rubber tube carefully back out through the Suffolk Punch’s nostril.

Gully asked Leo to let the Punch out in the field to stretch her legs then bring her back for Henery to take to the farmer who might buy her. Leo wondered why Gully would not do that himself. The old man shook his head. ‘I’ll buy but I’d rather not sell. Me, I’m not much good. You’ve seen yon lad. He’s got the gift a the hawkin. The bluster. He’s full of it.’

The boy thought that Henery would need to be. He led the carthorse into the field where the gypsy horses grazed, those of the Orchards and the Hicks all together. He untied the halter rope and stood back. And then to his astonishment the Suffolk Punch put her head first down, then up, and without further ado she set off and trotted away across the field. At some point she broke into a canter. She kicked her heels and galloped from one side of the field to the hedge on the other, turned and cantered back. Years fell away from her. Leo had never seen such a transformation in a horse. It was as if her ancient form had all of a sudden given birth to some younger

version of herself. An act of magic, or miracle, but from some other Bible than the one he knew. It came to him that he wanted to share the experience, and realised that it was Lottie Prideaux he wished to tell.

*

In the evening George soaked his hands in petrol, as he had been doing every night for some weeks. Rhoda complained of the stink but George told her he had grown to like it and planned to give her some as a gift in the form of perfume.

Samson came over. He informed Leo that he would ride in the bareback races for them, it had been decided. Levi Hicks had told them how the boy could ride. It was a great honour for him. Leo nodded. He did not know about the races but he could not wait to ride the white colt.

Then Samson reached up and touched his giant son on the shoulder. ‘Will you look at him, Leo?’ he said. ‘He’s a freak a nature, honest to God. He come from my loins and those a my juval there, but would you look at him?’

Leo asked the burly old man if he’d been a fighter himself, as people said. Samson filled his pipe with tobacco and lit it. ‘I was a pugilist, for my sins,’ he said. ‘I fought all sorts. All over. I fought with Welsh mountain fighters and cockney practitioners a the fistic art. I’ve beat em good, Leo, till they was washed in their own blood, and I’ve been beat bad myself, make no mistake about it, and I never backed down, Leo, never. But my boy’s twice the fighter I ever was. He’ll fight tomorrow, he’ll fight the locals, and if there’s a gentleman turns up with his fighter and wishes to make a wager, we’ll have George fight him for the purse. But I wish he’d fight a Penfold.’

Samson stared at Rhoda’s fire. He smoked his pipe, eyes narrowed, his body hunched tighter into itself.

‘Mendoza Penfold was the biggest bastard of the lot, God rest his soul,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t stand that man. I fought him three times and I’d a liked to fight him three or thirty times more. I’d fight him now if he was not beneath the mud. He bit the top a me ear off, Leo, do you see that there? He bit it off and spat it into the long grass, the bastard. We never found it. One a the dogs had it, most likely.’

Leo inspected the old man's truncated ear where he had held his hair aside for the boy's scrutiny. Samson grinned. 'We all used to take a bite back in them days. Me, I'd take a bit a yer ear, yer nose, yer fuckin cheek. And I wouldn't spit it out, boy, I'd swallow it.'

As he lay in his blanket under the waggon that night Leo heard voices coming from the direction of Gully's campfire. Henery spoke loudly. 'To be replaced on the eve a the race!' he cried. 'By a fuckin gentile? How can you all do this to me, Uncle?'

Gully spoke in reply but much more quietly, his voice indistinct. Leo lay in the darkness. Surely he was not making another enemy?

*

On the day following, some of the men went to set up a boxing ring in the Okehampton showground. The moor rose up to the south. To the north lay rolling hills of green fields dotted with white sheep or red cattle. Samson proclaimed that in the afternoon Gentle George the bare-knuckle champion would take on all-comers. This Leo did not see but had explained to him by George back at the campsite, where the big man whittled clothes pegs from hazel for Rhoda to sell as if this were any other day.

After he had completed his chores, Leo rode the white colt. Levi put on reins. Gully stood back. Henery lurked in the background with three or four others. Leo took off his boots and rode the colt bareback in the farmer's field. He made it trot in large circles and turn about. He wished to judge its mouth. It resisted him. He brought it over to Gully and the lad Levi who owned it, and told them the colt felt all wrong, or rather he himself did, it was not the fault of the horse. He did not believe he could ride it as he once had. Another rider would not destroy their chances in the race as he would. He was sorry.

Gully stood there mystified. Leo passed the reins to Levi, slid off the horse and walked barefoot out of the field. Back at George and Rhoda's waggon he was tying the laces of his boots when Henery stood before him. He said nothing but loomed above the boy. Leo tied his bootlaces carefully, methodically. He glanced up. Henery was looking at him. Waiting for his attention.

'You don't fool me,' he said. 'You might a fooled them, I can't say, probably not . . . give em a little while . . . but you don't fool me for a minute.' He shook his head. 'Leo,' he said, 'I'd rather be insulted than thrown off that fuckin animal. Have me bones broke.' Henery grinned. 'And I'd rather make some tin out a you than lose it on meself. Do you see, Leo? Now get them fuckin boots a yours off again.'

*

Leo rode the white colt. There was nothing stiff or awkward in his comportment. He sat the horse like some languid companion of the animal. When he kicked with his bare heels and the horse galloped from one corner of the field to another, the boy and the beast seemed to conjoin one to the other. The faster they rode, the more snug the fit, as Leo's body and his limbs adapted themselves to those of the colt in motion.

He knew this horse would beat whatever was put up against it. He knew it. The animal became more alive as his blood warmed. When his blood was hot, galloping, the colt was most fully himself. And the boy astride him felt himself carried into the same fire-filled realm of existence. Yet the faster they flew, the cooler his brain. Ease the colt round, dig your heels into him now, pull him back. The ground, the hedge, the people watching, blurred past him and the horse but he did not seem to be afeared or even aware of the danger. He could think clearly. Perhaps he was stupid. It was very strange.

In the afternoon they went to the showground. Leo carried George's water bottles and a bucket. At the boxing ring Edwin had taken over the hawking and a crowd milled about. The ring consisted of four heavy posts driven into the ground, one at each corner of a fifteen-foot square, with three cables of rope strung tight around them. It was open to the air. The gypsies had not erected a tent but rather a canvas fence or screen around the outside of the ring. Each man who paid a shilling received a blue ticket as he passed through to the space between screen and ring. A tanner for lads. No children.

Those who wished to challenge Gentle George paid five shillings, customarily from their pals who formed a syndicate for the purpose. All those who survived three five-minute rounds would receive their money

back plus the same again. Any who put George down would win a prize of ten guineas, a man's wage for a year. Was that not worth a man of courage bravin a bruise or two? So Edwin sold the show. Punters jostled to get a ticket, ardent for blood. Whether that of those they knew from hereabouts, their friends or acquaintances, or of the gypsy fighter, the boy did not know. He followed George through the nervous, surly throng.

*

George Orchard undid the buttons of his shirt with a dainty, deliberate precision belying his thick fingers. Then he stretched both arms out behind him and his brother Edwin pulled the shirt off. The crowd grew quiet. The big man had no discernible muscle that the boy could see. His ribs were lost in solid flesh. He was made of great slabs of meat any butcher would be glad of, no more man than beast, half-bull, half-human, just risen on his two feet.

The first punter in the ring was tall and brawny, but facing Gentle George he looked puny. Warming up, he threw quick jabs in the air as if a wasp was bothering him and came forward ducking and bobbing like a man whose nerves had been shot. Long ago or perhaps just now, when Edwin removed the big man's shirt, it was hard to tell.

Gentle George advanced ponderously, clumsily, leading from the shoulders. The punter took some wild swings but even as his fists flew he was already retreating from the big man's retaliation. One or two blows landed and were lost in flesh. Gentle George kept coming. He raised his hands, gathered loosely into fists. He didn't throw punches like the tall punter. It was more like his fists were solid objects or tools he carried at the end of his arms. The big man gently swung his huge fist at the punter. He pawed him like a bear. The right hit so slowly it seemed like an affectionate gesture, a stroke of the cheek, and that was why the punter had not avoided its foreseeable trajectory. Yet his face distorted strangely. Then the left came around in like manner from the other side, a slow hammer swing. The tall man's jaw cracked and blood exploded from his ruined face.

They dragged him out unconscious. Leo poured water from a bottle into the bucket. Edwin raised the bucket to his brother. George lapped from it like a beast of burden. The next punter came forward, a fat, belligerent little

man with eyes set close together and misshapen ears. Perhaps he thought he could keep low enough, out of range of the big man's blows.

Leo looked up. Dotted around the top of the screen were faces peering over. As if a band of Cornish giants with small heads, perhaps that county's fabled wrestlers, had turned up to watch. Then he realised they were all boys much the same age as he himself, sitting or standing on the shoulders of friends.

*

In the early evening back at the camp they counted their earnings from the boxing ring. In addition, the women had done much hawking of goods and telling of fortunes. Nimble-fingered boys and girls had procured money by other means. Henery had sold a couple more of Gully's ponies.

'We'll not be short a tin for the winter,' Rhoda told the boy. 'The winter will tell you what you did in the summer, see, and how we do in Okehampton is a good sign. We should be bok but we're not, on account a those Penfolds. We have to do somethin about it. And we will, Leo, don't you worry about that, you'll see.'

Leo believed her. The men acted each as if someone had just insulted them. Samson sat staring into the fire on which his Kinity had set a pot stirring. Every now and then she muttered, 'So you'll do nothin, is that it? Getting old, are you now?' Samson sat hunched over as his wife continued to goad him. 'You'll let it go, will you? You're no husband a mine, are you?'

All of a sudden Samson clambered to his feet. 'Right. I've had about enough,' he yelled. 'That's it.'

The others must have been waiting for this word for as Samson walked out of the camp all the men, of the Hicks as well as the Orchard family, gathered in his wake and followed him. Leo stood watching them. Gully turned and nodded to him to join them and he ran to catch up.

They skirted the town. Gully told the boy that the Penfolds had not even set up camp on the opposite side of Okehampton but just a short way around it on the southern side. This supposedly was further evidence of their perfidy.

The Orchards' arrival appeared unexpected for it caused panic in the Penfold encampment. As Leo approached he could see women crawling into their benders, calling their children after them. Men stood in the clearing, backs against tree trunks, or at the wheels of their waggons. They might have been kin to the Orchards yet everything about them was different. The men's faces were darker. Their clothes were in tatters. The waggons were ramshackle. The fires smoked without visible flames. A pony stood roped to a tree, its skeleton discernible beneath its sorry skin.

Samson took up position facing a man of a similar age. The family arrayed themselves around him. 'I'm callin you out, Naylor Penfold,' he said loudly. 'I'm callin you out, you filthy, dirty, thievin bastard. You're not fit to wipe a pig's foot on. I've a crow to pick with you, Naylor, you nasty scum. You're the dregs. You've been followin us around, stealin our patch, sullyin our name, and I'm callin you out.'

Samson paused, to take a breath or perhaps to remember his lines rehearsed over the days preceding. All were quiet around and before him, intent upon the performance.

'Ye'll never amount to no more'n a piece a shite – and the same goes for the lot a you. You're the biggest liar that ever stood on two feet, Naylor Penfold. Look at you . . . chewin your tobacca like a sheep chewin its cud. Your old woman there looks as sour as a crab apple tree. All your women chatter like magpies.'

Samson paused again and the man Leo took for Naylor Penfold stepped forward. 'Look at yourself, Samson Orchard,' he said. 'You're a big man with a small heart and you're good for nothin. You're a large puddin with nought in it, so you are.'

'Aye, and you're an ugly bastard, Naylor Penfold. Ugly enough to frighten the Devil himself. I'm callin you out here and now for all to hear. I'll fight you meself like I fought your father and I'm nigh on sixty year of age, an old man, but I'll fight for me and all a my breed.'

Edwin put his hand upon his father's arm and stepped up beside him. 'To be a Penfold?' he said. 'I wouldn't wish it on a dog. I feel sorry for your horses, they don't deserve it. We'll fight you, any one of us, any one of our breed'll take you on. The Orchards or the Hicks, the Isaacs or the Smalls if they was here. We're the tribe of Orchard and we're callin you out.'

Gully and Edwin stepped aside from Samson, and George took their place. Though he had meted out much punishment in the show field that

afternoon, he had taken some too. Gully explained to Leo that it was only the sight of blood, of blows landing on the big man, that beckoned punters into the ring. His eyes were swollen and there was a purpling yellow bruise on one side of his face, and his lower lip was misshapen. Leo could not tell whether this made him look less fearsome or more so to a prospective opponent.

Samson put his hand on his son's shoulder. 'My boy George here,' he said, 'will fight any one a your boys. He's a bare-fisted fightin man. If you like, he'll fight em one after the other. I tell you what, Naylor, he'll take em on all at the same time. Or you can put em on a rope and he'll take em on in a tug a fuckin war. There's not one a you's fathered enough sons to beat him. Look at your boys. Will you look at em there? They've seen our George and their hair's liftin the hats from their heads. You're a bunch a miserable cowards and we'll see you in the mornin in that field yonder.'

Samson turned and walked through the middle of his family, who followed likewise and formed a phalanx around him, and so they returned to their camp.

*

In the morning the Orchards and Hicks rose and went all together once again to the field Samson had stipulated. The Penfolds were not there. They went back to the Penfolds' camp. The people, the animals, the waggons, the tents, all were gone. They had vanished. Stolen away in the night. One or two fires still exuded a weak plume of damp smoke. Scraps of metal and wood and clothing lay around. There was a smell of rotting food and shit, whether of dogs or people Leo could not say for sure. 'They've left nothin but a load a junk to give us all a bad name,' Samson declared. The mood was exultant. To have the Penfolds run was even better than to fight them.

6

On the days following Leo rode the white colt. He would have liked to gallop on the open moor but they would not let him take the animal out of the field so he practised there. Often there were others besides Gully watching him. It rained almost every day, and the horses obtained what shelter they could from overhanging branches of trees in the hedgerows, but the colt was always eager to exercise.

Leo recalled the sight of Lottie suppling her blue roan in the paddock and tried something of the same exercise to see how the colt responded. He took him alongside the hedge on their left-hand side but with the front right leg, followed by the head, neck and spine of the horse, arching as if about to make a circle and the back legs keeping the line along the hedge. The horse did not like it, resisting the pressure Leo exerted, with his legs or on the reins. It was difficult for the colt to bend his spine and as he understood what his rider wished him to do he created the illusion of doing so by bending his neck only.

The boy did not expect immediate acquiescence, nor wish it. He liked the feel of the colt's resistance; there was something subtle and articulate about it, as if the boy had spoken and the horse disagreed, as if they were conducting a conversation in some arcane language each understood.

Leo still had his chores to run, but now he had assistance. Others helped him gather wood and stack it beneath trees to dry. Even Priscilla, his chief tormentor, aided him in lighting damp kindling, and Thomas the little pugilist carried water.

*

The gypsies possessed no timepiece yet seemed to know when their brethren would gather for the races. ‘They’ll be here tomorra, the Burtons, up from Tavistock,’ Samson declared. On what evidence, the boy could not tell. On the morrow it transpired that something unforeseen had delayed them. ‘But the Francombes down from Barnstaple, we’ll see them soon enough.’

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7

In due course four bedraggled families gathered on the eastern side of the village of South Zeal, east of Okehampton. Men bought jugs of beer at the Oxenham Arms and carried them back to camp. There was singing and dancing around the fires. A Burton girl of not much more than Leo's own age danced to music three men of her family made on a banjo, a violin and an accordion. She danced on a board put down for the purpose. Her black hair swung about her head. She held her arms aloft like a soldier in the act of surrender, yet there was no trace of submission in her expression. Perhaps the opposite. Sweat glistened on her brow in the firelight. All were quiet, watching. She swayed her hips in a manner Leo was sure he had never seen before, and he realised that his body wished for things his mind had not decreed. This was new to him.

Then the girl rapped her feet hard upon the board and grew hot and more ardent and whirled about. The spectators were stilled save for older women sporadically yelling or yelping encouragement. The musicians sped the music up. The girl's black eyes widened like those of the colt galloping as she spun, in a furious vortex, until all of a sudden the music ceased and she did too, and knelt on the board bowing for the applause.

*

In the early morning they had trotting races on the open road but the boy did not attend for Gully had no interest in them. He told Leo of a Scottish island where gypsies ran bareback races but not with their own horses. Instead they had to steal a neighbour's, and ride it with their wife or girl behind. The old man took a minuscule bag from his pocket and loosened the string. He drew from it a single tooth. 'I took this from the mouth a the best

horse I ever had,' he said. 'A skewbald she was. A small, sweet head but a broad chest, well muscled. Flashy action.' The old man gazed at the tooth in his hand, as if he could see in its place the horse it had belonged to. 'A proper cob,' he said.

*

The day of the first bareback races dawned cool and clear. The sky was a sheer unblemished blue as if it had been rinsed clean. They walked from their encampment to a stretch of the road to Whiddon Down that lay straight and flat before them.

The first race was between the Orchards' and Hicks' white colt and the Francombes' big grey mare. Some kind of committee made up of men from each family examined the horses. Then the riders. They took Leo's boots and his jacket and shirt. Gully had given him a pair of gypsy trousers, high-waisted, narrow-legged, that would not flap around as he rode. These were all the clothes they were allowed to wear. The other rider was a much older youth, wide-shouldered and muscular, and he regarded his slight, pale opponent with a look of incredulity as each was inspected and patted down for concealed whips or spurs with which they might provoke their own mounts or attack their rival's.

Edwin and Henery took money for wagers. Samson came over. He grasped hold of each of Leo's ears with either hand and brought his face close. 'My brother says that this horse of ours is fast,' he said. His breath smelted of stale beer and rich meat. 'He says that you can ride. Well, boy, here's where you begin to repay your debt. Number one you win. Number two you make it look lucky. That way we'll get more money put down on the final race. Do you understand?'

Leo nodded that he did. Samson squeezed his ears in his rough hands. 'Good,' he said. 'Good.'

Then the riders stood side by side facing the crowd of spectators as a pot-bellied man explained that the turnpike would forthwith be closed off. The horses would be ridden west to a post the keen-eyed among them might discern in the distance. They should go clockwise around the post and back here. Between these two poles, planted either side of the road, which formed both the starting and the finishing line.

The riders were helped aboard their mounts. The big grey mare was two or three hands taller than the white colt, statuesque and powerful. Leo studied her. If God had designed her for a purpose it was not for speed. At least not speed alone. Her rider needed his strength for he had to manhandle her up the road and turn her and force her back towards the starting line. He was already a-sweat himself. Leo waited for him. The white colt did not seem concerned by the bustle of human beings nor the grey mare but let Leo turn him this way then the other in a slow circle, on a tight rein.

A man beside the pole on one side of the road removed the red scarf from around his neck and held it up above his head. When the two horses were more or less abreast before him he swept his arm downward and yelled, ‘Run.’

The Francombe youth uttered a great roar as if to frighten his horse to action and Leo’s to the spot, but they both took off. The mare forced herself forward and into the lead. The colt followed in her wake. He seemed uninterested, yet though both horses sped up, once the mare was at a full gallop the colt continued to accelerate. He almost overtook her, then settled back behind. Leo did not know what else to do. If he did not hold the colt back they must win easily. He had to restrain him. But surely it would be clear that he was doing so. Clear to any horseman. He glanced to his left-hand side as if inspiration might lurk there. He saw a stand of oak trees. Dartmoor rose in the distance, up over the curved horizon.

They galloped along the road. Up ahead Leo could make out a post stuck in the middle of the turnpike. Then it came to him. He let the mare turn first around the halfway point, but kept the colt going another ten or twenty yards. Ahead of him half a dozen gypsies stood across the road. Beyond and above them a single farmer stood on the seat of his waggon, baulked of his passage on the highway but keenly watching the spectacle.

As he slowed his horse Leo looked back and saw that the mare was only now completing her own clumsy pivot about the post, her hooves ruining the patch of shingle and rough tarmacadam. He turned the colt and pursued them. Francombe jerked back and forth on the back of his horse and threw the reins forward and kicked the mare, his exertions as great as those of the animal beneath him.

Leo took the colt as wide as he could, out to the right-hand verge of the road. He still held him back somewhat with the reins and felt sorry for doing so. He hoped that none would realise, that they would see his arms

and shoulders flailing and not notice the grip of his hands, distracted by his gradual improvement, the prospect of victory in an ever-closer race, and be caught up in the excitement. His colt overtook the big grey mare a few yards from the finishing line. Leo did not see the crowd on either side nor hear them. He kept the colt reined in even now. There was no alternative for if he let him go all would glimpse his true potential. Leo cantered the horse up the road, trotted him, turned and came back, shaking his head. He could feel the colt resentful beneath him, angered with this rider he'd thought would give him the freedom he desired.

They passed the Francombe lad, bent forward over the neck of the grey mare, breathing hard. As they approached the crowd of gypsies Leo rolled and slid down off the colt and let his owner Levi Hicks take the reins off him and walked, still shaking his head, towards Gully.

'I'm sorry,' he said as he reached the old man, in his voice that was like honey rolled over sand. He knew only one or two could hear him and hoped that was enough. 'I couldn't turn him. Like you said, he don't want to turn. He's fast enough but he's no good.'

*

The second race immediately followed the first and was won by the Burtons' horse, a palomino mustang of great beauty. The deciding, final race was set for the following morning. During the day word spread through the gypsy encampments and beyond. The Burtons' palomino was fast and dependable, a sure-fire winner. The lad who rode him had won the year before. The titch riding for the Orchards and the Hicks was not strong enough. That white horse had speed but was wilful and the boy could not turn him. He could neither speed him up nor slow him down. The horse did as it wished. Worst of all, the boy was said to be a gentile, and this was the Orchards' most grievous error. The rules forbade them from changing rider at this late stage. Arabella's prediction, that Leo would bring them bad luck, was made more widely known. Edwin and Henery moved gloomily about, accepting wagers reluctantly but trying to haggle the pot down. But they were poor at it this day, downhearted or lackadaisical, and often came away with the price of the wager not lowered but raised. They wrote nothing down, were bookmakers who remembered each figure for each person.

In the Orchards' camp Samson spoke with great vehemence, yet in a whisper. 'Did I not tell the boy?' he said. 'A stroke a genius if I say it myself. Make it look lucky, I said, did I not, boy?' The old man took hold of Leo's hair and pulled the boy to him and kissed him on the forehead. 'You're learnin our ways right beautiful, boy, is he not, Gully? But by God this boy can ride. And that horse! After this we're leavin the West Country, I'm tellin you, Gully, the Orchards have been down here too long. We're goin up country now. We're takin this horse to the Kilsney races and the Appleby Fair and who knows where else. Wherever there's races and tin. We've been waitin for this moment, have we not, Gully? A horse and a rider together. And the moment's come to meet us.'

*

In the evening the boy went into the field. He found the colt and fed him some carrots and spoke to him. He apologised to the horse for holding him back this morning and promised that on the morrow he would not do so. He had a debt to repay and though he did not see how they would ever give him his freedom, for the more valuable he became so the longer they would wish to keep him, still he believed that he would gain his freedom and the horse would too.

'What say you to that, old fellow?' Leo asked the colt as he stroked him in the dying light of the spring evening. A smell of mint rose from the grass and mingled with the sharp sweet smell of the horse.

*

In the morning, none in the Orchards' camp wished the boy well. All but Gully ignored him, skirted his presence, looked away when they glimpsed him. Gully told him he'd rubbed the colt down, he was in fine nick, but he reminded Leo that he had only galloped this course the once and on that occasion shot right past the halfway mark. Horses are slaves of habit. The colt might think himself obliged to repeat the manoeuvre today. Leo nodded. The Hicks lad Levi walked his horse up to the road. Gully and the boy walked behind. All the others came after. Then George was beside the boy. He put his meaty hand upon his shoulder and spoke softly.

'I've seen me gettin hit, Leo,' he said. 'I've seen me goin down, and I've laid there on the ground, Leo, and I thought the clay is nice enough. The soil. The mud. I could lie on it or under it, I don't mind, there's no need to get up. But I got up. Yes, I did. Every time. I always got up, Leo, I seen it, I seen myself get up and raise my broken fists and finish it.' He squeezed the boy's bony shoulder. 'Never give up, Leo. Never.'

They walked up through the crowd. Perhaps the Burton dancing girl was among them. It would be her turn to watch him. Not all were gypsies. Gentiles had come to place their bets, from the villages of South Tawton and Spreyton. From Okehampton town. Word had spread and many regarded the boy with pity. Leo bowed his head. George kept one of his great hands on the boy's left shoulder, Gully on the right, like the seconds of some diminutive parody of a prizefighter approaching the ring.

The riders removed their clothes save for the trousers and as before were examined to make sure that neither concealed whip or weapon about their person. The Burton lad had long black hair pinned up behind his head, and black eyes. He was leanly muscled, with no soft trace of fat beneath the taut skin of his torso. He offered his hand to Leo, who took it and yelped as he felt the bones of his fingers being crushed in a brief, fierce grip. The lad let go, smiling, and turned and walked to his horse. Leo shook the pain out of his knuckles and took the reins of the white colt from Levi, who cupped his hands. The boy stepped into them with his bare left foot and sprang up and astride the horse.

Perhaps the Burton rider had taken note of Leo yesterday, or been advised, or come up with the notion himself, but as they waited at the starting line he turned the mustang round in half-circles, one way then the other, as did Leo a few yards away. The same man as before stood beside a pole, removed the red calico scarf from around his neck and held it aloft. The riders turned their horses. They might have been winding them up like clockwork toys. Both men and animals were ready to go. The starter held his red scarf up, staring intently from his side of the road to the pole on the opposite side. He would not bring the scarf down. He waited for the horses to align themselves, each facing the right direction, dead abreast. The riders turned their horses with the reins held tight, the animals' heads high up, their hooves pawing the gravel. They rotated in increasing agitation and the men in the crowd screamed, but what they said each individually in the roar of men and women shouting no one could say. Were they telling the starter

to wait a second longer or to proceed now, this instant? All were yelling, each convinced of the impassioned truth of his own opinion.

But perhaps the starter held his flag precisely to prolong the excitement, and the boy was glad, for he could feel his blood warming within him, and the horse's likewise. When the starter dropped his scarf and opened his mouth to yell something none heard, Leo let the colt go. The race might as well have been called off within yards, for though the palomino began well enough the white colt bolted ahead.

The boy clung to the galloping horse. The colt was beyond his control. Any number of catastrophes could occur now and each would mean his injury or death. He did not care. How could terror contain such joy? There was no place on this earth he would rather be, no person, than a bare-chested barefoot bareback rider on this white horse.

Some way to the marker in the centre of the road Leo glanced back and saw the palomino mustang four or five lengths behind. The colt sped on. As they approached the marker Leo slowed him, to a canter, to a halt, and they waltzed together around the post. As they came about the mustang approached. The rider was obliged to turn clockwise around the post. Yet for some reason Leo could not fathom, the gypsy on his mustang came careering towards him, on the wrong side of the road. The rider took his right hand off the reins and reached up behind him and pulled something from his hair. His black hair loosened and fell long and wild around his shoulders. He came veering towards Leo with his right arm extended behind him. Leo walked the white colt forward. The Burton lad leaned out as far as he could towards Leo and as he came past swung the blade in a wide arc across Leo's torso. Leo leaned away. He walked the colt on and out across the road in a diagonal from the left- to the right-hand side. He turned his head and watched the Burton rider struggle to slow the mustang and bring it past the post on the correct, left-hand side. He saw the thin blade fall to the ground.

Leo felt like he had been scratched, as if he'd been fool enough to go blackberry picking bare-chested. He bent forward and looked down and saw a thin, darkly reddening line drawn aslant his chest. What was it? He took a hand off the reins and spat on a finger and wiped the cut with saliva. It was nothing. A slight incision in his skin. He looked back. The black-haired gypsy lad had finally coerced the palomino mustang around the pole and was turning to come back home.

Leo squeezed the colt's ribs with his bare heels and in a moment the white horse was cantering. Leo did not wish him to go faster but he could not stay him for he had given the animal his word. He would not slow him now. Yet the colt did not gallop. Instead he cantered easily, as Leo wished he would. Somehow the colt knew. The boy sat high up on his back and the horse bore him like some imperial hero coming home. They cantered, waiting for the palomino mustang and its rider to catch up with them, and when that pair came abreast some yards away across the road Leo looked over at the Burton lad and waited for him to glance back. When he did so, the gypsy's black eyes seemed blind with hatred. Leo smiled, and held out his hand as if to offer a sardonic handshake to the older youth. He saw the eyes fill and widen with darkness, before the palomino galloped on ahead.

The boy turned back and kicked the colt and leaned back down into his rider's clinch. The white colt accelerated out of his canter and within yards had overtaken the mustang. Leo hung on. Ahead of him the crowd on either side of the road was a heaving throng of bodies, as those behind jumped up for a better view and fell, and many waved their arms and shook as if riding some invisible horse themselves in their wish to encourage their rider. He could make out one among them, a giant at the front, George, who had lifted the boy and carried him and brought him back to life.

Leo glanced back. The palomino mustang was falling behind. The gentle boy and the white colt rode clear, coming to victory. But then they turned inexplicably away, off the road. Towards a stand of oaks. The crowd went quiet. As the pale, half-naked boy, with nothing but the trousers he wore, the reins in his hands and the white horse beneath him, struck out for the distant moor.

Part Three

THE DERBY

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Lottie, June 1913

‘The point of the handicap,’ Lord Grenvil told his daughter, ‘is that the weight a horse carries determines the speed at which he can gallop.’

‘No, no, Duncan,’ said Lord Prideaux. ‘That is merely a description. The point, Alice,’ he said, leaning forward a little from his seat in the carriage, ‘is that without a handicapping system, everyone would know which horse is likely to win. Obliging the faster horses to carry weights makes for more even, unpredictable races.’

Alice Grenvil nodded. ‘And how is the handicap judged?’ she asked.

‘That’s simple,’ her father said. ‘The handicapper has the results of every race run during the season so far.’ He held up his left hand and with his right counted off the fingers. ‘He knows what weight each horse carried. The distance of the race. The condition of the course. The form of each of the runners. He’ll have a report on the pace of the race and the distance between each horse at the finish.’ Having no more fingers, Lord Grenvil sat back.

‘For every race?’ Alice said. ‘Sounds like a doddle, dear father.’

Arthur Prideaux smiled. ‘In addition to all that information,’ he said, ‘the handicapper will want to know of any incidents that might have occurred to impede this horse or make that one’s position better than it deserved.’

The girl, Charlotte Prideaux, gazed out of the window. Fields of ripening corn and grazing beasts racketed through her field of vision; dense pockets of woodland.

‘It sounds to me,’ Alice said, ‘like an impossible job. The handicapper must have to be some kind of mathematical genius. I can’t begin to imagine his desk, covered with sheets of scribbled calculations.’

'It's even worse than that,' Duncan Grenvil said. 'Yes, he needs to assess the factual information, but he has also to interpret it. A horse came third in a race but the handicapper learns that the ground was soft, and he believes this horse likes hard ground.'

'I suppose he'll have help from the owners and trainers in that regard,' Alice suggested.

Both men found this speculation amusing. 'A good handicapper is inherently suspicious. He doesn't trust a soul,' Arthur Prideaux said. 'Not owners, not trainers. Jockeys least of all.'

'Why not?' Alice asked.

'Because, Alice, they're all hoping to pull the wool over the handicapper's eyes. Not to mention those of the bookmakers and the ordinary punters. In order, quite simply, to get long odds for a good horse, which they can then gamble upon and make a fortune.'

'Or more likely lose it,' Duncan Grenvil said. 'Talking of reckless gentlemen, did I tell you that Hugh Lowther invited us to pop into his box tomorrow for the customary plovers' eggs and champagne?'

The girl knew the man of whom they spoke, her father's friend Hugh, Lord Lonsdale. When he travelled by train to visit them he reserved two sleeping compartments, one for himself and the other for his dogs. Her father and Duncan Grenvil spoke for a while about extraordinary sums of money won and lost on horses, agreeing with each other that the great plungers were extinct. There were no true gamblers left.

The train braked sharply as they pulled into a station. Westbury. They idly watched the commotion on the platform. Some travellers left the train, others joined it. Porters wheeled their trolleys to the luggage van. Doors closed with reassuringly conclusive percussion. In due course, their carriage creaked as the locomotive pulled on it.

'It's awfully good of you to join us, Alice,' Arthur Prideaux said. 'Lottie's wanted to come for years, haven't you?'

'Yes, Papa.' The girl gazed out of the window. On the estate, human beings and animals cohabited the landscape. You were never far from another person, working, for all the fields, fences, ditches, hedges, lanes, culverts, drains, copses, had to be kept up. Yet this land they rolled through, this England, was huge and barely populated.

'You could hardly have come without Alice, could you?'

'No, Papa.'

‘So when I decide which horse to back,’ Alice said, ‘I should look at what weight the handicapper’s saddled them with, but I should also study their form and so on, and come to my own conclusions?’

‘Very good,’ her father said. He paused to light his cigarette.

‘I shall be glad to advise you, Alice,’ Arthur said, ‘should you need it.’

‘She won’t,’ her father said. ‘As I’ve told you, Arthur, in a healthy bloodline each generation’s brighter than its predecessor.’

‘Indeed. *Das Ei will kluger sein als die Henne.* Though possibly not as difficult in your case, Duncan, as in some.’

The girl turned from the window. ‘It’s not a handicap race.’

Alice returned her gaze. Lottie shook her head. ‘Most flat races are, but none of the Classics.’ The two men and the young woman looked at the girl, who turned back to the window.

‘It’s gratifying to know that one’s offspring does listen to what one says,’ Lord Prideaux said. ‘Occasionally.’

‘Yes, Papa,’ Lottie murmured, the glass misting from her spoken breath.

There was a knock at the door of their compartment. The train attendant informed them that lunch was being served in the restaurant car.

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In the third-class carriage Lord Prideaux’s valet Adam Score offered the maid, Gladys, a cigarette. She took it and put it between her lips. He lit a match and held it up to her cigarette but the yellow bulb of flame at its tip would not stay still.

Gladys pursed her lips around the cigarette so that she could speak. ‘Your hands is tremblin, Mister Score.’

‘It’s this bloody train, it’s bouncin all over the place.’ The match burned down.

‘As long as it ain’t me makin you nervous.’

Adam Score flinched as the fire reached his flesh. He shook the match out. He put it in the ashtray beneath the window and lit another.

‘You’d make any man nervous, Gladys,’ he said, holding one hand with the other to steady it.

Lord Grenvil’s valet stood to fetch his pipe and tobacco from his bag in the luggage net. ‘Will you be havin a flutter, Gladys?’ he asked.

The maid sucked on the cigarette and blew the smoke instantly out of her mouth. 'I'm hopin Mister Shattock might give us a tip or two.' She turned and spoke across the central aisle, to the man seated on his own. 'Won't you, Mister Shattock? Give us a tip for the gee-gees?'

The master's groom smiled. 'I shall,' he said. 'And I'll give it now. Put your tin on the favourite. A little each way.'

Alice Grenvil's maid passed round the luncheon baskets they'd bought at Taunton station. They opened the baskets and inspected the bread and butter and cheese. There were various meats. Adam Score said he could not eat tongue, it did not agree with him. Gladys said there was an answer to that but she would not give it in polite company. She agreed to swap her slices of ham for the valet's tongue. Herb Shattock had ordered beef sandwiches. Others had chicken. The men had purchased in addition a bottle each of stout. The women drank ginger beer.

Gladys asked Mister Shattock more about the bookmakers. Were they bent? Could you trust them? It was true, he said, that in the old days there were those who would take punters' money then try to slip away during the excitement of the race. Welchers. He'd seen the odd one caught and badly beaten. But all was in better order now.

Adam Score said the problem with betting was the dope. 'The Yanks brung it over,' he claimed. 'Got some old nag and give her a shot a cocaine. She run as if possessed a the devil, eyes startin out of her head, sweat pourin off of her. She raced past a field a the finest thoroughbreds and won her crooked owners a pile a loot.' He told them of one who crossed the finishing line in first place. The jockey dismounted and the horse took off again and galloped straight into a brick wall. 'Killed outright,' he said. 'That's true, that is. I heard it from the master his self.'

The maids agreed how scandalous the dope was. They asked how it was administered. Were the horses injected?

'No,' said Herb Shattock. 'They was given this poison from a bottle.' He told them that doping had been banned long ago. In 1904. Those caught doing it were warned off. Perhaps it still went on. It could give a bad horse energy, but made a good horse run itself out too soon. He said Americans were not all bad. He himself had learned much from them concerning the ventilation of stables. 'We leave our doors open now. The horses is much cooler than we used to keep them, and they're much happier,' he said.

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In the restaurant car the two friends were also reminiscing about Americans they had known. Their daughters sipped Brown Windsor soup.

‘You girls have heard, no doubt, of the new style of riding they brought with them at the end of the last century. The forward seat. We called it “the monkey on the stick”.’

‘The trouble is, they did win a deuced lot of races.’

‘That has nothing to do with it, Prideaux. It was ugly then and it’s ugly now.’

‘The odd thing is,’ Arthur said, turning to Alice Grenvil, ‘that they used to ride with even longer stirrups and straighter backs than we did. Your grandfather, Lottie, do you remember him?’

‘No, Papa.’

‘I suppose not. He travelled in America. Saw some racing in Kentucky. He told me they were most beautiful horsemen. What happened was this. What you have to remember is that America is vast. A continent. There used to be a good deal of remote, up-country meetings – primitive affairs with barely trained horses and local riders. Now Johnny Huggins told me this himself, Duncan. He used to send a decent old plater round, and if a young, local horse beat his, he’d buy it and bring it home. Under his training and his jockeys these horses often improved enormously. But then the trick stopped working.’ Arthur shrugged and opened his arms to demonstrate the depth of the mystery. ‘Johnny couldn’t fathom it.’

Arthur Prideaux stopped speaking in order to consume his soup before it grew cold.

‘Well?’ Duncan Grenvil said. ‘You’re going to tell us these up-country horses were being ridden by the Rieff brothers?’

‘I suspect,’ Alice Grenvil said, ‘that the horses were getting thinner. They’d been following these faddish Yankee diets.’

Lord Grenvil laughed at his daughter’s joke. Arthur Prideaux choked on his food. Duncan slapped him on the back. There were certain qualities that were particularly welcome in a woman. Intelligence was one, that was true, but wit was surely another.

‘Good try. Both of you,’ Arthur said. ‘Do you care to hazard a guess, Lottie, since this seems to have become a parlour game?’

‘No, thank you, Papa,’ the girl said.

Arthur Prideaux raised the side of his bowl and scooped a last spoonful of thick soup. He swallowed it. ‘One day,’ he resumed, ‘Huggins bought one of these winning horses, and the nigger boy who’d ridden him begged Huggins to take him too, for the boy loved this horse so. Huggins took him on as a stable hand.’ Arthur paused to take a sip of claret. ‘Now, Johnny Huggins raced this horse and the damned thing lost, to the very plater he’d beaten up country. Huggins couldn’t understand it. The black boy asked to be allowed to ride the horse. Sure enough, the boy won. In fact, he won on whatever he rode. He was the most successful jockey Huggins had ever had, though the boy claimed that riders just as good were ten a penny in the state of Georgia.’

‘And he rode in this manner?’ Alice asked.

‘Indeed. The reason being that no one had ever taught these boys to ride. They were thrown up on old broncos, without a saddle or even reins. So they held onto the mane and crouched up on the withers and held on as tight as they could. They found their balance and it turned out to distribute the rider’s weight upon the horse better. It wasn’t long before most of the top American riders were black. The very first Yank to come over here and win a race was a nigger – Willie Simms – almost twenty years ago now. Funnily enough, we had a boy on the estate rode like that, a ploughman’s son.’ Arthur sighed, lost in his memory of Leo Sercombe riding at Bampton Fair. ‘A sight to behold,’ he said. ‘Ugly, perhaps, but thrilling.’

Lost in thought, Arthur Prideaux seemed suddenly to realise where he was and that his daughter was there too, sitting next to Alice, beside the window. He looked over at her. She gazed at the passing landscape, giving no indication of having been listening to what he said. He shook his head, took another sip of claret.

‘And we’ll witness this style of riding in the Derby, Arthur?’ Alice said.

‘Not quite,’ he said. ‘You’ll see Danny Maher. Your father won’t agree, but I consider him the finest jockey we’ve ever seen. He told me that the good American courses are much flatter and more even than ours. Here, once a horse’s footing is disrupted, it’s almost impossible to get its balance back when you’re stuck up on its neck. So he rides a little lower and further back than he would in America.’

‘Arthur’s right, dear,’ Duncan Grenvil said. ‘I do disagree. There’s been no one to touch George Fordham. Not before him, not since. The greatest exponent of the waiting game we ever had. Another facet of the art of

horsemanship I fear you girls will not see. Nowadays they're all off and away and just dash em round like brainless whippets.'

'True enough, Duncan,' Arthur said. 'I'm just old enough to remember Tom Cannon. So stylish a rider that during a race he had time to check how finely polished his boots were. No, the Derby's not what it was. The House of Commons used to go into recess for the day, so that members could attend. It really meant something then.'

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After lunch, as they made their way back to the compartment, Lottie visited the lavatory. She did not hurry. The hot and cold water in the washbasin impressed her, the flush toilet too. She wondered where the waste went. She switched the electric light on and off. The illumination was feeble and yellowish. When she came out, her father was waiting for her in the corridor, smoking at a window.

"Yes, Papa," he said. "No, Papa." How long do you intend to continue this performance? It's been almost a year now.'

Lottie looked up at him. 'I don't know, Papa.'

They stood aside to let a conductor pass. 'Could we not call a truce?' he said. 'That we might all enjoy this excursion? Do you think it's fun for the Grenvils?'

'Will you have them back?' Lottie said.

Her father smoked his cigarette. He leaned his head back and blew the smoke up to the open window. 'The ploughman and his family?' he said. 'I don't know where on earth they are.'

'You could find out.'

Arthur Prideaux nodded slowly. 'Yes, I suppose I could. But I cannot have them back. Nor the boy. If you truly do not understand that, all I can say is that one day you will.'

'And one day, Papa,' the girl said, 'you will understand how wrong of you it was.'

Lord Prideaux shook his head. He turned and walked along the corridor, swaying with the motion of the carriage, back towards their compartment. His daughter turned and made her way in the other direction.

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There were first-class and third-class carriages on the train. Second class did not exist. Perhaps it never had. Or perhaps an entire category of people had vanished. Second-class people were shipped out to man the Empire shortly after the railways were invented. That was probably it. The girl could not come up with a more rational explanation.

The third-class carriages were open. There were more people to look at, as an alternative to staring out of the window. She saw their party of valets and maids but passed them without a word. She walked along, counting the carriages. There were seven. The luggage van was the eighth. She walked along the corridor. A crewman sat upon a suitcase, dozing. When she reached the end of the train she gazed out of the back door, at the parallel lines of the track spooling out behind, converging in the far distance.

‘Are you all right, Miss Charlotte?’

The girl turned. The figure of her father’s groom filled the corridor.

‘I saw you walk through the carriage,’ he said. ‘I trust that nothin is amiss.’

She assured him that she had merely wished to stretch her legs. He said that he too found the confinement difficult to deal with. It made him uneasy. To be seated while hurtling across the fields at a speed impossible by any other means – it was strange and disagreeable. He believed the speed of a horse was as fast as man was meant to go. The girl smiled and Herb Shattock acknowledged the partiality of his opinion.

‘The first horseman must a been a mighty strange sight,’ he said. He bent forward and they watched the view out of the back window together.

‘Can I ask you something, Mister Shattock?’ Lottie said, turning from the window. ‘You come to the Derby with my father every year.’

The groom straightened his back and stood up. ‘I do.’

‘Why?’

Herb Shattock smiled. ‘A fair question, Miss Charlotte,’ he said. ‘Few would ask it quite like that.’

‘I know you’re his groom,’ she said. ‘But from what he’s told me, he spends all his time with Lord Grenvil. He’s already got his valet to look after him. Do you love the Derby, Mister Shattock?’

Herb Shattock took a deep breath and gave out a long sigh. He pondered the question. Perhaps it was more difficult than Lottie had intended or

realised. Then he nodded. ‘Your father,’ he said, ‘has a stake in a stable. It is only one of his business interests, he might have many for all I know, but I believe this one’s dear to his heart. The stable is known as Druids Lodge. You might have heard of the Druids Lodge Confederacy?’

‘No.’

‘Known also as the Hermits of Salisbury Plain?’

The girl shook her head.

Herb Shattock frowned. ‘There’s no one owner, but the ringmaster, if you like, is a Mister Cunliffe. It was he what brought the master on board. They was friends at school, as I believe.’ The groom paused, and pondered the matter a while, as before. ‘I don’t know as I should tell you all this,’ he said.

Herb Shattock had taught Lottie to ride. He’d chosen her ponies, first the little Welsh dun mare, then Embarr the blue roan, then Blaze. It was said he’d been particularly fond of her mother, a fine horsewoman and sidesaddle rider; had been almost as heartbroken when she died as Lord Prideaux himself.

‘As you know, I go to Ireland periodically to buy a hunter for your father. I found your Embarr there. The Druids Lodge Confederacy buy their horses in Ireland. I am a scout. I meet Captain Forester and the vet Mister Pearl there, tell them if I seen any promisin foals for sale. They brings their purchases back here and trains them in seclusion up on the Wiltshire Downs.’ He raised his chin and gestured out of the window, as if should they look now they might see these gallops as the train passed close by.

‘Do they have a horse running tomorrow?’ the girl asked.

Herb Shattock nodded. He confessed that they did. It had been a lovely bay colt he himself had seen two years ago and recommended. Mister Cunliffe bought him, in a group of three yearlings. It was always a lottery buying yearlings, of course. ‘And unfortunately that colt has grown into a savage beast,’ the groom said. ‘Aboyeur by name. You’ll see him. And you’ll see Mister Cunliffe too. You can’t miss him. You might think the farmer Amos Tucker, on Manor Farm, is a weighty man, but Mister Cunliffe must be twenty stone.’

‘So Aboyeur won’t win?’ Lottie asked.

‘No chance at all,’ Herb Shattock said. ‘Except the outside chance that every horse has. And at the long odds he’ll be on, he’ll be worth a shillin or two of any punter’s money. But do not mention that to anyone, Miss Charlotte. Anyone at all. Not Lord Grenvil. And not Miss Alice, neither.’

The girl looked up at the stocky groom. He looked suddenly worried. He had said more than he should.

‘I won’t.’

‘Good. Now how about I escort you back to your carriage? The master’ll be wonderin where you’ve got to.’

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2

On the day following, the party left the Grenvils' town house in Belgravia and took a cab to Victoria Station. Arthur Prideaux and Duncan Grenvil wore morning dress, with silk top hats. Alice Grenvil wore a pale yellow gown of organdie, with a high-necked yoke and sleeves of transparent net. Bodice and skirt each had wide fluffy tucks. She wore long white gloves, and a hat decorated with flowers made of coloured material, and one enormous white feather. Lottie marvelled that it stayed upon Alice's head. She herself wore as plain a dress as she'd been able to find, blue and white, made of dimity, with a minimum of lace trim around the skirt. Her own hat was really a straw boater adorned with another of those ridiculous feathers, and she had constantly to hold it in place for a breeze or the jostling throng threatened to upset it.

The Grenvils' valet had all their tickets and they boarded the train. Herb Shattock was not among them. He had spent the night elsewhere. The maids were on holiday, and could barely contain their excitement. The heaving crowd in the station concourse appeared desperate to flee the capital. It might have been on fire again. All London, it seemed, was headed for Epsom.

3

The girl watched the jockeys come out of the weighing room, carrying their saddles. They walked along the path to the parade ring. Together, they were of a similar size and unremarkable, but as they entered the ring their lack of height became evident in comparison with other men. All were small and slight as boys, though they were of varying ages. Some were old, wind-wizened horsemen. The smallest looked particularly young. The boy had dark eyes, seemingly focused on something no one else saw. He reminded Lottie of Leo.

A pale-faced jockey passed close by them and Lottie saw that his teeth were chattering. Alice said she felt sorry for him, for what he was about to do was exceedingly dangerous. But Duncan Grenvil claimed that nerves were a good sign in a rider, just as they were in a horse, an indication of pluck.

Arthur Prideaux assured the girls that the man was the king's jockey, Herbert Jones, and he always looked like this. They should not be concerned. Jones had won the Derby for the Prince of Wales at his first attempt and again, when Teddy was king, four years ago, on Minoru. That was an unforgettable occasion. 'When the king led his victorious horse into the parade ring, right here, people threw their hats into the air, it was like a flock of birds taking off. Do you remember what Granville said about Teddy?' he asked Duncan. 'That he was loved because he had all the faults of which an Englishman is accused.'

Alice said it was a fine sentiment. Duncan wondered whether Teddy's son, though blessed with countless virtues, could hope to match his father in the affections of the nation. Lottie said that she could scarce remember the old king.

Her father appeared to know half the people milling around them. She wondered how, for at home he led a socially isolated life and showed no

apparent wish for more company. She thought they had come for the races, yet he was constantly stopping to chat with his fellow spectators. Some people studied their racecards, others strode purposefully though it was not clear where they were headed. Many wandered around, looking for faces they recognised in the crowd. Alice was most concerned with the women and their attire. The day was becoming increasingly warm but all were committed to whatever they had chosen to wear. Alice shared her observations with Lottie. That there could be such subtle variety of material, colour, cut and trim, was it not extraordinary?

Arthur Prideaux gave his daughter pin money, Duncan Grenvil likewise. They introduced the girls to a bookmaker who would take their bets. They bought Dorling's Correct Cards, with their lists of runners and riders. Arthur Prideaux whispered information to Alice Grenvil: 'This horse has a mouth like silk.' Alice took note of what she considered relevant and ticked off her fancies on her card. She wondered what would happen to her money in the case of a dead heat. Arthur Prideaux said he did not know. Long ago there was a tie and the two horses were sent back later in the afternoon to run the course again. A dead heat occurred once more, at the very first Derby he himself attended, in 1884, at the age of fourteen, the same as Lottie here. On that occasion those involved agreed to share the prize money and the crowd complained vociferously.

'We all wanted a winner,' Arthur said. Whether the bookmakers paid out he could not remember. He suspected not, for bookies never would unless they had to.

Lottie preferred to watch the horses in the paddock. They were extraordinary creatures, all taller and more elegant than the best of her father's hunters. A beautiful blood-chestnut horse. A big lengthy filly, with glorious shoulders, straight hocks. A washy chestnut had four white legs. Lottie could not take her eyes off a great raking bay gelding. But beyond their equine beauty – the nap of their coats brushed till it shone, their manes plaited – it was as if she could see into them, their skeletons, their bones moving in the articulation of their joints. The girl wanted to know more, about their muscles, ligaments, blood. How everything worked.

Knowing that she was going to put money on them, Lottie estimated their likely prowess and found the prospect mesmerising; watching how a horse moved but also gleaning or guessing what one could of its character. Some of the animals were excited or made irritable by the crowd close around

them; others remained placid. There was a little mare, all wire and whipcord, barely over fifteen hands. Lottie placed a bet on her to win the first race, the Woodcote Stakes. The mare came in last.

Alice had taken Arthur's advice, placing an each way bet on a horse whose jockey's colours she liked, and won. She wondered whether fillies as well as colts would run in the Derby, or whether men had barred them as they did women from the more important races of this world. Her father reprimanded her but Arthur Prideaux said that Alice had a point. Duncan Grenvil said that a filly had won just last year. Tagalie. Ridden by the yank, Jonny Reiff, who was on the favourite today.

'If a filly is entered,' Arthur Prideaux said, 'the colts have to carry an extra weight.'

'Don't you think,' Alice said, 'this principle might be applied to human affairs? A little handicap where necessary, so that men and women may compete for the same prizes?'

'For the more significant prizes,' Arthur said, 'there need be no handicap.'

Lottie watched them. She did not quite follow their conversation. It occurred to her that her father and Alice Grenvil were speaking in some kind of code. She saw Alice blush. And all of a sudden Lottie understood that Alice was not the chaperone here. Lottie herself was. The girl turned and pushed her way through the throng, away from the stand and across the course to the vast and bustling interior of the horseshoe-shaped track.

4

Though the first race had already been run, people were still flooding in. Lottie watched the free-for-all between vehicles drawn by horse and those powered by combustion engine. Four-in-hands driven by military-looking men in boldly checked trousers. Landaus, brakes, broughams, chaises, gigs, brightly painted dog-carts. Open-topped omnibuses, their jostling passengers swaying on the top deck. A convoy of black taxicabs. A motorcycle ridden by a man wearing goggles, with an enclosed sidecar, presumably bearing his passenger, weaving in and out of the other vehicles, startling horses.

The smells of cooking drew Lottie on to the food stalls. Hot fat sizzled and spat, savoury sausage fried in one pan, onion in another, over gas-powered flames. She swore they used methods of cooking that intensified the smells for they were unbearably enticing. The stalls were in reality ingeniously constructed carts, only the wheels betraying their mobility. They sold beef-steak pies and kidney puddings. Ham and beef, pork pies, cold sausages, hard-boiled eggs. One advertised baked sheeps' hearts. Another stall called itself a *delicatessen*, and sold sandwiches made of sardines, smoked salmon, German sausage.

Lottie watched customers purchase penny slices of batter pudding, over which the stallholder poured a spoonful of pork gravy. People turned away to eat their pudding and how gravy was not spilled upon their clothes or shoes she did not know. She could resist no longer and bought a slice. It tasted coarse and delicious.

The smell of fish mingled with that of meat. There were oysters and fish sandwiches. Fried fish, and fried fingers of potato, wrapped in paper. When people had paid they took salt with finger and thumb from a box on the counter and sprinkled it on their food. The girl had not heard of many of the delicacies offered. Tripe and onions. Eel jelly served in a cup with a spoon.

One stall sold eel pie. The proprietress lifted the lid of a metal bin before her and took a hot pie, ran a knife around its dish and turned the pie out on to a piece of paper for each customer.

Some food vendors had no stall but merely a barrow. One sold peanuts, another baked potatoes. Had they walked all the way from London to Epsom?

There were drinks – yellow lemonade, ginger beer, coffee and tea – and sweets. Hot apple fritters. Candy floss being spun from pink sugar, the air around sweet and sticky. Dark red-coated toffee apples. Lottie bought herself a bag of bullseyes.

There were beer tents. Marquees. Boxing booths. A sprawl of tents across the Downs. She heard a snatch of military music from a brass band in the distance. A barber had a stall composed of a small banner on which was painted his prices, a box for the implements of his trade, a bowl of water and a single chair. Upon this sat a customer whom the barber shaved. Lottie looked down and saw straps hanging from the two back legs of the chair and understood the barber carried it from place to place upon his back.

A lunch party sat on chairs around a dinner table. They had eaten well. The table had been laid with a full service on a white cloth, but now empty wine bottles stood amongst the detritus of the meal. A man dressed as a clown entertained the diners with slapstick, though he appeared to have drunk as much as they and was not funny.

In the middle of the carnival was a fair, far larger than the one that had visited Taunton last year. Carousels, boat swings, dodgems – all powered by steam engines that hissed and whistled with a smell of hot oily vapour in the air. They issued without warning small black clouds of soot that settled on the summer dresses of those who passed too close by. Lottie forgot about her companions, and the races they had come to watch. There were sticks to be hurled at coconut shies, a penny a throw. Rifle ranges, darts aimed at playing cards, hoopla stalls. There were bearded ladies. Snake charmers.

‘Guess your age, darlin?’

The man had a drooping moustache.

‘Give us a penny . . . money back if I get it wrong.’

The girl was sure that he would for she was tall for her age, taller than most full-grown women. She took a penny from her purse and handed it over. He looked her up and down, then stared into her eyes. Less judging her physiognomy than peering into her mind and finding there what she hid.

Mesmerism, it was called. He said, ‘Fourteen.’ Lottie nodded, and moved away.

A woman in some kind of uniform handed the girl a leaflet for the Temperance Society. Perhaps Lottie looked like a precocious sot. She joined a group who stood before an Open-air Mission. A woman held a placard that stated, *Behold the Lamb of God*. A man with a bulbous nose stood on a crate and promised eternal life to those who gave up drink and gambling and took up the way of the Lord. A punter yelled out if he was so wise, did he have a tip for the Diomed Stakes about to be run? Another, did he wish to be stuck for eternal life with a mug like that? And other such ribaldries. People’s smells – perfume, sweat, tobacco smoke – grew stronger as the crowd pressed upon her.

Two children stood, seemingly on show, the girl’s dress and the boy’s suit decorated with lovely patterns made of mother-of-pearl buttons. A woman festooned likewise passed a box around requesting contributions for the London Hospital. The children appeared bemused by the attention though they must have been used to it.

When she saw Herb Shattock pushing slowly through the crowd towards her, the girl thought that he would see her. But he was deep in conversation with the largest man she had ever seen. This must be the one of whom Shattock had spoken. Though so large as to appear an invalid, the man walked with a comfortable gait, his body rolling from side to side, and people parted to make way for him. The pair passed close to Lottie without seeing her and she watched them disappear.

Gypsy women sold lucky charms, nosegays or posies of wild flowers, purple heather. One stood in front of the girl and handed her a sprig of white flowers. ‘Tell your fortune, love?’ she said. She wore a blue and yellow skirt, and a red shawl wrapped around her shoulders. ‘Real Romany, mind, not like half a them there, only the likes of us’ve got the foresight, love.’

Lottie felt impelled to pull away but equally to stay. ‘All right.’

The woman took her hand. She studied it. She shook her head and looked up and into Lottie’s face. They were the same height. The gypsy woman had black eyes. She said, ‘You’ll see him again.’

‘Who?’ the girl asked.

‘There’s no doubt about it, he’ll come back. It’s not over, not by any means.’

‘Who?’ Lottie said, but the gypsy let go of her hand and said a penny would do it, she was glad it was good news she could see. The girl gave her a coin.

She climbed the hill. Families with prams and baskets and umbrellas sprawled on rugs with their picnics. Many had come the night before, her father had said, parked their carts and pitched their tents on Epsom Downs.

Some spoke with an accent the girl supposed they’d brought out of London. She had heard it the night before, on arriving at Paddington, and again this morning. Unlike the West Country burr of those on the estate and round about them, whose words issued naturally from the speaker’s lips, it seemed to her that these cockneys, if such they were, had to contort their lips to force the words out in order to sound as strange as they did.

At the top of the hill Lottie looked down on the carnival below her. Turning east, London sprawled across the land. She could make out Big Ben. And a great church . . . was it St Paul’s? She could see the Thames, threading its way into the city. And that was surely Windsor Castle, to the west.

‘Ere, darlin, you lost, are ya?’

The young man stood swaying on the sloping ground. His friend pulled him upright and said, ‘Come with us, girl, we’ll take you ome.’

The first man appeared to find this suggestion hilarious. ‘Yeah, we’ll take her ome, Billy, won’t we?’

Lottie turned and walked away. Within a few strides they had caught her up and now accompanied her, one on either side.

‘You don’t want to be on your own up ere, girl,’ said the comedian. Billy. ‘You can stop worryin now, though, you’re safe with us. Ain’t she, Tommy?’

‘Yeah, you stick with us, darlin.’

‘I’m all right, thank you,’ Lottie said.

‘No, you come with us, girl,’ Billy insisted. He had hold of her right arm. The other man, Tommy, gripped her left arm, pinning it to her side. If he had been drunk, he was no longer. They marched across the hill, through the crowd, where to she could not see and did not know. She was not sure if she was walking. It might have been that they had lifted her from the ground and carried her away, and her legs though moving had no say in her ambulation.

The girl attempted to struggle but her body would not obey her. She wished to cry out for help but she could not. Her voice did not work. She saw men, women, children as she passed them and implored them to come to her aid, but the plea went unspoken. They did not see her, or if they did saw only three friends strolling.

Lottie could not understand it. She had not known fear of this kind before: induced by human beings. She had not thought that she could be scared of other people. Only of death and who it took. Yet this was a paralysis, and she was terrified. The men smelled of beer, their clothes reeked of tobacco and sweat. Then it was as if she had come to life, yet without knowing it, for she felt the men beside her shoving and writhing. Then suddenly she was free. Stumbling forward, the girl turned and saw Herb Shattock holding each man by the hair of his head. He swung them towards each other, letting go of their hair and sliding his meaty hands around their skulls before he cracked them one against the other. The impact made a sound like that of croquet ball and mallet meeting. The two men staggered. One bled. Shattock struck one upon the chin with his fist, then the other likewise, and each fell to the ground and lay inert.

The girl stood and stared from the bodies on the ground to her father's groom. He breathed deeply, his mouth closed, chest rising and falling, as he surveyed his victims. Then he looked at the girl.

'Let's get you back,' he said. 'The master'll be wonderin where you is.'

Herb Shattock indicated the direction in which they should walk. He headed that way and she followed and walked beside him.

'I heard rumours a trouble,' he said. 'More layabouts than usual, that's for sure. There's more bobbies but not enough. Down the Rubbin House more n likely.'

Lottie's legs felt weak but as they descended the hill her strength returned. So too did her voice. 'I don't want to go back,' she said, and stopped walking. Herb Shattock did likewise. 'Not yet.' She frowned. 'I want to watch the Derby with you.'

'We should get you to your father.'

'Please. Nothing will distract him from the race. We'll go directly after.'

Herb Shattock looked around him, as if one amongst the crowd might arise and offer him the answer.

He nodded. 'All right, Miss Charlotte,' he said. 'Come along. They'll be almost off.'

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5

They walked fast down the hill, through the crowd, past the tents and food stalls, hucksters and entertainers, Herb Shattock not breaking stride and Lottie having to trot periodically to keep beside him. As they drew closer to the racetrack the crowd thickened, and he forged a path through the throng that she could not. She found it more sensible to drop behind and follow in his wake, holding on to his jacket. She glanced up and saw the sky had clouded over somewhat, though the afternoon was still bright and there felt no chance of rain.

They approached the course. The groom did not slow down but pushed on, easing people out of his way, the girl clinging on to him. Some complained at being so manhandled or of the breach of etiquette but Shattock paid them no mind. Soon they reached the rails and he turned aside to let the girl squeeze past him. He stood behind her. The stand containing her father and the others was on the opposite side of the track. A line of horses and riders had come out and the first walked past directly in front of them.

‘The king’s horse,’ Herb Shattock said. ‘Leading them out onto the field. Ridden by Herbert Jones, what won it twice before for Teddy. You might recognise His Majesty’s colours.’

The royal silks: the purple body of the shirt, with scarlet sleeves. The black velvet riding cap with a gold fringe. White breeches and white silk scarf. Lottie watched the horses walk up the course, one after the other. There were fifteen runners. She asked the groom which was the one her father had a stake in, and he said it was the one in blinkers. He might not look like a savage but he was, and had no chance. The jockey, Edwin Piper, was good but not top notch. He was due to ride a different mount, Knight’s Key, but that horse was scratched. Shattock did not know who had been jocked off Aboyeur to let Piper ride him.

He gave a commentary in Lottie's left ear. The favourite was that beast, Craganour, ridden by the Yankee Johnny Reiff, glaring at the crowd as if to defy them to boo him. Both he and his brother Lester had been warned off some years previous, had had their licences revoked, for pulling their horses or some such dishonesties, and were disliked by a good few punters. But Johnny was not merely a good rider. He knew how to win, and that made him popular with many more.

Lottie asked Mister Shattock to point out others. Which jockey was her father's favourite, another American? That was Danny Maher, there on Lord Rosebery's horse, Prue.

When the horses had passed out of sight the groom and the girl studied their racecards. She said that Aboyeur was a beautiful bay colt. She liked the white streak down his face, and did not believe a horse was made bad. Trainers made them so. The groom smiled and allowed she might be right. Aboyeur and the favourite Craganour, of which he had heard nothing bad said, were sired by the same stallion, one Desmond by name.

'Then they are brothers,' the girl said.

Herb Shattock nodded. 'Half-brothers, yes.'

'Then I should like to bet on both of them.'

They squeezed back out of the throng and he took her to a tic-tac man who stood beneath a large banner bearing his name, Henry Bradberry. He stood making hand signals like some kind of dance designed only for the arms. She could not see to whom he gesticulated. Mr Shattock took her money and put it down for her equally on her father's horse and on the favourite, half a crown each way.

They returned to the rails near the finishing line, the swarthy groom once more pushing his way through, to the consternation of those ahead of him, and waited. The horseshoe-shaped racetrack stretched for almost one mile and a half. The groom told Lottie that from the start it bent slightly to the right but then curved around to the left, rising over one hundred feet. Then it would come down again a little to Tattenham Corner, the first place they would be able to see the horses. The girl leaned over the rails and peered to her right. Herb Shattock said that, as she could observe, the surface was cambered, the inner rail upon which she leaned, appreciably lower than the far one. Then the track came downhill from the Corner until the final half-furlong, where it rose a fraction once more towards the finish right there in front of them.

Lottie could not make sense of what he said nor what she saw. She turned and said, ‘But why? Why do they not flatten the course and make it perfect?’

Herb Shattock smiled and said, ‘Then it wouldn’t be the Derby, Miss Charlotte.’

Lottie looked around her. All were excited as she was. An odd agitation shared by so many strangers. The groom reached over her shoulder and gave her his binoculars. She thanked him and looked through the lenses for her father and Alice and Duncan Grenvil, in the stand on the far side of the course, but could not find them. Then she realised that those around her had gone quiet. All were facing to their right. She looked too but there was nothing to see. Then she heard a sound. It was that of people shouting, yelling, cheering, in the distance. Then she saw movement on the track, blurring into view down around Tattenham Corner. She raised the glasses to her eyes and adjusted them and saw the horses coming.

For a long time they did not seem to draw closer, whether because they were coming more or less directly towards her or by an effect of the glasses she did not know. There were many of them, nine or ten, seemingly all packed together. Then she identified her father’s horse, Aboyeur, in the lead. Herb Shattock told her he thought that was Craganour coming up outside. Others were gaining on the inside. By now spectators all around them were yelling but the girl could not hear what they said for she was too intent upon the sight in the circular frame of her vision. Suddenly Craganour lurched across, bumping into Aboyeur, causing him to veer towards the rail, hampering those coming up the inside.

Was that allowed? Surely it was not. She watched. The jockey Edwin Piper struck Aboyeur with the whip in his left hand, causing his horse to lurch to his right and into Craganour. As he did so Aboyeur reached out his neck and bit or attempted to bite his brother.

Now the jockey of Craganour, the American, whipped his own mount. He held his whip in his right hand, and so drove his horse back towards Aboyeur. The horses’ hooves disappeared as they hit the dip, and then they came rising up for the final hundred yards, both jockeys thrashing their horses, bumping them repeatedly against each other even as others on either side drew closer to them.

The riders worked furiously but it seemed to the girl that they and the horses were slowing on the incline as they came to the post. By now they

filled the lens and she lowered the binoculars and looked up to see them flash past just yards away from her, the sound of their hooves thundering loudly into the turf even with the crazed yelling of the crowd around and behind her. The huge beautiful beasts with their small jockeys like insane parasitic creatures, past her and gone at a speed she could not fathom. She turned and watched them, now slowing to a canter, the jockeys' backsides lifting clear of their saddles, easing their mounts down.

A second pack of also-rans followed, one of them riderless, and behind them the crowd spilled onto the track and rushed to the finish to see the winner in the ring. Herb Shattock and the girl did likewise. She had no idea who had won in the blanket finish, it had happened so fast, but he said it was Craganour for sure. Who came second or third he did not know, and did not envy the stewards' job.

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They found Lord Prideaux and Lord Grenvil in the crowd around the winner's enclosure. There was no sign of Alice. If the girl or the groom thought that her father might be relieved to see her they were mistaken, for all he said was, 'There you are, Lottie, did you enjoy the race?'

The stewards had put Craganour first by a head from Aboyeur and a neck from Louvois in third. There was no objection made by the loser, though some expected one, for all the rough riding in those final furlongs, so the clerk of the scales gave the instruction that the winner was all right, and the flag was hoisted. There was a great roar, for Craganour being clear favourite had the most backers amongst all those punters present, and many rushed to the bookies to collect their winnings.

Duncan Grenvil was dejected for he had put his money on Danny Maher, riding Prue, swayed – so he claimed – by Arthur's eulogies of the American rider. Arthur Prideaux said that his friend was surely swayed more truly by the winnings he'd made on Maher in the past, but though once a great jockey he had not won the Derby in almost ten years.

Then there was unrest among the crowd. The flag had been taken down. This, Lord Prideaux said, was unprecedented. He sent Shattock off to find out what had happened. Some around them gabbled their own theories but most were simply confused, and gaped, waiting for enlightenment.

Meanwhile Alice Grenvil appeared. She was in a tearful state. She told Lottie that she had gone out looking for her and seen a terrible thing. Right in front of her. Directly across the course a madwoman had bobbed under the rails and calmly walked out into the middle of the course. The first group of horses had already passed and the second group bore down upon her. One missed her. She tried to grab the reins of another. ‘The king’s horse,’ Alice said. ‘Anmer. I saw the rider’s silks.’

The groom returned and said that one of the stewards, Eustace Loder, had demanded an enquiry. This Loder claimed Craganour had jostled Aboyeur and a stewards’ adjudication was necessary. The girls’ fathers and the groom went to stand amongst those milling about outside the stewards’ room.

Alice held Lottie’s arm and stopped her following them. She said that Anmer hit the madwoman at full gallop head on with his shoulders, knocking her with great force to the ground. ‘She rolled over and over and lay unconscious,’ Alice said. The horse had stumbled, pitching the jockey clear over its head.

‘Anmer missed her somehow. And the horses following swerved by and missed her and the jockey too. Anmer rose up and went on.’ Alice took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes. ‘The poor jockey, Lottie. His foot caught in a stirrup and he was thrown. He didn’t move. They brought a stretcher for him and when they lifted him up, it was like they were lifting up our Lord for the Deposition. The poor, poor man. I pray to God he lives.’

Then the verdict of the stewards’ enquiry was announced. Craganour had bumped and bored Aboyeur and interfered with other horses too and so was disqualified. Herb Shattock came over and told the girls that the jockeys had all spoken out against Johnny Reiff and his use of the whip. Arthur Prideaux and Duncan Grenvil were in contrasting moods. Lottie’s father had won more money than ever before today, it was a miracle. Duncan Grenvil said it was a poor show that Prideaux had failed to advise him to put money on a horse he had a stake in. A very poor show. ‘They didn’t even let the beast into the parade beforehand,’ he said. ‘They saddled him separately from all the others.’ He looked to the girls for support.

The fat man Lottie had seen on the hill with Herb Shattock passed close by, but neither her father nor the groom acknowledged him, nor he them. Alice tried to tell her father and Arthur Prideaux what she had seen, but neither paid her any mind for there was so much to ponder and to argue

over, which they did all the rest of the afternoon, and upon the train back into London, and on into the evening of the day.

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Part Four

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1

Leo, June–July 1913

The boy rode the white colt to the moor, up on to the granite massif. The tors loomed on the horizon, small in the distance but when he came to the first one he saw the great weight of granite. Once upon a time volcanoes had bubbled and erupted here and left huge boulders on the hillocks and ridge crests, the tors of Dartmoor, like the ruins or relics of some geological religion, as if an enraged earth had erected monuments to itself.

He rode on, bare-chested, barefoot, saddleless upon the colt. He knew that none of the gypsy horses could catch him and did not believe they would try. But they might. The tors had patches of moss or lichen but were mostly grey. Yet somehow, coming closer, he fancied one was blue, and rode up to study the rock. The closer he came so the tinge of blue was lost, in the manner of a blue roan horse. Perhaps not like a roan exactly for he touched the granite and was able to trace the veins of some finer-grained and lighter rock. It was curious.

Leo rode on. He turned the horse westward, across purple grass and bog cotton, searching for paths over the wet moor. The horse trod warily on black soil, sodden, soft and springy. The moor was empty, and quiet save for a light southing wind.

The day was cool but the noon sun warmed his white skin. He came across a circle of stones, granite obelisks planted at two- or three-yard intervals. For what purpose it was not possible to say. Beyond it was a small herd of ponies. They were like Exmoor ponies but had more variety of colour. They had small heads and large, wide-set eyes. They watched the pale rider, or more likely his mount, like plain maidens at a village dance into which a beautiful visitor has trespassed. Their ears twitched, suggesting

that listening to this passing vision was as important as seeing it. They had strong bodies, with broad ribcages, well-muscled hindquarters. Their manes were full and their tails long and flowing as they turned as a group and moved away.

The ground dried and Leo and the colt crossed heather and the dark leaves of whortleberry bushes. The moor opened out and he could see the full extent of it looking westward laid out before them, sloping away into the distance. He saw a man digging on his own surrounded by nothing on that windswept heath. No horse or cart. No dwelling, not a tree. Only the lone labourer, who dug narrow spadefuls of black earth that did not crumble but cohered in rectangular tablets, which he removed and laid down to one side in a row then dug the next. The man stopped working to watch the shirtless and unbooted rider pass, each an apparition to the other on the empty moor.

Leo rode down past gorse bushes studded with yellow flowers whose pungent scent reminded him of something he could not specify, through green, aromatic bracken, and on into a steep valley, its bevelled sides ridged with buttresses of rock. In some of these granite was visible in black seams. In others, sparkling quartzite or some such mineral. The horse walked on silt, then sand, then on to valley gravels. They came to a stream in which cold clear water ran over smooth shining cobbles. The horse and the boy both drank deep.

They rode on. Sheep grazed on unfenced grass. Leo smelled a farm before he saw it. First smoke, then the muck pile. A wooden gate hung open, spars bent, split, the lowest rotting. The horse's hooves sounded in the stony lane and a dog barked. Leo walked the horse into the yard. Two muddy geese hissed at them. Grey stone outbuildings were closed or had their doors opened to darkness. Beasts resided within them, he was sure. The dog bared its teeth then slunk away.

The house was a different shape from Amos Tucker's commodious farmhouse. This was long, with a cattle byre evident to one side downstairs. Leo pulled the reins over the colt's head and tied them to a post and stepped forward and rapped upon the dark, heavy door. It opened, inward, almost instantly. A woman stood in the hallway, peering out at him.

'Do you have clothes?' the boy asked.

The woman did not answer.

'I'll work for em,' Leo said. 'Have you jobs? For food as well. I'll do anythin.'

The woman gazed out of the dim interior of her house at the bare-chested, puny boy before her. Then she looked past him.

'I's stronger than I looks, I can chop wood, or carry aught.'

The woman stepped out of the house and to one side and studied the white colt, with the avidity of one long hungry. She swallowed.

'I'll give ye clothes,' she said, 'for yon horse.'

The boy shook his head.

'I'll feed ye up an all.'

'No.'

The woman did not look at Leo. She addressed not him but the colt directly. 'I'll give ye all a my dead boy's clothes. They's in the wardrobe, the lot of em, not that there was many. We buried im in his best. You can have them others. I'll keep the horse.'

'I can't give up the horse,' Leo said. 'Let me work.'

'Ye can ave my old man's too. Ye'll grow into em.'

Leo shook his head. He wished to take hold of the woman and force her to look at him, see his need.

'I'd like that horse,' the woman said. 'I'll feed ye for a week.'

She looked at him now. They assessed one another. Weighed each other up. She was taller than he and rangy for a woman or at least a farmer's wife. He wondered if she had killed the man and the boy of whom she spoke. Or perhaps the man still lived and cut peat up on the moor. The afternoon was cooling. The sun fell. Leo trembled. He had no choice. The woman had white in her hair. She was not as muscled as she might once have been. The boy walked past her, through the open door and into the house.

'Where do you think you's goin?'

'I need clothes,' he said over his shoulder. She came after him. He saw the stairs off to the side and took them barefoot two at a time. At the top were two doors off a tiny landing. One was open, the other shut. He heard the woman climbing the stairs behind him.

'Get out a my house,' she yelled.

He stepped forward and opened the closed door. Some mouse or other rodent scuttled across the floorboards.

In the small room was a bed and a wardrobe, each of dark heavy wood. Nothing else. The boy opened the door of the wardrobe as the woman

stepped through the doorway. There was a mirror attached to the door, which swung open and gave him a view of himself, a thin pale wraith with a faint diagonal line etched in pink across his torso. Then a view of the woman as she advanced towards him. Except that it was not her. Yet it was. He could make no sense of the sight. What was she? Leo turned from her reflection to see the woman true. She had lost twenty years, had climbed the stairs and become again the young woman she had once been, swift and strong. He shielded himself with his arms and backed into the corner, flinching. What infernal magic did this house contain?

‘Is this he?’

‘No.’

Leo cowered yet he was not struck, or seized. He opened his eyes and peered between his fingers. The woman scrutinised him. She now wore, he saw, a muddy smock. And behind her stood herself, aged as she truly was.

‘It is,’ said the younger version. ‘Tis him or the ghost of him.’

‘No,’ said her mother.

‘The white horse brought him.’

‘He’s a beggar come to steal your brother’s clothes.’

‘That white horse brought him back.’

The young woman came towards Leo. She placed an arm upon his shoulder and turned him away so that he faced the wall and could not see her. All he possessed were his gypsy riding trousers. Perhaps they would soon hang in the wardrobe of this devilish abode.

He felt the young woman’s fingers upon his back. Measuring him or probing his skin. For the point of a blade? Like a butcher?

‘Don’t pull em,’ said the older woman from the doorway.

‘I shan’t,’ said the other. ‘I twist em.’

Leo could feel her fingers on his skin but not what she was doing. ‘Did ye ride through bracken?’ she said. ‘Picked yourself a couple or three ticks ere.’

When she had removed the blood-sucking insects she bade the boy sit upon the bed and picked out clothes for him. Her mother had disappeared. She chose a white flannel shirt, woollen socks, and a black serge suit. She told him to take off his trousers. Unabashed by his nakedness she had him put on her dead brother’s clothes. They smelled of someone other, yet they fitted Leo well. The boots were too big but he believed his feet would soon grow to fill them.

Downstairs in the kitchen the mother had warm stew. There was no meat in it. Leo ate greedily. The vegetables were soft and collapsed upon his tongue. The bread was hard and tasted stale but he ate all she gave him, and drank the tankard of flat beer too. The young woman had gone. She reappeared and said that the white horse was feeding and the boy thanked her.

The two women watched him eat. The light in the room was fading. The young woman told the boy he should stay the night, but he said that he could not, he must press on. She did not insist, nor ask him whence he came or where he aimed to go. The mother said that if he sought work he should try the mines, though not the one in which her son had drowned. Her daughter said that he'd be lucky to find such work for most of the mines had closed. Wheal Friendship remained, east of Mary Tavy, not two miles from here, he could not miss it.

'There was a man,' Leo said. 'Digging turf. Is he yours?'

The two women looked away from the boy and at each other. 'I warned im,' said the mother.

Her daughter shook her head.

The mother said, 'I warned im for the last time.'

'I knows you did,' said the young woman. She rose from the table. From the corner of the kitchen she took up a wooden post or cudgel the boy had not noticed before and left the house by the back door. The boy rose too. He thanked the woman for the food and the clothes and walked to the front door.

'Wait,' said the woman.

Leo turned and saw her take down a cap from a peg in the hallway. She gave it to him. He thanked her and put it on his head. Like the clothes it fitted him snugly.

Outside, the colt stood where he had been left. He munched the last of the hay from an empty tub. Beside it was a half-drunk pail of water. The reins had been removed and lain down on the ground by the wall of the house and in their place the colt had been restrained by a halter. Leo picked up the reins and walked the horse out of the yard. He did not mount up but walked on in the darkening afternoon until he saw a barn in a field. Its stone-tiled roof was half caved in but one end of the building was dry and there was straw, many years old by the look and musty smell of it. The boy gathered stalks and wisps of straw into a pile and lay down and slept, the

white colt standing hobbled for the night close by, sentinel of his safety and his dreams.

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2

In the morning, the boy in his new suit rode the horse bareback. He rode down deep, winding lanes. Hawthorn trees blossomed white, or pink. Crab apple trees likewise. Birds sang of his passing. He rode past white cottages with grey slate roofs. Leo asked their inhabitants where the mines were. All were friendly and assured him how fortunate they were to live here, in this land so rich in minerals. In the coombes and woods on the western margins or periphery of the granite moor, mines had flourished for centuries. They told him of the lead at Florence Mine up in Lydford parish, of silver at Crandford Mine in Bridestowe, of zinc at Wheal Betsy just up the road. Sadly all were closed at present. They directed him to the village of Mary Tavy and Wheal Friendship mine nearby.

*

The mine was not one pit or shaft but covered acres. Granite buildings shaped in squat blocks. High pyramids of black spoil. Chimneys, from one of which spouted pungent fumes. Others stood unused. There were rail tracks leading out of the earth. Along them a man pushed a barrow filled with some kind of rock, clattering loudly. Many buildings appeared abandoned. The noise of machinery issued from inside one, pumping and stamping. The colt looked askance at it, but let Leo lead him past. One massive waterwheel turned. Others did not, the water courses that fed them blocked or dried up or otherwise defunct.

The boy was directed to an office in the Counting House. He tied up the horse outside and knocked upon the door and entered. One man sat at a desk, writing in a ledger. He looked up.

‘Yes, boy?’

'Have you work, sir? I'm lookin for work. I have a horse. He can work, too. The horse and me.'

The man removed his wire-rimmed glasses with long, thin fingers bent like claws and peered through rheumy, grey eyes at the boy. He did not answer but turned to another man, who was reading something at a table with his back turned to the room.

'Did you hear that, Arnold?' he said. 'We have before us an optimist.' He glanced back at the boy and studied him a little longer, then once more addressed the other man, or at least his back. 'The young men hereabouts are leaving or have left already. Gone to work in the iron mines of Cumberland, so we're told. The coal mines of the north. As navvies on those new railway lines in the Home Counties. Yet here we have one hopeful lad, and with his own horse no less, come to offer us his labour. Will you not stir yourself to look upon him, brother?'

The man Arnold was heavyset, unlike his brother, and it seemed to take him a considerable effort to stir from his reading. He tried but could not turn his body much and so was obliged to stand, and twist his chair, and sit down again in order to behold this unlikely visitor.

'Do not mind my brother and his contentious manner of speaking,' he said. 'We can find you some odd jobs, boy. For you and your horse.' He rose once more, took a deep breath, and steadied himself. 'I'll show you round.' He turned to his elder brother. 'You stay there, Captain. Do not stir yourself. I'll show the boy around.'

Leaving the colt outside the office, Arnold Mann escorted Leo Sercombe on a tour of the mine. He explained that theirs was an industry in decline. Tin had been the great product of this moor but when their buyers could purchase cheaper ore from Malaya all did so. It was the same with copper. 'Fifty years ago more than half the copper used throughout the world . . .' the large man stopped and turned to Leo, spreading his short chubby arms ' . . . the world,' he repeated, 'came from west Devon and Cornwall. But then it came cheaper from elsewhere.' He shook his head. 'Abroad. So much for the Empire, eh? Does it help us?'

He showed the boy the smithy, the carpenter's shop, the dressing house. In one or two places a man pottered, retainers waiting for work to be brought to them. In the engine house the air was oily. A steam engine pulsated. It raised the tubs of copper ore to the surface, Arnold Mann said. Recessed in the solid walls were bearings for thick axles to turn huge cable

drums. The boy had never seen such massive machinery. The metal cables ran over pulley wheels above the pit, for raising and lowering the cages. ‘Back in the old days, the men climbed down the shafts on ladders,’ Arnold Mann said. One man looked after the engine, his face smudged where he’d wiped the sweat of his brow with an oily hand. The boy was not being shown jobs he might do but given a history lesson. A metal flue from the engine ran through the large shed on its way to the chimney stack. There were wooden racks around the walls. The mine owner asked the boy what he thought they were for. Leo shook his head. ‘For the miners to dry their wet clothes.’

Arnold Mann and the boy followed men who pushed trolleys along the tramway, to the crushing and sorting sheds. Here the ore was washed and separated on noisily vibrating tables over which water flowed. Back outside again, they walked uphill, the corpulent man stopping every now and then to get his breath back. He smelled of snuff. He said that a great problem here was water, inundating the sub-terrain, flooding the mines. He asked Leo with what did their clever predecessors solve the problem?

The boy did not know.

‘With water!’ said Arnold Mann. They built waterways, or leats, bringing water from up on the high moor to turn waterwheels that powered pumps that pumped water out of the mines. ‘Was that not clever?’ he said. ‘All before the age of steam.’ He was proud of his ancestors as another might be of his children. ‘There are miles of shafts and tunnels underground,’ he said, stamping his foot upon the earth. ‘Beneath us, all around.’ He opened his arms wide again. ‘We have maps,’ he said, as if the boy might not believe him. ‘Our deepest shaft is over two hundred fathoms.’ He sighed. ‘Closed now, of course.’

Leo followed him back down. Arnold Mann said that what men there still were at the mine lived locally or lodged with families roundabout. In the old days many had kipped in the bunkhouse. He did not know how many did so now. Naturally they had a stable but he could not remember where. He and his brother, who was the captain of the mine by virtue of being the eldest and no other reason, lived in the Counting House.

Arnold Mann returned to the office, leaving Leo with no advice or instruction. He untied the colt and led it round searching for the stable but could not find it. Perhaps the owner was mistaken and there never had been one. He found a shed with two dozen bunks. It smelled of old wood and

stale sweat. The stove was cool to the touch. All was covered in grey dust. Leo went back outside and walked the colt out until some way distant they found a patch of new wet grass and he let the horse graze. He broke a branch and stuck its sharper end into the ground as a stake and tethered the colt to it. He climbed further up the hill. From a height he looked down upon the mine. There was something strange about it and now he could see what that was. Nothing grew there. Grey stone buildings, ground of cinders or gravel, heaps of black waste.

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3

There was no work for the horse. Leo left him in the bunkhouse. There was no food either. Men brought their own and at crib time took pity on the boy, each giving him a morsel of their own, until the Mann brothers had their housekeeper make him pasties. Both the proprietary brothers and the miners treated the boy as a curiosity or mascot. They sent him on errands so that he could exercise the horse. A miner needed matches from the shop in Mary Tavy, paid for with mine tokens. Captain Mann needed a book returning to his friend William Crossing.

On the third day they put him to work in the refining of mundic or mispickel, known also as arsenical pyrites. It stood around in waste heaps. Now arsenic was in demand, for weedkiller, insecticide, medicine, the manufacture of paint. No longer despised. More profitable than tin or copper. On the dressing floor he learned to wash and separate the mispickel from ore.

On Saturday afternoon the men knocked off early and received their wages in the Counting House. They walked out from Wheal Friendship and set off in various directions. Leo was given four shillings and sixpence. He rode the colt out. At a farm he purchased hay and a bag of oats. Back at the mine he poured oats into a bin he'd found. The hay he separated into what he estimated were mouthfuls for a horse and the rest he laid on the floor of the bunkhouse.

On Sunday the mine was silent. Leo left the colt to feed and walked over to the Counting House. The Mann brothers came one after the other out of the front door as he approached. Leo took off his cap.

‘We are going to church, boy,’ Arthur said. ‘You are welcome to join us.’

Leo regarded the two dissimilar men. Perhaps one resembled a fat mother, the other a thin father. Or vice versa. They were dressed as on every day in dark suits, coloured waistcoats and ties, white shirts. But these were

clean and pressed, their boots shining. He looked down at his own dusty suit. He raised his head and shook it.

'You see, brother,' said Captain Mann, whose first name was Ernest. 'As I've told you, mining makes heathens of men.'

Arthur ignored his brother. 'You are not inclined to take Holy Communion?' he asked.

Again Leo shook his head.

'A mere lad,' said the captain. 'Been here a week.'

'He's not even gone underground,' Arthur said. He began to walk along the lane out of the mine. 'I thought you said it was proximity to the infernal regions that caused their nihilism.'

Captain Mann carried a stick, which he did not appear to need for walking since he raised it and used it rather in the manner of Miss Pugsley the boy's old schoolteacher, pointing at script on her blackboard, though in his case it was at something in the air only he could see. 'Perhaps he climbed down a shaft in his spare time. Driven by curiosity as foolish people have been ever since the very first.' He followed after his corpulent brother, speaking all the while, emphasising his points with his stick, until the words were lost, and soon the brothers too vanished around the first bend in the lane.

Leo knocked on the door of the Counting House. There came no answer. He knocked again, more loudly. Perhaps the housekeeper had gone to chapel. Or like the miners went home. Could he munch hay? He turned the handle and pushed the door open and went in. Doors gave off the hallway to an office and the counting rooms. The brothers' living quarters were upstairs. He walked quietly along the hallway to the kitchen. It was silent, clean, tidy. There was nothing out of place. No dirty pans or plates or cutlery. The sink was empty.

There was a doorway the boy had seen the housekeeper come out of carrying food. He surmised it led to the larder. He opened the door and stepped inside a narrow room illuminated only by a small square window at its far end. This window was slightly open, pivoting from hinges along its bottom rail, but wire mesh covered the opening anyhow. The larder was much cooler than the rest of the house. Along the two walls were wooden shelves stacked with jars and tins and bags of food. Upon a long granite worktop stood four plates, each displaying a joint of meat that was

protected by a wire-mesh hoop or bell put over it: ham, beef, chicken and pork.

The boy returned to the kitchen and found a carving knife. He sharpened the knife with a steel and returned to the larder. He carefully sliced a thin strip off each of the cold joints. Back in the kitchen he cleaned the knife and used it to cut two slices of bread off a loaf he found in an enamel bin. Between these he laid the four slices of meat. The sandwich was too large to fit in a jacket pocket so he cut it in half, put one half in each pocket, cleaned the knife and put it back in the drawer in which he'd found it. Then he took a single carrot from a rack of vegetables and left the house as quietly as he had entered it, as though despite his certainty that it was empty yet someone watched him all the while.

*

Leo rode the colt up onto the moor. He found a track and nudged the horse in the flanks with his heels, just hard enough to let him know that he could go as fast as he wished to now. The white colt cantered across the bleak terrain. He gave the impression that he could happily gallop if only he had a reason to, was a horse in search of a race.

The damp air smelled of peat. There was some bird or birds hidden in the heather, cheeping persistently. They rode beside a leat, perhaps the same one Arnold Mann had shown the boy. In its bed were grey stones stained brown. As he sat the horse gazing around, a lone sheep came floating along. It looked clever, and smug to have found a novel way to travel from one place to another, saving its frail legs as no other sheep ever had. The ewe lay on its side. Perhaps it was asleep and would at any moment wake up and clamber out of the leat, shake the wet from its wool and totter off. Then Leo saw its eyes were open and realised he was wrong. The ewe had drowned.

Again they came across wild ponies. He stood the colt and watched them from on high make their way down a shallow valley. He counted nine. They paused to graze. One ate thin grass, another chewed gorse, a third pulled sedge from the water's edge. Such was their varied menu. After a brief feed they moved on. They had to be tough to live up here all year round. Leo reckoned the white colt would not last a single winter. The boy watched the Dartmoor ponies until they disappeared. Browns, greys, nondescript,

differing yet not easy to distinguish one from another. He rode down to the same stream and dismounted. While the horse drank, Leo dislodged stones from the bank and used one of them as a tool to mix up black mud. This he took up in handfuls and plastered across the hide of the white horse, speaking to him as he did so, explaining the need for disguise since he was such a singular creature and the Orchards would not rest until he was theirs once more.

There was little wind. It was so quiet on the moor the boy thought he could hear his own heart gently beating. Leo walked the horse up to a tor and tethered him in the weak sun for the mud to dry, then climbed the rocks until he found a perch on which to sit and eat the lunch he'd taken. He opened the bread and pulled loose a thin slice of ham, rolled it into a tube and chewed it. The taste and the texture burst upon his tongue like the revelation of some truth that a wise man might express in words but was given to him by this other sense. It was not the Holy Communion of wine or wafer, but it did seem to him like the sacrament of some other ritual, once practised but since lost in time as all things were. He ate the meat and bread, crouched upon the rock in his fine suit, and beheld the horse below and knew not whether he was blessed or cursed. Wealthy or poor. Free or bound. Joyful or desolate. In time he might discover.

The boy looked around. He knew the tors were long-extinct volcanoes. He imagined them centuries ago waiting for God to light them like fireworks. Then the explosions of stone. Around the hills below them were strewn heavy grey boulders, most of random shape yet some perfect headstones or obelisks. A leat ran like a thread of grey steel around the contour of a hill. He looked out to the west. The land lay in ridges, like the ridge and furrow of the old agriculture, as if a Cornish giant farmed out there. On a promontory of land stood a church like a proud outcast of some schismatic sect, to add to the Baptists and Methodists, the Plymouth Brethren, Salvation Army, and doubtless others the boy had failed to ever comprehend the point of.

When he climbed down, Leo walked away from the rocks, then turned abruptly in order to look upon the horse as a stranger might. It was a feat of magic, no less. The elegant beast had been replaced by a scruffy, uncared for, unremarkable cob. Though his form was unchanged, really. Leo approached. The colt looked mournful, like one standing in the rain, head down, unnaturally still. Downcast, miserable.

‘How can you know what you look like?’ Leo asked him. ‘What do you care?’

The horse would not look at him. The boy shook his head. He peered up at the sky as if beseeching the clouds for assistance, then back at the horse. He threw up his hands. ‘I hear you,’ he exclaimed. ‘You damn beast. I hear you.’

The boy rode his muddy horse down off the high moor, descending some way south to where he’d that morning ascended. There at the edge of heathland he discovered further mine workings. These were entirely abandoned. The roofs of buildings had begun to collapse as the wooden beams rotted. Doors and windows were disintegrating. Grains of soil had accumulated on gravel and spoil; seeds of wild grass or weeds had sprouted therein, giving the landscape a watery wash of green like a first thin coat of paint. A ramp ran down into a large pool. Leo pulled loose some tufts of scratchy heather. He removed his jacket, shirt and waistcoat, then his trousers, and laid them on a rock. He led the horse into the water and stood him there while he brushed and scraped the once again wet mud off, apologising for whatever insult he’d inflicted. The water was horribly cold. Leo shivered as he worked, naked but for his boots, standing in the water up to his waist, his boots drenched but necessary to protect his feet from the horse’s hooves. When the white colt was once more clean Leo pulled on the clothes over his damp skin. He rode the horse out of the quarry, trying to eat the carrot he’d taken despite his chattering teeth.

Back at the bunkhouse Leo gathered wood for the stove. The Mann brothers were back in their house and he begged a light. Arthur gave him a box of matches. He lit the stove and hung his wet boots and damp clothes all around to dry, and sat wrapped in a musty blanket close by, watching the flames. The horse too stood there, warming himself, perhaps lost in the fire’s display as the boy was, with the same vague ruminations. Who could say?

*

On Monday morning the miners returned to work. None said a word but moved warily, with eyes half closed. No man worked harder than he had to.

Leo did not know whether they suffered hangovers still from Saturday night or had drunk on the Lord's day too.

Three men did not turn up so they put the boy to work in the ovens. These were huge stone-built calciners where the mispickel was roasted. Vapour passed through a huge flue, condensing upon its surface. The men covered Leo's hands and feet. They padded his mouth. They blocked first his nostrils, then his ears. He was given a metal scraper and a bucket, and sent into the metal flue-pipe. He spent that day working hard. They told him that he would be paid three times as much as he had the week before. His eyes stung. When he took the plug from his nose he could smell the sulphurous odour. He looked at the men who worked there and understood that those who did not escape were dead men.

On the morning following, the boy rose before first light. Rain drummed upon the roof of the bunkhouse. He gave the horse the remainder of the oats and when he had fed led him out of the mine. With the sack of hay tied upon his back like a rucksack, Leo headed west.

4

In the driving rain Leo walked on the leeward side of the horse, using the beast for protection. Still, he was soon soaked. A road curved south around the moor from Okehampton. The boy did not wish to be seen upon it and so kept to back lanes and tracks. Peter Tavy church had four knobbly decorated points at the top of its tower, like the crown of some comical king. A black crow spread its ominous wings and launched itself from the tower as if performing an act of great bravado.

The boy and the colt walked through the sodden land. At a dip in a lane, a run-off of water flowed from a field of red soil and swilled like a pool of blood. They splashed through it.

With no sun Leo had nothing by which to guide the way save for the road to his right and the moor on his left-hand side. The boy soon began to doubt his instinct. When he came to a mine he thought at first it was Wheal Friendship and that he had navigated a convoluted circular route back there, but it soon became apparent that this was a different one, abandoned. He found a shed with its roof intact and took shelter there. He broke up an old cupboard and lit a fire with the matches Arnold Mann had given him, which had kept dry in an inside pocket of his waistcoat.

Around midday, though the sky did not clear, the rain ceased and they set out again. Leo mounted the horse and rode. The sound of water running downhill, along streams, in underground drains and riverlets, accompanied them. The sky was grey but that single word did not begin to describe it. The boy let the colt plod and splash through the puddles in the lanes and studied the sky above him. You could dismiss the firmament as overcast or you could look at it. He did not have the vocabulary to describe the fluctuating shades of grey where the sun tried to shine through thin cloud here or rain-filled thick clouds there. He saw charcoal grey, pewter, ash. He saw slate, granite. But granite itself was not uniform. Neither were the cold

ashes of a dead fire. A man would need a thousand words to describe all the varieties of colour upon which he gazed. Only a fool would say the sky was grey.

A wasp buzzed. Close by. It must be flying around his head somewhere. Except that some quality of the sound suggested distance. Not an insect. A machine. Approaching. He stopped the horse. The sound grew louder, coming closer from along the winding lane. Leo slid off the horse and pulled him hard against the hedge and gripped the bridle tight. A horn blew, high-pitched, like the alarm call of a fractious mallard, and the colt tensed. The combustion engine grew louder, then it appeared around the corner thirty yards away, and bore down upon them.

Eyes wide, the horse reared up as motorbike and rider screamed towards them. Perhaps what the colt saw was a grotesque parody of himself. Hooves replaced by wheels. Frame, rods and forks, pistons and pipes, the parts of a skeleton of a creature without flesh, nothing but bone. The colt pranced on his hooves as if the ground were suddenly too hot to stand on. Holding tight the bridle, Leo glimpsed the rider hunched over his motorbike like a jockey, gripping the handlebars with leather gloves, some kind of spectacles buckled to his head beneath a peaked cap, worn back to front.

The bike disappeared around the next bend and the sound of the engine, like the scream of some animal in pain, faded away. When the boy could hear it no more, still its impact remained, some strange resonance, as if it had sucked oxygen out of the air, and the atmosphere would require a period of readjustment.

Leo spoke to the horse, calming him from the terror of this intrusion. Holding the bridle with his left hand, he pressed the fingers of his right hand to the skin beneath the colt's jaw until he found the artery there, and felt the animal's heartbeat hammering, almost as fast as his own.

*

They rode down into the town of Tavistock. There was intermittent traffic: traps, a governess cart, carrier carts, drays. He was surely conspicuous amongst them. A number of the large granite buildings in the centre of the town possessed battlements, as if they aspired to the status of castles, yet the crenellations only made them look like children's toys. Like Lottie's

facsimile, Leo remembered, of the big house in its own attic. In Tavistock he found a bakery and bought bread. In a provision store he bought a lump of cheese. A greengrocer sold him apples and carrots, and gave the boy a potato sack to carry these victuals.

Leo mounted and rode out of the town. He followed the Tavy river down along a wooded valley. In one stretch all the trees were being throttled by ivy. In another the trunks of the beeches were covered in moss of an intense green, as if these trees had grown themselves an extra skin.

The moist air smelled fresh from the downpour. No more rain fell from the sky but when a breeze shimmered through the valley, water dripped from the leaves. The rain had swollen the river, which ran dark brown. Four men built a wall beside it. Two dressed in waders stood in the water, the other two on the bank above. All stopped working to watch the boy as he passed them on the white horse, gazing blankly at him, none raising an arm to greet him or acknowledge his passing, as if he were some strange child of the woods of whom they had heard tell but never seen before.

He rode beside a stream, through a valley with fields of meadow and marsh grass, no beasts grazing thereon and woods rising to either side. He saw men cutting trees with long two-handled saws.

A chaffinch stood on the branch of a tree and called to him. Leo attempted to whistle back to it in its own language but it took off and flew away. He stopped and ate some bread and cheese. As he ate, Leo stood and listened to the birds. He could hear them calling – small birds, wood pigeons, crows. The air around him was composed of layers of birdsong.

*

In the afternoon he forded a stream and rode up out of the woods along a lane past large, long, quadrangular fields. Some for grazing, others ploughed. Beneath the young corn the soil was turning red again. As they kept climbing out of the steep valley, he and the horse rose straight up to the sky above, clear blue, washed clean by the rain. Up on the ridge he crossed a single-gauge railway line and then entered a large field across which a flock of sheep grazed. His arrival vitalised them. They came towards the horse, crowding all together, hustling and shoving, noisily bleating. They parted enough to allow passage through their midst then followed the horse

and rider across their high field with a plaintive chorus of lamentation, beseeching them to stay. They'd hoped the boy was their Messiah long awaited, come to free them from their sorrow, yet they knew already that he was not, merely another false prophet, and so they wailed loud and resentful once again, a congregation grieving for themselves. If they could betray him to the gypsies they would.

*

In the cooling evening the boy sat his horse and looked upon the wide valley below, pondering his route down to the brown river, which snaked south, nosing its way towards the sea. Mist rose from the water. There was traffic on the river, boats of different size and sail. He could see one bridge. To the north was a quay with many buildings, and ramps, conveyors, sheds, bustling even at this late hour of the day.

Across a water meadow lay a path. A ribbon of mist formed along it as he watched. He kicked the horse forward. They descended the steep fields, the boy leaning back almost with his own spine along that of the animal, so sharp was the incline.

They rode along the misted pathway like ghosts of those countless animals and riders whose passage had hollowed out their route. As he approached the riverbank, Leo looked up. The bridge was a viaduct, raised on huge pillars, a hundred feet above the river. A train steamed across it. Halfway across, its whistle blew, for the benefit of its passengers, perhaps. Leo watched the plume of white smoke in the wake of the train dissipate in the sky, whose colour was turning to a paler blue before it darkened into night.

He rode on upstream, passing beneath two of the massive pillars.

*

'An a'penny for you, but if you wishes me to take yon horse twill be a penny a'penny.'

The ferryman was a stout, bearded man with muscular shoulders. He did not look simple but perhaps he was.

'I do wish to bring the horse, sir,' Leo said. 'How could I not?'

The ferryman shrugged. ‘Let im swim?’

Leo looked across the river. Some kind of steamer sailed downstream.

‘I won’t be able to take no one else, see?’ the ferryman said. ‘They wouldn’t want to share the platform with no horse who might turn spooky, see?’

The boy looked around. There were no people in sight, and little prospect of further passengers. He said nothing, but handed over the money and led the horse onto the barge. As the ground shifted the colt skittered, sliding his hooves one way and another to secure his balance. The ferryman loosed the rope coiled around a wooden post on the riverbank. He stepped onto the barge and took up the oar and placed it in a rowlock on the back plate of the vessel and began promptly to work it to and fro in the water, both oar and rudder in one.

Leo held the horse, and stroked his shoulders. The barge moved slowly but unwaveringly towards its corresponding bay on the far bank. The ferryman must have much knowledge and skill to work so consistently against the current. As they came into the middle of the river the boy saw fish in the water before and around the boat, a multitude of them, all swimming downstream. He turned in confusion to the ferryman and yelled to ask him what they were.

‘Salmon,’ the man called back. ‘Come up the Tamar to spawn. This lot was born somewhere up there.’ He gestured with his chin upriver. ‘Two year old. Now they’s headin out to sea.’

The barge progressed through the shoal of fish and on to the far bank. The quarryman turned the barge and docked. He secured the rope to its post. Then Leo led the horse onto the bank, and mounted, and rode on into Cornwall.

Part Five

DISSECTION

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1

Lottie, July 1913

The lad walked silently through the walled garden, on through the glasshouse and down the steps to open the door. Sid Sercombe stepped into the dank cellars. The girl was there, waiting for him. Often she was not, and he would leave a package for her in the old oak cupboard amongst the stack of stowed furniture. He handed her a small parcel tight-wrapped in hessian.

She took it and did not thank him but said, ‘Do you have more or fewer bones in your body now than when you were born, Sidney?’

The lad frowned and said, ‘I do not know, Miss Charlotte.’ He shook his head. ‘I never thought about it.’

‘Have you never studied a skeleton?’

‘Not a human one, miss.’

‘In that case,’ she said in a tone of forbearance, ‘you might consider the matter a moment now, and favour me with an answer.’

Sid pondered the riddle. ‘Well, I never counted em,’ he said. ‘And I don’t know as I’ve lost any. As I noticed, like.’ He bit his lower lip in concentration. ‘My brother Fred did push me out a tree when us was nippers and snapped the bone in my arm here. I thought twas mended but maybe there’s two bones now where there was one before.’ He smiled. ‘Yes, tis a trick question, Miss Charlotte, and that’s your answer. I has one more bone than I was born with.’

The girl shook her head. ‘You have far fewer,’ she said. ‘You were born with three hundred. A number of bones fuse together in childhood. How old are you, Sidney?’

‘Seventeen year old.’

The girl looked up at him. ‘By the time you are fully grown, if you are not already, you’ll have not many more than two hundred.’ She nodded to the small packet in her hands. ‘Now, what have you brought me?’

Lottie placed the parcel on a dust-covered table and untied the string. Then she unwrapped the hessian and beheld the contents.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Another rat. Is that the best you could do?’

‘Her’s fresh. Alive not an hour ago.’

‘But still. You have given me a number of rats.’

‘See how swollen her belly is,’ Sid said. ‘Pregnant. And well on, I should say.’

The girl gasped. ‘But that’s marvellous!’ she said. ‘It’s just what I wanted.’ She folded the wrapping as it had been before and tied the string. ‘Here,’ she said, and gave the lad one penny. ‘Thank you, Sidney.’

The girl turned and hurried away along the corridor through the cellars. The lad went back out of the door by which he’d entered and walked away from the big house.

2

The girl helped herself from the silver chafing dishes set on the sideboard: poached and scrambled eggs, haddock, kidneys. There were also hot rolls, three kinds of marmalade. A cold platter of ham. She carried her plate to the table. Her father read the newspaper. He tilted his head slightly and looked up at her over the top of his spectacles, and smiled, and returned to his reading. The girl munched her breakfast. The poached eggs were perfectly done, runny orange yolk inside firm white globes, which meant Cook had poached them herself. Anyone else and the yolk was too hard or even worse the white too runny, gelatinous, it made lottie sick.

'Does it not bother you, Papa,' she said, 'to know that what you are reading about took place the day before yesterday?'

Her father looked at her, then lifted his cup and sipped coffee. 'Your grandfather's copy took not one but two days to reach here. Things are speeding up.'

The girl was unimpressed. 'I don't know how you can stand it,' she said, smiling. 'I could not.'

Arthur Prideaux removed his glasses. 'Much of what is reported from around the Empire has taken days, weeks even, to reach London. Look at this.' He lifted the newspaper and brushed his fingers against the page. 'Skirmishes on the Northern Frontier district of the East Africa Protectorate. There's nothing there, only arid waste, but the few unfortunate inhabitants are raided for their cattle by Abyssinians. Tribes bring their own beasts in from Somaliland to graze and steal the water from the wells. Ivory hunters cross the border in both directions. It says here a gang of Abyssinian outlaws attacked a platoon of native rifles. Shot the British officer. Murdered the poor fellow. It happened weeks ago. What does another day matter?'

He reached forward and scooped a spoonful of marmalade, dolloping it onto the remnant of toast left on his plate. He lifted the toast and ate it. Lottie could hear it crunch between his teeth. He swallowed, and said, ‘One is told that many of the stars in the night sky burned out long ago, they do not exist, their light has taken aeons to reach us, yet still we study them.’

‘I don’t.’ Her father smiled again. Lottie saw and scowled. ‘You read the news down here a day later than almost everyone else in England does, Papa. That is sad.’

Lord Prideaux shrugged, with mournful theatricality, as if to say, What can one do? One does the best one can in the circumstances. ‘Would you rather live closer to London?’ he asked. ‘Or Manchester, perhaps?’

The girl shook her head and said, ‘I’m sorry, Papa. If being a little out of touch with events is the price we pay for living here, it is a small one. You are right.’ She poured a glass of pear juice and drank, then put her glass down and said, ‘Where is your heart, Papa?’

‘My heart?’ He frowned. ‘It is with you, my dear girl, of course. It is with your mother and always will be. But time moves on, and—’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I mean, whereabouts in your body? The organ. Touch your chest to show me where your heart is.’

‘Oh, I see. Well.’ Her father raised his left hand then changed his mind and lowered it and raised his right hand instead and touched his jacket over his left breast.

‘That’s what everyone does,’ Lottie said. ‘You’re all wrong. Our heart is in the middle of our chests. The bottom of it leans over to the left and the strongest pumps are located there, so that’s where we feel our heartbeat. It’s an illusion.’

‘I didn’t know that, my dear.’ Her father nodded. ‘Thank you. Most impressive.’

‘Some of our organs are to the right and the left of our body. Like eyes and ears, of course. And kidneys.’

‘I see.’

‘Two organs that are almost identical, but not quite. Have you any idea how many organs there are in a human body, Papa?’

Arthur Prideaux rubbed his eyes. ‘I don’t believe I do,’ he said, but he was already putting his reading glasses back on.

‘Almost fifty. Isn’t that remarkable?’

'It is,' her father murmured, while glancing at his watch. 'I say, my dear, won't Ingrid be expecting you?'

'Which one do you think is the biggest?'

Lord Prideaux removed his glasses once again. 'What?'

'Which is the largest organ in the human body?'

Her father inhaled deeply, and sighed. 'I don't know,' he said. 'The heart?'

'No. You'll never guess, Papa. Nobody does.'

'Well, perhaps I just might. The lungs?'

'No. Do you give in?'

'Of course not. It's a trick question, isn't it? Some odd thing . . .' He gazed towards the table and swung his head slowly from side to side. Then he looked up. 'Of course! I know, the guts . . . they're much longer than we think. What's it called? The colon.'

'No. Shall I tell you, Papa?'

Her father breathed in and then breathed out, his shoulders dropping.

'Well, all right,' he said.

Lottie grinned. 'The skin.'

'Skin?' her father said. 'Piffle. The skin is not an organ, dear girl.'

'Yes, it is,' she said. 'Nobody gets that one.' She rose from her seat and turned and walked to the door, her father watching until she'd left the room before he returned to his two-day-old copy of *The Times*.

3

The dowager Lady Prideaux, Lottie's great-grandmama, no longer left her bed. In the morning her maid washed and dressed her, changed the bedding, then fed her, one spoonful at a time. Often she needed help with her tasks from Lottie's maid Gladys, for the old lady became distressed. The only one who could reliably calm her down was her great-granddaughter. So this morning after breakfast Lottie did as she always did before her lessons with Ingrid Goettner and visited her great-grandmama. The old lady lay whimpering like a frightened bird and Lottie took her hand and spoke to her until her agitation subsided. Then she placed a kiss upon her powdered cheek and left the room.

The girl studied Latin grammar for one hour then history for one more. While Lottie read of Romulus and Remus, then of William Tell, her governess marked the Latin/German translation she had set her.

At eleven o'clock the maid brought in a tray of milk and biscuits – some flavoured with lemon, others almond. Lottie told her governess that the crumbs would pass from their stomachs to their small intestines. Ingrid grimaced. Lottie said that this organ was twenty feet long. The molecules of food would creep through its walls to tiny blood vessels, or capillaries to be precise, and be carried in the blood to parts of the body where they could become molecules of new human cells.

'Of course what is not needed will continue, to the large intestine, and on to the rectum, and—'

'Yes, thank you, Lottie,' Ingrid said. 'It is very interesting. Just what I am wishing to consider as we take our elevenses.'

'It is natural.'

'It is crude.'

'Oh, don't be such a muff, Ingrid.'

The governess was of indeterminate age. Her unlined face could have been that of a girl but she wore dark, sternly cut clothes with high collars and her hair tight to her head, and her dark tresses had single white hairs scribbled amongst them if one looked at all closely. Lottie did not believe that she herself would become one of those vain, empty-headed women she had met at that summer's parties, yet she reckoned she would pluck such errant hairs if they appeared before they should. She wondered whether Ingrid might be as old as thirty or even forty but had not quite the impudence to ask. Nor had she determined the cause of her governess's limp.

'You are ready to leave, Lottie, this is plain to see. You must be patient.'

'I do not wish to leave. Why should I have to? Other girls don't go until they're seventeen or eighteen.'

'Oh, you will love Weimar, Lottie. Your German relations will amuse and entertain you, I promise.'

'They are not my real cousins. And Papa says I will not be able to take Blaze with me.'

'Yes, but there are muscular horses in Prussia too – the Trakehners. This is I believe the most spirited warm-blood breed in the world. Come, Lottie. Back to work. We shall read some Fontane.'

*

At lunchtime Lottie went to the kitchen where until this year she had always shared her midday meal with the servants. She understood it was frowned upon now and her meal was served to her in the dining room instead. She went to the larder and returned with a tomato, an apple and a potato of almost identical size. She laid them upon the kitchen table. 'Look at these, Cook,' she said. 'Which has the most water inside it?'

The cook was working at the stove and did not look at the girl or the items, but said, 'I haven't the foggiest, my lovely.'

Lottie shook her head. She turned to the three servants who had taken their places around the table for lunch. She repeated the question. 'It might be important,' she said. 'If you find yourself in a crisis. A person can go weeks without food but you'd never last one week without water. You'd be really up the stick.'

The head gardener Alf Satterley said he would study the matter. He reached over and took up the tomato, rotating it in his hands like a cricket ball. He put it back. The apple he scrutinised likewise, then the potato. ‘I should a reckoned, Miss Charlotte,’ he said, ‘to decide by weight. Water I should say weighs more than the flesh of a fruit or vegetable. The potato weighs the most.’

Lottie made to speak but the gardener resumed. ‘Yet I do not believe it, for I consider bitin into each a them. And when I does consider it, I find the tomato has the most water. The spud the least. The apple somewhere’s in between.’

The others had followed what the old man said and now turned to the girl to hear her judgement. She frowned. ‘You are right. A lucky guess.’ She turned and said, ‘I suppose I had better have lunch now, Cook,’ and walked out of the kitchen.

*

After lunch, while waiting to resume her studies with Ingrid, the girl sat upon a sofa in the drawing-room watching her maid Gladys cleaning. She bent and dipped a cloth in a bucket of warm water and wrung it out till it was merely damp then wiped around the outside of picture frames. She climbed the stepladder to reach the picture rail.

‘Do you know,’ Lottie said, ‘what most of the grime you’re collecting is composed of?’

Gladys looked down at the young mistress. ‘I should say tis mostly dust, Miss Charlotte.’

‘House dust is largely made up of cells of the skin we shed. That’s what you’re wiping away.’ Lottie closed one eye. She balled her hand into a fist save for thumb and forefinger leaving a minuscule gap between them. She held this up to her open eye and said, ‘Thousands of infinitesimal flakes of dead skin.’

Gladys descended the ladder and rinsed the rag in the bucket once more. ‘I should prefer to think of dust as dust, Miss Charlotte, if I may.’

‘Or hairs,’ Lottie said. ‘Do you not find human hairs when you sweep the carpets? We lose about one hundred hairs a day from our heads. They fall

out.' She saw the look of alarm on the maid's face. 'We grow many more, Gladys.'

'I suppose,' the young woman said, 'that Mister Shattock, the groom, his cottage must be clean's a whistle these days.'

*

When she joined her father in the drawing-room for afternoon tea, Lottie found Alice Grenvil already there. She was in the act of pouring tea for Lord Prideaux.

'Lottie, my darling,' Alice said. 'Will you have tea or lemonade?'

It was their custom for the maid to leave the tray upon the table, with cakes or scones, and Lottie would serve her father. 'I shall cut the cake,' she said. 'Which would you prefer, Papa, ginger or fruit cake?' She kept an eye on Alice. 'Papa only takes a dash of milk,' she said.

'I know,' Alice told her.

'He cannot bear weak tea. Can you, Papa? And one sugar.'

Arthur Prideaux asked after Alice's father, his friend Duncan. She said he was well but London life bored him. He wished to come home. 'He says in his letter that the glory of our capital is the Thames flowing through it. But whenever he sees the river all he wants is to get a boat and row into the countryside.' Alice asked Arthur if he did not feel duty bound to attend the Upper House himself. He told her that he felt no such obligation for he had nothing original to say on the sort of matters under discussion and would not inflict his views on other members, but that he did attend if called upon. When there was some abhorrent bill to be resisted, for instance. He relied upon Duncan to let him know if his presence was required.

'Papa is not a country bumpkin, you see,' Lottie said. 'Whatever he claims. He follows events, but from a distance.'

'Through field glasses,' her father said.

'Mama was more involved, wasn't she, Papa? In improving the lives of people on the estate. People still tell me about her work. And in the village. She persuaded Papa to build the new school.'

Arthur Prideaux accepted a second piece of fruit cake. Alice tried it too and said that she thought their cook to be top drawer.

'She is indeed,' Arthur said.

Lottie stuck with the ginger cake. It was dark, almost black with molasses, and moist. She savoured its texture in her mouth, its spicy taste on her tongue.

‘Alice has a present for you, my dear,’ her father said.

‘Oh, yes,’ Alice said. She rose and went out of the room, returning carrying a long box or case. She laid it on the floor at Lottie’s feet and, kneeling, unclipped the catches and lifted the lid. She swivelled the case towards Lottie.

‘You know what a terrible shot I am,’ Alice said. ‘And frankly I have no interest in improving myself. Your papa says you almost certainly do.’

Lottie gazed at the pair of light Churchill guns. Then she jumped off her chair so that she too was kneeling on the carpet and hugged Alice Grenvil and thanked her profusely. She let go and studied one of the guns and ran her hands along the stock and the barrel and the decoration around the name E. J. Churchill.

Alice glanced up at Arthur Prideaux and smiled and he nodded to her, smiling likewise.

4

Lottie Prideaux opened the door to the library and walked in. The room was empty. She looked around for the magnifying glass. Her father used it to read the old almanacs and encyclopaedias, whose print was too small to read with the naked eye. The people of earlier epochs had better eyesight. This was, he claimed, but one of many measures of human decline. She found the instrument and removed her jacket. Though she intended only to borrow the glass, she hid it inside the jacket when she left the room. She walked across the hallway and up the stairs. She saw and heard no one, yet felt herself observed. The big house itself seemed to be listening to her, watching her, as she climbed the stairs.

In the attic nursery Lottie laid out the implements she might need upon the table. In the hours between tea and dinner she could expect to be undisturbed. The small hammer she had found in the cellar, amongst a box of tools that she believed might once have belonged to a cobbler, though she was not sure at all. The tiny nails or pins she'd begged from the estate carpenter, who said he used them when glazing windows and gave her a handful. The small, sharp pair of scissors were in the sewing kit that had once belonged to her mother. The slightly larger, blunter pair she'd found at the back of a drawer in her father's desk. She had never seen him use them and did not believe he would miss them. The tweezers or forceps were her own. The board was an old bread or chopping board found in the shed in the back yard. She had two knives, one a penknife, the other a small kitchen knife Cook had missed at once and even now, six months later, would shake her head periodically and bemoan: 'Wherever has it got to?' Sid Sercombe had showed Lottie how to sharpen them, and given her a whetstone, a small bottle of oil and a sharpening steel. The pipette she had been given by the new veterinary surgeon, Patrick Jago.

Lottie unwrapped the parcel the under keeper had given her that morning and placed the rat on its back upon the board. She spread out its four clawed feet and pinned them to the wood with smart taps of the hammer. The creature had been dead no more than twelve hours and smelled strangely like a dog. A sharp but not unclean aroma.

She counted the nipples or mammary glands. A row of five along each side of its belly. There were three openings above the tail: this, the vaginal; this, the urethral; this, the anal.

Lottie gripped the rat's brown hair with her tweezers and lifted a pinch of skin above the urethra. Using the sharp scissors she inflicted a small wound. Then using her tweezers she lifted the skin and inserted the larger scissors, their blades unopened, into the wound, and poked them in from side to side to rupture the connective tissue and separate the skin from the muscle beneath. One of the scissor blades was rounded at its end and blunt. With this one under the skin and the other sharper one above, she cut the skin of the rat along the middle of its belly up to its thorax.

Holding up the flap of skin with the tweezers, Lottie separated more of the tissue between skin and muscle using the same scissors, lifting the flap away, first on one side, then the other. The world around her disappeared as all her concentration settled on the small carcass before her. With the sharper, smaller scissors she cut the skin in diagonal lines out to each of the four legs, and lifted the two flaps of skin out, and pinned them as she had the claws, with a nail at each corner. Now she could smell the slightly metallic odour of blood.

All the viscera were there dimly visible beneath the encasing wall of muscle. Lottie made a hole in the rat's muscle wall beneath where she had done so in the skin and cut up through it, careful not to disturb what lay beneath. The muscle was thin from being stretched by the rat's pregnancy and easier to cut than normal. She sliced up as far as the ribcage, then cut through the thin bone as well. Cartilage and bone breaking made a faint sound and was soon done. Now she could scent a rank smell of meat. She made diagonal cuts in the muscle as she had the skin and lifted it out in flaps on either side and pinned it likewise.

Lottie had been surprised to discover that she was not squeamish. The inner structures and workings of the small bodies Sid gave her were so engrossing. She picked up the penknife in her right hand with her tweezers in the left and delved into the rat's innards. There was its diaphragm,

separating the abdominal cavity from the thoracic cavity. There was the dark red liver. Beside the liver was the rat's stomach. She lifted the stomach and found what appeared to be a further part of the liver, yet it was separate from it so could not be, surely. She consulted the anatomy textbook the vet had given her. There. It must be the spleen.

The small intestine was orange. She did not know why. It was covered by globules of white fat. When people spoke of guts did they mean the stomach only or the whole of the digestive tract? The small intestine fed into the slightly larger intestine. Where they met was an organ peculiar to herbivores, the caecum, where the cellulose they consumed was broken down. Humans possessed one but it had no function and was connected to the appendix. Or was the caecum another word for the appendix in humans? She could not remember. The one in this rat was a tiny lump of reddish matter.

The heart was a compact little fist, with the lungs on either side. They looked like nothing at all but she found her pipette and inserted it into the rat's mouth and pumped in air and saw the lungs bloom. The heart that beat, boom-boom, boom-boom, and lungs that breathed in and out, in and out. How incredible they were. People didn't realise.

Lottie was taking her time, she was aware of that. Affirming what she already knew, putting off the fresh discovery awaiting her. She moved aside the organs she'd identified and found another, surrounded by fat. Using the knife she cut away the fat to reveal a bean-shaped kidney. It was a similar dark red colour to the liver and the spleen. Perhaps a little more purple. There were many minuscule blood vessels attached to it.

The other kidney Lottie would have sought and studied to see how they each connected to other organs but her patience ran out. She beheld the womb or uterus, normally a long, insignificant ribbon of pale flesh; now it ringed the rat's belly, a sausage curled around its innards.

Lottie counted the shapes inside. Six on one side, five on the other. Eleven rat babies. She cut into the uterus and carefully removed one of the foetuses. Attached to it by a pale umbilical cord was its dark red placenta. The foetus was tightly bound inside its amniotic sac. She cut this open and scraped it off, and studied the tiny, strange, embryonic creature before her. She could make out its head, its snout. The forelimbs, the hind limbs, all beginning to emerge from the blob of flesh. Were those not its eyes just starting to form? She could feel a kind of tingling sensation. These cells had

multiplied and divided. Life was formed. Did people – her father? Her tutor? – not realise how extraordinary this was? No one had told her. It was something she was discovering for herself. Biology. The science of life. It was more fascinating than anyone could imagine.

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Part Six

ON THE FARM

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1

Leo, September 1913–April 1914

The day was Michaelmas, the twenty-ninth of September, 1913. The boy on the white colt rounded up the flock of one hundred and twenty ewes and secured them in a hurdled pen. The horse had taken to the work.

The shepherd put a dark red, powdered iron oxide in an old bucket. He added linseed oil and stirred the mixture to a paste. Leo caught the first ewe with the crook and brought it stuttering on three legs to the old man. He examined each ewe. Some had fared badly in the summer from the fly. Others had damaged udders. Mastitis. He took the boy through ailments from which sheep commonly suffered. What he should look out for. The beasts were prone to scab, mange, worm. They could breed despite such conditions. As he had grown older this was one thing he had learned. Eye disease, foot rot. Another thing was that they could lie down and die from no apparent cause. ‘There’s naught the little sods likes better an dyin on you,’ the old man said. ‘I swear they thinks on nothin else while they’re grazin.’

The shepherd Vance Brewer wore a coat of dark grey fustian, a hard-wearing cloth with a heavy weft. He had a white moustache, part stained or burned brown from the cigarettes he smoked. His clothes smelled of Jeyes fluid and cider and tobacco. His breath stank of onions. He doubtless smelled of sheep, too, but so did Leo himself, and was no longer bothered by it. It had only taken him a week or two to become accustomed to the animals’ unpleasant odour.

The shepherd mouthed the ewes. As they squirmed in his grip, he winced from the pain in his hip, cursed and kicked them to subservience. The youngest had two teeth. These ewes he told the boy to mark upon the back

of their heads. Leo dipped a short stick into the raddle and applied a little of the paste. Those a year older, with four teeth, he marked on the neck. The six-toothed ewes were marked between the shoulders and the full-mouthed in the middle of their backs. All these ewes, marked for tupping, Leo let loose in the field.

As ewes grew older their teeth continued to grow. They became long in the tooth, and often lost one or two. These sheep the old man called broken-mouthed. He told Leo to mark them on the rump, as he did those he knew to be barren.

Leo asked Vance Brewer why he culled every ewe who'd lost as much as a single tooth, even when her udders were correct.

'Broken-toothed sheeps can't eat turnips and that,' the old man told him. 'How's they goin to give their lambs good milk?'

Leo said nothing. He put the ewes marked thus in a different pen. The gaffer would take them to market. Supposedly for slaughter, though Vance claimed that disreputable farmers bought cheap broken-toothed ewes and bred from them for a further year, if not more. Leo tried to imagine such a farm, meaner than this one, but could not.

After some time Vance Brewer asked the boy to tell him exactly how many he had examined. As some of these were already out of sight the boy had to count the larger group still within the holding pen, and subtract this figure from the number of the flock. This he attempted to do but could not, for the animals would not stay still. He climbed into the pen and tried again. They huddled close together and he could not distinguish one from another. His failed attempts amused the old shepherd, watching with an open-mouthed grin. Eventually the boy gave up.

'You has to count em as you study em, see?' Vance Brewer said. 'Tis the only way. No one could do it else.'

'Have you been countin em?' Leo asked.

'I have,' the shepherd said. 'Us have checked forty ewes. That's one-third a my flock and I reckon tis time for our mornin croust.'

Leo shook his head. 'You can count, Mister Brewer, and not just on yer fingers.'

'You has to be a mathematician in this job,' the old man said, tapping his skull, still grinning.

The flock was of long-woolled sheep. They were tough, short but bulky in form. All but two or three of the ewes were placid. They weighed around twelve stone each and the boy could not lift them. Neither could the old shepherd. Together they could.

The ewes' faces were white, though their fleece came down in a fringe, veiling their eyes, giving them a coy appearance. Their fleece was hard-wearing and used in carpet-making. Vance Brewer claimed that Cornish long-woolled sheep produced more wool than any other breed in the United Kingdom. Leo did not know if this was true. The shepherd also said the animals could be sheared as young lambs.

'Beautiful lambswool like you never sin,' Vance Brewer said proudly.

*

Five days after Vance Brewer's examination of his ewes Leo rode the colt and gathered the flock once more. The shepherd had no dog. There was not one on the farm. By the markings upon their backs they separated the maiden ewes from the rest. The old man wore a pinafore or frock he'd cut for himself from a sack. Again they mixed the red paste, but this time they raddled the rams, upon their breasts or briskets. There were three such. Vance Brewer put the old one with the thirty-two maiden ewes, and the young rams with the rest. 'Eighty-eight between the two of em,' he told Leo. 'Think they'll manage?'

Then the shepherd and the boy left them alone. Periodically over the days following they returned to the pens and released the ewes with the red mark upon them that showed they had been served.

*

When Leo had ridden into the farmyard and asked for work Cyrus Pepperell, the tenant farmer, told him that his horse didn't look strong enough for agricultural labour and neither did he. The boy assured him that together they were worth more than any other horse or lad. Mister Pepperell narrowed his eyes. He said the boy was lucky, he was looking to take on a new lad, having only just let one go.

'You'll be wantin fodder for yon horse – I'll take it out a yer wages,' the farmer said. 'Let's try you, boy. Learn the shepherdin from my old chap. He was a dab with sheep. As good as any in his time.'

He shook Leo's hand. It was like grasping rough-barked wood. The farmer took Leo to the barn and told the old man to show the boy the ropes. Vance Brewer regarded Leo through narrowed eyes. When the gaffer had gone, he muttered, 'The ropes? Do he want a shepherd boy or a fuckin sailor? I spose he don't reckon I'll be needin many more pair a shoes, do e?'

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2

The farm lay in the bottom of a coombe, miles from the nearest village, south of Bodmin Moor. The land was all up and down, nothing level, yet more rounded than steep. It reminded the boy of his mother's bread-making. The earth here had been kneaded into shape. The sloping fields were small and overlooked by woods. Even on clear days the sun found it hard to find the farm. Vance Brewer told him that the water supply was unreliable and dried up most summers, as did the pond across the yard, yet the fields around the farm turned marshy when it rained. Leo looked at the threadbare pastures and guessed they had not been visited by a muck-cart in a long time.

The farmer, Cyrus Pepperell, was a man of medium build, a head shorter than his wife, Juliana, and once he stepped out of the farmhouse he had a harried air. He was always on the move. However hard he worked his men, Cyrus toiled more. He chose the tougher part of any job and sweated at his labour. On occasion, shifting from one place to another, he broke into a run. Vance Brewer shook his head and told the boy, 'Never will catch his self up.'

Vance said Leo should see him in the spring on the vegetable patch, the gaffer scratching the miserable earth with his hoe like some demented cock.

There was a stockboy, too, an ill-tempered lad by the name of Wilf Cann. He was tall and rangy, with straggly brown hair, and wore a permanent scowl as if he was suffering from some irritating pain or insult, but did not wish to share it.

All slept in the small farmhouse, Leo with Wilf Cann in the loft above the Pepperells' bedroom, which they climbed to up a ladder off the landing. The house was odd. Heat was supposed to rise but in this dwelling it did not and on cool nights the attic was shivering cold. The old shepherd slept on the ground floor in a stall on the other side of the kitchen wall from the hearth,

partitioned out of an old pantry or stockroom. There were no others on the farm. No children. According to Vance Brewer there were once four, ‘two of each’, but all had long gone.

It was a poor establishment of a kind Leo had heard referred to but not seen for himself before. They were known as mean farms. The Pepperells provided cider sop, bread soaked in cider, for breakfast. Mustard sandwiches for lunch. Rice pudding for supper. Pastry lard and bread pudding. Tea was offered but neither milk nor sugar. Juliana made no apology for this meagre fare. She was an anxious, fidgeting woman. She made it clear that she could do better with assistance. Why her daughters had left her she did not say. Her breath smelled of menthol, from some concoction she gave herself daily to ward off the flu. Yet she was often sick, she said, and was obliged to drink beef tea as she laboured, trimming the oil lamps or blackleading the grate.

When Leo and Wilf Cann climbed to the loft at night the lad crawled beneath the unwashed blankets of his mattress, blew out his candle and told the boy to do likewise. When Leo spoke to him, all Wilf said was, ‘Why does you croak when you talk? Is you a frog?’

Leo resolved to avoid him but this was impossible for the farm was too small. Every day at some point the gaffer ordered Leo to help Wilf dig this drain or mend that gate. Beside the flock of long-woolled sheep were half a dozen Ruby Red cows, two pigs, geese and chickens, and a single ancient carthorse by the name of Cobby. Wilf was junior stockman, part-time carter, ploughboy. He was three or four years older than Leo and might have welcomed at least one companion within thirty years of his own age, yet did not seem to.

There was no greater cordiality between the lad and the old shepherd. Beyond the most essential discussion they only exchanged jibes and insults. ‘A sheep’s fart is better than a cow’s turd,’ Vance Brewer told Leo within Wilf’s hearing. ‘Cattle does sod all for the land, they gives nothin to it, see?’

‘Oh, aye?’ Wilf said. ‘But at least a cow’s breath is always sweet, eh, unlike them fuckin ewes, all shitty one end and sour-breathed t’other.’

Through the autumn Leo watched the woods around the farm change colour. It was as if the trees were singing, not in sound but in their own language that he suspected no human painter could quite equal. None of the others seemed to take any notice. Leo lifted his gaze. He regarded the field maples' flame-filled leaves. There was a chestnut tree. A breeze blew across the hill and a dozen pigeons rose out of the branches, bad-temperedly, as if the tree had tired of their company and shrugged them off.

Some days they hitched the colt to a cart and went up onto Bodmin Moor and cut bracken for cows' bedding, a coarse and cheap equivalent to straw.

Thursday was baking day. Juliana set the dough beside the fire to rise, and on that day the kitchen filled with the odour of yeast, fermenting in the rising dough. On Fridays Cyrus Pepperell went alone to Bodmin. Some weeks his cart was laden with jams and jellies made by Juliana, or eggs and potatoes, or geese for the butcher. Another time it went empty but returned with four sinewy, ill-tempered goats. Leo could see no pattern or logic. The only certainty was that Cyrus would bring back a single copy of the *Cornish Echo*, which in the evenings he read from beginning to end over the course of the week, allowing himself occasional pinches of snuff as he did so.

Leo spent a cold day ditch-clearing with Cyrus Pepperell and Wilf Cann. All three of them worked hard so as to keep warm. The gaffer possessed a pair of oilskin waders and went into the ditch to dig out silt, while the lad and the boy hacked branches and brambles from the banks.

At the end of the day they carried the tools they'd used to the shed and Wilf said, 'Do that again and I'll fuckin trim e.'

Leo asked what it was he should not repeat. Wilf did not answer but dumped the shovel, billhook and slasher noisily and went out. The boy reviewed the events of the day in order to discover what sin or affront he had committed. Had he uttered some insult? Used the lad's favourite tool? Worked in sunshine, Wilf in shadow? He could find none.

*

Leo's pay was two shillings and sixpence for a sixty-hour week, which Cyrus said he would receive at the end of the farming year, after harvest. He allowed them ten-minute afternoon breaks, which had to be worked off between midday and one o'clock on Saturday. On Saturday afternoon Wilf

Cann and Vance Brewer went rabbiting. In the village shop they received three ounces of tobacco for each rabbit they produced.

On Sundays Wilf shot pigeons and brought the catch home so that he could enjoy pigeon casserole made by Juliana once a week. One time he saw no pigeons but bagged two hares. Juliana made a hare stew that included their eyes.

Leo took out the white colt. He rode up onto the moor. The miserable farm in its gloomy coombe was a good place to hide, but he had to escape. If only for a while.

Grey sheep grazed on Bodmin Moor, perhaps coloured by the sulphurous smoke that rose from one or two chimneys. Pump houses and engine rooms stood empty, spoil tips around them. He heard the throaty cry of birds but could not see them. Moorland birds were unknown to him. He came to a quarry, now disused and full of water. Promontories ran out, made up of huge rejected slabs of granite. Before he saw horses he smelled their dung. Then he saw them. They were much like Dartmoor ponies but a little less robust-looking and were mostly bay or blackish. They had good coats, manes and tails, and stood around thirteen hands high.

One Sunday in October he rode down off the eastern side of the moor. In the middle of a wood was a barley field, all enclosed by trees like some secret holding. He could identify the crop by its stubble, which had not been burned. Perhaps owing to the danger of a forest fire. He found evidence of the deer before he ever saw them: the twin half-circles, like elongated horseshoes, of their slots in the mud of a ride or fire-break after the rain. Under the trees were small mounds of neat droppings.

On subsequent Sundays he revisited the wood. He saw trees had patches of missing bark, chewed when better food was scarce or else rubbed off by stags scraping the soft skin or velvet off their antlers. He could recall his brother Sid telling him that.

Then he saw them: a group of fallow does with their calves out in the barley field, nibbling at what they could find scattered amongst the stubble. Perhaps this was a Cornish custom: the gleaning was left not for women and children but for deer. He eased the white colt deeper into the wood, away from the herd. Looking back over his shoulder, they did not seem to have noticed him.

The week following he dismounted from the colt and let him graze. Leo sat upon a fallen tree. Some way along the path a doe and her calf appeared.

She stared at Leo. Or towards him. He kept still. The doe had large dark eyes. Her ears appeared to have pricked up, alert. He knew she had an incredible sense of smell, and acute hearing. His brother Sid had told him deer could smell a man a mile off, though their eyesight was comparatively poor. The doe lowered her head and grazed.

Other deer came out of the trees and onto the path. Leo reckoned this was the same group he had seen in the barley field. They browsed and chewed the moss off beech roots. One of the does was more alert than the others. They grazed, or even sat down to rest, but this one cast around her, listening, scenting the air. She must have smelted him and sought him out with her eyes, for when his gaze returned to her he found her staring at him as her fellow had done. But this was different. This guard doe held him in a fixed gaze. Leo felt a strange sensation in his stomach. He was an alien passing through their domain. She turned and walked away from the path and off into the trees, and one by one the other deer stirred or rose and followed her.

*

One Saturday afternoon in November, as Leo was grooming the colt, Wilf came up to him and said, ‘I don’t know where you go, boy, but I’m prepared to come with you tomorrow. I’ve had enough a pigeons for a while.’

They rode together on the colt, Wilf behind the rider, at a walking pace. They rode up past the mines and the quarry, and on over the eastern side of the moor. The day was cool and smoky, and still. Wilf declared that this was his favourite time of year. Leo took them to the woods. He told Wilf that he came to watch deer. Wilf said that if he’d known he would have brought the gun.

Leo tied the colt to a sapling on a long rope and left him to graze. ‘This way,’ he said, and led Wilf to thick undergrowth in which he’d made a comfortable hide. They could look out upon a wide clearing.

‘This is the spot from where you make your observations, is it?’

‘Yes,’ Leo whispered. ‘Now we wait.’

They sat or kneeled and peered out between branches. After a while Wilf yawned and lay down. Some time later he sat up again.

'This is it?' he asked. 'This is what you does on a Sunday? Come all the way up here, crawl into a bush and sit starin at nothin?'

Leo shrugged. 'Yes,' he said.

'The tedium'll kill me,' Wilf said. He stretched out his legs. 'If cramp don't first.'

Leo shushed him. 'Quiet,' he said. 'Look.'

They gazed and saw a doe on her own, walking slowly, her black tail flicking over her white, heart-shaped rump. Her light coat was changing to the dull brown of winter. Then she began to move faster and Leo saw that a buck pursued her. She ran away but not far. The buck trotted after her, and she stopped and waited for him. When he reached her, she stroked his neck with her cheek and rubbed her body along his. Leo wondered whether they had already mated for this looked less like a courting ritual than a marriage. The buck waited to let the doe walk slowly ahead of him and then he rose on his hind legs, his front legs scrabbling awkwardly astride her. But she walked on and he slipped back onto his four feet.

'Poor bastard,' Wilf said.

Leo put his hand on the other lad's arm, to quiet him.

The buck followed after the doe, grunting. Whether out of annoyance or frustrated lust, Leo did not know. Otherwise both buck and doe were silent. The male tried a second time to mount the doe and again she moved away and resumed grazing. He followed her. This time he moved alongside and licked or nibbled her neck, the boy could not quite tell which, for the buck was on the far side of the doe from where Leo and Wilf were hidden. After a while the buck once more mounted the doe and this time she stood her ground and took his weight upon her back quarters, and the buck pressed himself into her. For a few seconds the beast thrust to and fro into the doe, then suddenly his great back arched and his antlered head flew up in the air. The doe stepped forward and the buck teetered on his back legs then fell to the ground.

The doe resumed grazing as if nothing had happened. In seven or eight months' time there might be proof that something had. The male wandered away.

The lads watched them until both animals had moved out of sight. 'That's the thing about fallow deer,' said Wilf. 'And most other breeds too. They split after the rut. The does stay with the fawns. The stags and young bucks form a male tribe, go off wanderin across their territory.'

Leo looked at him, open-mouthed. ‘How do you know that?’ he asked. ‘Was your father a gamekeeper?’

Wilf exclaimed as if expelling breath that had got stuck in his mouth. ‘A gamekeeper? No,’ he said. ‘My old man was a poacher.’ He shook his head. ‘The worst poacher in the history a Liskeard District. He knew all about deer. He just knew nothin about keepers. Always gettin caught he was. I’m not sure as I’ve ever tasted venison, even now.’

They crawled out of their hiding place and walked back to where they’d left the white colt.

‘Roe deer is different,’ Wilf told Leo. ‘They’s the odd ones out. They lives as families all year round. Father, mother, usually twin kids.’

They rode back to the farm. Wilf slid off the horse. ‘That was good, boy,’ he said. ‘That weren’t too bad at all. I’ll be sure to bring the gun next time, mind.’

3

In December, wood pigeons ate ivy berries. Against a grey sky, black leafless trees swayed. They appeared to Leo as sentient beings deep in thought. At dusk a flock of starlings swirled overhead. They did not fly straight but changed direction all the time, all together. Thousands of one mind, creating patterns, the birds knitted one to another into a fabric that stretched this way then contracted that. How could they swoop and veer and alter course so swiftly without hitting one another? It was impossible to understand or even believe, only to witness.

Leo stood and watched. When the starlings passed directly overhead the whole world darkened. The sound of all their wings beating was a roar. There was a stand of sycamores and the birds flew there to roost. Some landed and were lost to sight. More came swooping out of the sky.

Something made him look to his right across the field. Out of a lone oak a sparrowhawk appeared. She flew on into the black whirling mass of birds. Leo saw some kind of disturbance and then the hawk came out of the flock with a bird in her claws. She flew back to her oak. The starlings did not show any sign of panic but continued swirling as they had before and settling in the sycamore trees.

The boy stood, transfixed by the brief spectacle of violence. It was a moment before he remembered to resume breathing.

*

One Friday morning Leo went out with the shepherd to look at the ewes. With no dog to bring them in, the old man stood some way off and regarded them from a distance. ‘You’d be surprised what you can learn from watchin em,’ he said. Leo did not think there would be much. He remembered little

Ernest Cudmore, the shepherd back on the farm where his father was ploughman, always in amongst his sheep. The air was still. Blackbirds sang loudly as if to exclaim at the mildness of the morning. In the east the sun had not yet risen but lit up that portion of the grey sky, turning clouds into pink continents of some otherworldly realm all may go to in time. Soon a watery sun rose, and the sky lost its colour. Rain fell in the afternoon. The water was colder than the air into which it came. They spent the day turning the wheel of the cake-grinder in the granary, grinding up slabs of kibbled linseed and cotton-seed oil cake. Cyrus Pepperell had gone to market.

In the afternoon the rain ceased. Leo walked across the yard to beg black tea from Juliana for their break. She told him he must not come in the house while Cyrus was away, and that they had their cider. She had no time to make them tea. On the way back, Wilf Cann stood in his way.

'Right,' he said. 'That's it. I've had enough. Put em up.'

Leo tried to walk forward but his way was blocked. He made to manoeuvre around but Wilf stepped across him in whichever direction he began. Leo stood with his arms by his sides, palms forward. Wilf was a head taller. Leo did not look up at him but at the ground. 'I don't want to fight you,' he said. 'I thought we was friends.'

'I don't want to fight you,' Wilf replied in a sing-song childish voice. 'I thought we was friends.' He slapped the boy's cheek. 'Put em up.'

Leo stared at the stockboy's hobnailed boots. He knew he must not cry yet he wanted to. He shook his head.

Wilf slapped Leo's other cheek. Now both cheeks stung. The old shepherd had come out of the granary. He did not intercede but watched mutely as he might two ram lambs.

Why was this happening? Leo did not know. He took a step back. Herb Shattock's stable lad. The maid Gladys, who was his cousin. Lottie herself, for her own amusement. His father. The gypsy boy, Thomas. The gypsy rider at Okehampton. Now Wilf Cann. Perhaps there was some oddity in his manner that provoked people. Something of the runt about him, of the hen-pecked or nag-ridden.

Or maybe that was not it at all. There was nothing peculiar about Leo Sercombe. It was simply that there existed more violence in the world, in man, than he happened to feel within himself. For it always surprised him. He made his hands into fists and raised them.

Wilf Cann grinned. He put up his own hands and from the waist began to jerk and sway, side to side, as if trying to see around Leo's hands into his eyes. As if one lad was playing some kind of peek-a-boo game with the other. Leo waited. Wilf tossed his left fist out to the side and leaned after it. Leo leaned the other way, to his own left, away from the stockboy's left fist. He watched it hover in the air then drop as Wilf let it fall to his side and took one step back, then another.

Leo didn't realise he'd been hit at first. He'd not seen the blow coming. This pain in the left side of his jaw seemed random, not necessarily connected to the lad stepping away from him, smiling. Perhaps it was coincidental. A wasp happened to have stung him at that moment. A wasp in December? Or the old shepherd had for some reason joined in, pitching a stone in their direction that had struck his face.

It was only when he tasted blood in his mouth that he understood how Wilf had feinted to the left but slugged him on the blind side. Caught him with a knuckly punch. With his tongue Leo discovered in the blood a loose object. As he identified it as a tooth so Leo saw that Wilf had ceased retreating and was coming back at him, jittering and weaving, hands in compact fists rolling before him. And in the instant that Leo found the tooth so a fire was lit within him. A furnace. His belly was an oven and the heat roared through his body to his brain. He bent his head and, yawning some formless word, ran forward.

The boy caught the taller youth unprepared. Wilf tried to punch Leo's head but it was already through his guard and he staggered backwards. He tripped and Leo fell with him, the two boys locked together as one, rolling, tumbling, towards the pond. On the far side the ground sloped so that animals could walk in to drink but here there was a bank, a foot or more clear of the water.

For a moment the boy and the youth seemed to cease competing and instead collaborated, slowing their momentum, until both were on their knees. But once they had done so each fought to propel the other into the water yet keep themself from it. Such was the conundrum with which they grappled on the lip of the pond. Leo grunted and heaved in his fury. He had his arms around Wilf's body, his hands locked, his head wedged against the larger boy's armpit, the rough material of the suit jacket against his bruised cheek. He could smell Wilf, his fresh and his stale sweat mingled. Wilf could not punch him except on the bony back of the head. And Leo would

not let go. Never. Nothing could make him. He could smell the water. He was desperate to force his opponent in. He sweated, pushed Wilf in the direction of the water, pulled himself back. As Wilf did the same to him.

What sent them rolling over the bank together and into the pond? They splashed in the cold water and the shock of it loosened their grip and each floundered separately until he had retrieved his balance. When they stood, the water came above their knees, almost to their waists. Each boy looked down at himself, then at his adversary.

‘You looks like a drowned rat,’ Wilf said, gasping.

‘You looks like a drowned cat,’ Leo replied.

The stockboy examined himself once more. ‘I does, don’t I?’ he said. He began to laugh, then so did Leo, even as the cold water made him shiver.

‘You is cracked, boy,’ Wilf said. ‘Or crazed, if you prefer.’

‘What do that make you?’ Leo asked him.

‘Come on,’ Wilf said, ‘let’s get us out of here.’ He climbed out and gave Leo a hand and pulled him up. The old shepherd had changed position in the yard and stood suspiciously close to where they had wrestled.

Wilf grabbed Leo in a headlock and held him tightly there as they stumbled across the yard. He could have strangled Leo to submission or worse, yet Leo understood that this hold was not martial but a gesture of affection. While also making clear to him Wilf’s superior strength. He had finished the fight on a whim or from an impulse of mercy or even admiration, but it was he who had let it finish all the same. He could continue the fight at any moment and could hurt Leo if he wished. But Wilf did not wish to. This hold was an embrace, and it had a meaning, clear as words, in the language of men.

They sat around the stove in the barn to warm their flesh and dry their sodden clothes. Leo had no other suit and Wilf only one, and that was his best. He asked Vance Brewer if he had pushed them in.

‘I did not,’ Vance said. ‘But my foot might have.’

When Cyrus returned, Vance told him that the lads had had a little bate or squabble. Cyrus said that most lads wait to have their baths in the brook or the river come summertime.

‘I never seen the pond used in winter,’ he said. ‘But there you go, Vance, that’s life. The young has their own ideas, there’s no helpin it.’

4

On Christmas Eve after supper Juliana cut all the men's hair, beginning with her husband then continuing with their workers in order of age. She gave each man the same look, hair cut close to their skull all round. When it was Vance's turn he sat with his eyes closed and a smile on his face. Afterwards the old chap preened in front of the flawed mirror Juliana held before him. He said she had a talent for the work and could have done well for herself in Launceston or Bude, though he was glad that she had not.

Christmas Day proceeded the same as any other, save for the fact that at breakfast Juliana Pepperell told the men that she would pray on their behalf and afterwards walked out of the yard, presumably to attend church or chapel thereabouts. The men worked as usual. Leo did not notice Juliana return.

Old Vance Brewer was a bachelor and Wilf an orphan, and like Leo had no other place to go. But even before it grew dark Cyrus Pepperell told the men to finish up and come inside. There he poured them a glass each of what he called his best cider. Before he could drink any, Leo had to swallow the saliva in his mouth, caused by the rare smell of meat cooking.

'This be zingin stuff, gaffer,' Wilf said.

'Don't think it means I'm getting soft,' Cyrus said. 'Tis but a Christmas treat for you lads.'

The men smoked. Leo sipped his cider. Juliana peeled vegetables at the table and pulled a pan sizzling with lard out of the oven. She poured the chopped vegetables into the pan, and stirred with a wooden spoon till all were covered in the hot fat, then returned it. Cyrus Pepperell said that there was much sense expressed in the *Cornish Echo*. He explained that there was one reason and one alone for the decline of agriculture, and it was what politicians who regarded themselves as lords and masters nowadays

pursued at all costs. ‘There’s only one word for it, lads,’ he said. ‘Free trade.’

Cyrus called his trio of workers ‘lads’, though one was twenty years older than himself.

‘I’m a doin my mathematics,’ the old shepherd said, ‘and I makes that two words.’

Cyrus ignored him. ‘The Huns? The Frogs? Do you think they opens theirselves up to free trade? No, lads. They’re protectionist and I don’t blame the bastards. Excuse me, Juliana. No, we depends on Germany for wheat, flour, even sugar beet.’

‘That’s wrong, gaffer,’ said the old shepherd. ‘We should be feedin ourselves.’

‘Aye,’ said Cyrus. ‘Still, I spose there’s one good thing about it. At least tradin partners don’t fight each other.’

Juliana called them to the table and they ate as they had not done since the boy arrived. Roasted goose. Roasted potatoes, carrots, parsnip. Brussels sprouts. A thick, dark gravy. This feast was like some kind of mockery of their usual meagre sustenance. They drank the cider and the gaffer refilled their glasses. Vance Brewer said he was having trouble with his water and went outside to piss in the yard.

‘You lads might not believe this,’ Cyrus said upon the shepherd’s return, ‘but Vance here was a wrestler in his time. One a the finest in this district.’

The old man nodded modestly, but Cyrus said, ‘You don’t believe me, lads, do you? Look at him now, I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t neither. Show em, Vance. He was a young heller, lads. Show em.’

Vance Brewer grimaced in apparent reluctance but bent forward and pulled up his trouser legs to reveal the blue scars of the kickings he’d received, thick upon his shins, such that Leo had never seen the like.

‘All right, old lad,’ Cyrus said. ‘That’s enough showin off. No need to put Wilf and the tacker here off of their suet puddins.’

Leo gazed upon the scars. He could not see them well, for the old man appeared to have four legs. The boy blinked and there were once more two, only for his vision to swim again. He blinked once more, and the shepherd had two heads. He looked up at the ceiling and saw it turn around in a full circle, somehow, then the wall came above him, then the floor, and so he slept.

5

Cyrus Pepperell came inside from pulling mangolds on chill winter days with his hands full of deep sore cracks. In the evening, sitting before the fire, he rubbed ointment from a small tin into them, methodically. It smelled of eucalyptus. Out in the field with sacks tied around his legs, another tied around his shoulders for a cape, he was like one of those Syrian hermits who condemned themselves to life atop a pillar or standing motionless or shut in a cell. So Cyrus Pepperell worked himself to his own deluded benediction in the Cornish wilderness.

Juliana did the milking of their cows. ‘The gaffer says er’s got kind hands,’ Wilf told Leo. ‘Gets the last drop a milk from them teats. Won’t let me near em to learn.’

Leo had seen Juliana in the milking parlour, her posture an insecure squat on a three-legged stool, the bucket pinched between her knees. She had a widespread walk on bandy legs, and a stoop that made her look even more subservient to her husband.

‘If tis true about her hands, they’s the kindest part of er,’ Wilf said. ‘Whatever old Vance thinks.’ He looked at Leo, saw his quizzical expression and said, ‘Did you not realise? Old Brewer’s in love with the missis.’

Leo did not say anything but he allowed that disbelief might be writ upon his face.

‘He says er beauty do not come from the paint pot,’ Wilf explained. ‘He says it come from within and do make her glow.’

‘He said that?’

‘One time after too much cider.’

Leo shook his head. ‘Do the gaffer not mind?’

Wilf shrugged to show he did not know the answer to this question. ‘Perhaps it do amuse him. I’m not even sure that Cyrus and Juliana

Pepperell is man and wife.'

'What do you mean?'

'They might be brother and sister, I reckon. They looks somewhat alike, would you not say?'

'Perhaps a husband and wife grow to resemble each other.'

'But can you imagine them two ever couplin?'

Leo considered this proposition, and said, 'I cannot imagine any folk so doin, if they does it as beasts do.'

*

One cold, sunny Sunday Wilf walked Leo around the perimeter of the farm. He said as they walked that he was sorry for their fight. The truth was that the boy had done nothing wrong, it was just that Wilf loved fighting. 'I always have,' he said. 'Don't get no opportunity here.'

Leo said that he accepted the apology despite its taking a month to arrive.

The perambulation took all morning and into the afternoon. The extent of the holding was far greater than Leo had realised. There were fields unused. Crops gone to seed. Grazing turned to tufty wilderness. They sat on a log at the highest point of the top field and looked down into the gloomy coombe.

'The gaffer don't know what he's doin,' Wilf said. 'He's a landskimmer. Old Brewer reckons the soil was plum once upon a time. Not that he's any good.'

Wilf rolled a cigarette and gave it to Leo, then he rolled one for himself. 'Take them sheep,' he said. 'I know I ribs the old fellow but this farm is sheep-sick. Why do you think they suffers so many parasites? Worms and fluke. You just watch and see how many lambs you lose next month. Dysentery.' Wilf felt in his pockets, patted his jacket. 'The old boy don't move the sheep around enough. They need shiftin from one field to another. That's why they get restless, them ewes. The grass is always greener. They need fresh grazin. They've not been up here for years. Ever since it's pained him to walk. Damn it,' Wilf said. 'Someone's took my matches.' He stood up, and cursed loudly at the sky. 'Come on, boy. We better get back. I wants a fag.'

Leo rummaged in his own pockets. 'Here,' he said, and passed Wilf two red-tipped matches.

Wilf grinned and took them. ‘Good lad,’ he said. He put his cigarette between his lips, sat back down and struck one of the matches on the bark of the log. The flame took and he cupped it in his hands and lit his cigarette. Leo leaned towards him and lit his in like manner.

Wilf exhaled smoke and took the cigarette from his lips. ‘What else you got in there?’

One after another Leo emptied the pockets of his trousers, jacket, waistcoat. A knife. The stub of a pencil. He put the contents on the log. Wilf shook his head. Thin copper wire, twine, nails of different sizes.

Wilf ruffled Leo’s hair. ‘You’re a funny one and no mistake,’ he said. ‘Come on, boy, let’s get back.’

*

In January rain fell, and turned to sleet. One evening Leo went out to use the privy before bed. As he came back to the house he looked up. White chips of snow floated down from out of the grey clouds, flakes of ash from a fire so far away it was long frozen, alighting upon his suit and his skin, and upon the ground.

The snow fell long and thick and stayed upon the earth. All motion stopped. Time floated and drifted. Dusk fell seemingly at random. Dawn likewise. Nothing moved but rabbits, their mouths and teeth all white for there was no grass and they lived off chalk.

On the snow in the mornings were the prints of animals who’d journeyed in the darkness. The slots of deer, scat of rabbit. Badgers’ paw prints, fox trails. Leo hitched the white colt to a small cart and took hay to the field, the snow creaking beneath him. The first day he stood on the ground to fork the hay out but the ewes in their hunger overwhelmed him and he fell amongst them. The sound of their bleating hurt his ears as their bodies pounded and squashed him. He grabbed hold of fleece and pulled himself up, and with the fork fought his way out of their midst. Thereafter he stood upon the cart and distributed the hay from on high.

At the end of January, the temperature rose and it rained but then froze again. Trees groaned. An ice storm caught and held rain on to the branches in the wood. At night the weight of the ice broke them off, and they fell with a sound like waves crashing on the shore. In the morning pheasants

flew down from their roosts leaving their tail feathers stuck to the branches. The boy found a mute ruddock glued by its frozen feet to its roost. He took out his knife and chipped it free. The tiny redbreast rose and circled above him, and with a shrill cry flew off towards the house.

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6

In the second week of February, Vance Brewer prepared his maternity ward. He partitioned the big barn with hurdles, and spread straw. Bottles of medicine and disinfectant were lined up on a shelf beside the stove, along with paraffin lamps. Wilf brought him a cartload of chopped wood and dumped it. The old man spent hours stacking the logs carefully against the wall. He also carried the wicker chair from his room, and dragged the mattress off his bed. These he placed either side of the stove. Leo asked if he should do likewise, manhandle his mattress down from the loft and sleep here in the barn.

'I would rather you did not,' Vance Brewer told him. 'My ewes and me gets along fine. Strangers bother em.'

The boy rode out on the white horse and brought the pregnant ewes to the barn. He slept in the attic and had his breakfast in the kitchen, but most of the day he spent in the barn. He did not believe he was any longer a stranger to the sheep but anyhow the only way for them to become accustomed to him was by his quiet presence among them.

The shepherd closed his eyes and dozed sitting in his chair, a slumber so light the slightest noise from a ewe could wake him. Then he limped among them, holding up a lamp in the gloom, studying their behaviour. One ewe refused to come to the trough. Another stood in the corner of her pen, looking bewildered. Each morning that Leo came to the barn it was to the sound of fresh bleating. The ewes chose to give birth at night. On the third evening he returned to the barn after supper and remained. While Vance Brewer sat in the chair, Leo lounged upon the old man's mattress. Thus they stayed in silence. The smell of the sheep mingled with that of paraffin and woodsmoke. Leo's eyelids drooped of their own accord. On occasion the old man spoke and woke him.

'There's some who shear their ewes prior to lambin,' he said. 'Or crutch em, which is shearin just around the udders and vulva. I never have. You only has to feed em more to make up for their heat loss.'

He gave the boy further advice on shearing sheep. He said the beast should be laid on its rump, and the wool shorn from its neck and fore-shoulders, then laid upon one side and the upper side sheared, then turned. Care must be taken not to cut the skin or the teats. 'If you makes a wound, apply a mix a tar and grease,' he said. 'And one other thing. If you put em out after shearin, make sure they have shelter. The sun can give naked sheep blisters summat awful.'

*

Deep in the night Vance prodded him awake. 'Come on then, boy. If you's here you may's well make yourself useful.'

The barn was full dark beyond the radius of the light from the lamp on the shelf. Vance told Leo to light another. He did so and followed the old man a few paces, to the pen they brought a ewe to when she was ready. Away from the stove the temperature fell.

'Look at this one,' Vance Brewer said. 'Not hardly a year old yet. Her first lamb.'

As they watched, the ewe lay down and bled. 'See how er's strainin there,' the shepherd said. The ewe stood up and ran around the pen, then lay down again. 'Er waters broke a while back but there be nothin showin. I be mortal afeared for er.' He shook his head. 'She can't lamb, see? She needs our help. Your small hands might be better an mine. Go wash em with the disinfectant in that bucket.'

Leo asked why labour should be so problematic that animals needed human midwives just as women did.

'It is a good question,' Vance said. 'One I intend to bring up with the Good Lord when I meet im.' He frowned. 'That is, if He's in when I gets there.'

The ewe lay down and the old man sat against her and held her hind legs and lubricated her passage with green oils. He told Leo to slide his hand inside the ewe and find the forelegs of the lamb. The boy did so, and felt around with the trembling fingers of his right hand. It was warm inside the

ewe, a pleasant sensation in the cold night, but he had no idea what he was doing.

'I think I have them, Mister Brewer,' he said.

'Good.'

'Wait,' Leo said. He probed the fleshy shapes in the ewe's womb and tried to make sense of what was there, attempting to conjure a picture of what his fingers found, but he could not. 'They's all t-t-tangled up in there,' he said.

The old man cursed. 'They?' he said. 'Twins?'

Leo found it hard to speak. 'I don't know,' he whispered.

Vance Brewer told him to take his hand out of the ewe. Leo did so. 'Help me lift her,' the shepherd said.

They took her by one hind leg each and with a great effort heaved the ewe, heavy with lambs, up in the air.

'Shake her,' Vance gasped. They tried their best. Then they laid her down again. She bled weakly. Vance said that he hoped the lambs had slid back inside her from the cervix, and might disentangle themselves. He kneeled down beside her and Leo inserted his hand and his arm once more. He found two small, slimy but hard shapes.

'I've got the hooves for sure!'

'Keep calm,' Vance told him. 'Now each time her strains, you pull em.'

'How will I know when she does?'

'You'll feel it,' the old shepherd said. 'Don't fret. You're doin fine, boy.'

A few moments later Leo felt something tighten around his wrist, and he pulled the lamb's feet. When the pressure ceased he waited, still holding the tiny feet. Vance Brewer waited. The ewe also waited, for she did not command the contractions within her. They came again. Soon the boy had the first lamb's feet clear.

'Do you want to finish it off now, Mister Brewer?' he said.

'You'm be doin good,' the shepherd said. 'Carry on. Only those is the hindlegs. Tis a breech birth.'

The lamb emerged by degrees. Vance told the boy he could let go now. The lamb inched out of the ewe, its back legs and half its body, then all of sudden the whole of it slithered out with a squelching sound. Vance held the lamb upside down and rubbed his hand hard down its sides to remove fluid from its lungs. Then he wiped the birthing sac or membrane away from the lamb's mouth and laid it on the straw and it took its first breath. The mother

licked the rest of the membrane off and ate it. The lamb soon began to try to stand. It tottered, legs buckling at the knees. The sight was comical and beautiful at the same time. Leo watched it, chuckling, but Vance told him not to get distracted, they were only half-done.

The second lamb came out of its own accord, in the correct configuration. The forelegs and head emerged slowly, then the rest. So it was born. The ewe treated it as she had the first.

The shepherd instructed Leo to guide the ewe into a small hurdled pen. Vance Brewer carried the lambs, one in each hand. The ewe continued to lick her lambs dry of the covering of yellow slime upon their white curly coats. Then she ate the afterbirth. Leo grimaced and said that he had not needed to witness that. Vance said he reckoned it must have something her body required.

Each lamb, once on its feet, sought its mother's teats, and sucked the warm curds of colostrum from her udder.

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7

On a Sunday in the middle of March Leo groomed the white horse in the yard. His winter coat came away on the brush. As he shed it, sparrows swooped by and took up hairs in their beaks and flew away. Wilf told him that last year he had seen crows on Cobby the farm carthorse's back, taking his hair and making him bleed.

Wilf once more accompanied Leo on his Sunday rides. The colt was full-grown and strong and the two lads rode him together. They took the gun to bag a pigeon or any other prey. The first time Wilf raised the gun and shot it while still mounted, the horse bucked in alarm and threw the boys off and cantered away. Wilf sat upon the hard ground holding his painful elbow and laughing heartily. Leo told him he was a fool, a man of shocking ignorance, not to be trusted with horses. He said he felt sorry for Cobby. Wilf said that Cobby gave as good as he got and that Leo need not feel sorry for the old jibber. Leo shook his head and walked after the colt.

The next week they rode to the River Fowey, for Wilf said he had a yearning for fish. Grilled fish or fish soup, he didn't mind. Leo presumed he would have a rod and line but he had neither, only the gun. They rode along steep and winding lanes then into a wood. The air cooled. All the trees looked young and slender; their trunks and branches were covered with a skin of dark green moss. Thick slabs of granite lay strewn amongst them and were clothed likewise. A leat like those the boy had seen on Dartmoor flowed through the wood. Stones from its unkempt walls had fallen into the water.

When they reached the river Wilf slid off the horse from behind Leo and said he would find a good spot, they should follow him. He walked along the river. Yet he studied not the water, but the trees. He came to a lone willow. Four branches grew more or less vertical. A fifth grew horizontal, a finger pointing to the far bank. 'This'll do,' he said. Leo watched him crawl

out on the branch above the river. There Wilf lay on his stomach, leaning from the neck out to the right side, with his left arm around the branch holding the barrel of the shotgun, the stock against his right shoulder. The sight struck Leo as foolishly precarious. He believed explosives were used to stun fish, and Amos Tucker had once told him of the whaling ships of North America, whose men harpooned those ocean-going leviathans, but he had never heard of any sane man shooting fish with a gun. Perhaps the Pepperells had adopted Wilf from Bodmin Asylum.

Leo staked the colt to graze and took out his knife and found an ash tree growing by a stand of sallow and elder and cut a thin stick. He ripped off the leaves, then fumbled in his jacket pockets and found the thin strip of wire he had remembered to store there. He tied the wire to the narrow end of the stick, embedding it in a notch behind where he had removed a twig. Next he made a noose out of the wire. It slipped back and forth with ease.

Leo looked up at Wilf, lying still on the branch with his gun pointing vertically down at the surface of the water. He appeared to be taking careful aim at his own reflection, like a cat that attacks itself in a window.

The boy crept to the river's edge where the water was clear and flowed over brown mud. He lay down and moved the stick out over the water and lowered the wire. It touched the bottom and a cloud of mud rose, and slowly fell. There he lay. Time passed. The morning was warm and he knew he'd fallen asleep when he woke with pins and needles in his arm and the stick slipped down to rest on the floor of the river. He raised it back. He looked up and saw Wilf lying as before. He too slept and would at any moment fall from the branch. Leo was tempted to watch for it would be a crime to miss such a comical spectacle. But when he glanced down he saw that a trout was drifting straight towards the noose. He could see its jaws moving. He held his breath. The trout eased unerringly forward. Its head, its gills . . .

'The hell with this waste a fuckin time!' he heard Wilf yell. Leo glanced up momentarily, long enough to see his friend now sitting on the log, the gun across his lap, shaking the stiffness out of his arms.

Leo said nothing but looked back into the water. The trout had moved into the noose past its first fin. An inch or two further then Leo would flip the fish up and land it. It pleased him greatly that Wilf could see what was happening, and what was about to occur.

The gun went off and made Leo jump. The ash stick fell out of his hand, the trout swam away and was gone. He looked up. Wilf sat on the branch holding the shotgun in both hands, the gun pointing upwards. His expression was one of unrepentant fury.

*

They walked along the river, Leo leading the horse. ‘I can’t rightly believe it,’ he said. ‘You’d rather have no fish than let me be the one to catch it.’ He shook his head. ‘I cannot believe it.’

‘Twas my idea to go fishin, boy,’ Wilf told him.

They walked in silence for a time. Then Wilf said, ‘But twas funny, the way you jumped when the fuckin gun went off.’

‘Make you laugh, that, did it?’

‘Looked like you was imitatatin the jump of a salmon for me. “This is how they leap, Wilf.”’

Leo looked at Wilf and saw him grinning in the way he did, on rare occasions. It was a smile that was the grin of a little boy and a demon both at once.

‘I spose you think the sight a yourself pointing the gun at the water was a fine one, do you?’

Wilf shrugged. ‘I doubt it,’ he said.

‘So do I,’ Leo said.

‘Bleddy hell,’ Wilf said. ‘If you got nothin good to say, you miserable sod, at least it sounds like your fuckin voice is finally broken.’

Leo led the colt. Wilf walked beside him. He nodded and said, ‘You ever raced that horse?’

‘Yes,’ Leo said.

In the distance smoke rose from a bonfire.

The stockboy took another drag of his cigarette. It looked like inhaling the smoke enabled him to formulate his next thought. ‘Is he as fast as he looks?’ he asked.

Leo nodded. ‘He is.’

*

They mounted the colt and rode him at walking pace. Leo said that as the weather grew warmer he thought he would like to go out on a Saturday and camp out overnight. Perhaps Wilf would like to accompany him on such a venture? Wilf said it sounded like a good idea. Leo said that he had begun to think on the future. When he left the farm, he planned to buy a saddle for the horse.

'I should warn you,' Wilf said, 'he don't plan to pay you.'

The boy asked Wilf what he meant. The lad explained how the farmer took boys on then towards the end of the farming year, once the harvest was gathered, did things such as to cause them to leave early. What things? Leo asked. Arduous work, Wilf said. Even more horrible food. Other cruelties.

Leo shook his head. 'He won't do it to me.'

'No,' Wilf said. 'He likes you.'

'He do.'

'He liked the others too.'

'What about you, then?' Leo said. 'Why has he not done the same to you? How much do you get paid?'

'I gets paid in kind,' Wilf said. 'Clothes is ordered. The rabbits keep me in tobacco.'

'Your master treats you rough,' Leo said.

Wilf grinned. 'He's tight as a duck's arse. And that there is watertight.'

'You should leave,' Leo told him.

'Where would I go? The grubber?' He looked frightened at the prospect, but then he grinned again. 'When we do have meat he carves it so thin it tastes of the knife.'

'I wouldn't mind a slice a thin meat,' Leo said.

'Last year he took two old cows to market. He wouldn't let the missis milk em, so's their udders was full, poor beasts. I said to him, "You must think people is stupid." He said, "They is." And I suppose he must a been right, for he come back without them cows.'

They rode on for a while, then Leo felt Wilf's hands on his shoulders. 'I could leave,' he said. 'If you was leavin.'

'You could get a horse a your own,' Leo said. 'We could ride together.' He tried to turn around.

'Whoa,' Wilf said. 'You'll pitch us both off, boy.'

Leo looked ahead. 'I never ad a friend like you,' he said. He was glad that Wilf could not see his face now. Otherwise, he did not think he would have

said it.

‘Me neither,’ Wilf told him.

Leo felt the older lad’s arms fold around his belly. They rode on back to the farm.

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8

One morning towards the end of March the boy noticed the old lag Vance Brewer and Wilf look towards him as they spoke quietly together. A quiver of alarm ran through his innards. Some time later when he had forgotten this moment of foreboding and they were picking up stones from the field behind the house, prior to ploughing, Wilf suddenly grabbed him in a headlock. He felt another take his hands behind his back and bind them together and hold him. Wilf let go of his head and walked to a shed. He came back with something cupped in his hands held before him like some precious gift. Leo struggled desperately. Vance had hold of his arms. Leo thought he might be able to twist loose and run fast enough away from him even with two hands tied behind his back. But Wilf would surely catch him in seconds. Even if first he had to hand over what he held to the old boy or even put it back in the shed.

‘You’ve heard a muzzlin the sparrow?’ Wilf asked him.

‘He probably thought it had gone out with they old parish apprentices,’ Vance said. ‘Well, it ain’t gone out here, boy.’

Wilf held his cupped hands out towards Leo and opened them, enough for the boy to see the grey bird trembling there in its dark cage of fingers.

‘You know what you ave to do?’ Wilf asked.

Leo neither nodded nor shook his head, but stared up at the older lad. It occurred to him to yell for help, that such might come from the farmhouse. But then the door opened and Cyrus and Juliana Pepperell came out and walked across the yard towards them. They stood some yards away, spectators come for the performance.

‘We got im, gaffer,’ Wilf said.

‘I can see that,’ said Cyrus Pepperell.

Vance Brewer kept hold of one arm but let go of the other and stepped around the side of Leo. ‘I ad to do this,’ he told the boy, grinning. ‘For

Cyrus's dad. So did this lad Wilf, three, four year ago, and many another in between.'

'Tis a tradition,' Cyrus said. 'What you might call an initiation, boy. Others let em go but we don't. Not this one.'

'I ain't sure as he knows what to do,' Wilf said. 'He won't say.'

'He knows,' said Juliana. 'They all know.'

'Will you explain to him?' Wilf asked.

Cyrus nodded. 'The lad here will place the wing a the bird in your mouth,' he told Leo. 'You has to draw the wing and then the body a the bird in, and bite off its head. If you do that, you stay on. If you don't, you still stay on, but with one difference. I shall sell the horse.'

'Do you understand?' Vance Brewer asked. His red eyes were inflamed with excitement.

Leo nodded. Wilf opened his fingers and took hold of the sparrow. He pulled the tip of a wing out and raised the bird and fed the wing into Leo's mouth, which he reluctantly opened for this purpose. Then he clamped it with his teeth, and Wilf let go. Immediately the bird flapped its other wing, trying to escape. Using his teeth and his lips, Leo drew the wing of the bird deeper into his mouth. It felt unpleasant on his tongue, whether taste or texture, so he folded his tongue to the back of his mouth, for he could not afford to retch. The bird meanwhile pecked at his cheeks and his nose in its frantic attempts to get away. Leo closed his eyes. He had to use his tongue. It was his most significant tool or weapon against the unfortunate bird. He had to gobble it up as fast as he could, using tongue and teeth and lips all together. It pecked at him and thrashed against his face. He pulled the wing into his mouth, bit by negligible bit, dimly aware of new sound, the clamour of people close around him, yelling. He kept his eyes closed. The sparrow pecked his face. He did not wish to kill it but he must, he had to, he could not lose that horse. It was all he had, the only thing and everything. He pulled the whole body of the bird into his mouth, its head too, its other wing, and he did not vomit.

But now the sparrow was struggling inside him, in the constricted space and the darkness of his mouth. He tried to feel with his tongue the shape of the bird, where the parts of it were, but he could not do so. All was confusion. Stabbing pinpricks of pain, fluttering wings, scrabbling claws. The sparrow's tiny beating heart. When he felt it at the back of his mouth he sensed his throat pulsate and the need to retch. He must not let his mouth

open. He tasted something odd and it occurred to him that the terrified bird had shat upon his tongue. He kept his eyes closed. He should not have drawn the animal entire into his mouth. He had to let its body out without allowing the head free. No. The other way round.

Leo sought the bird's beak with his tongue. He let his lips open, a little, then his teeth, and pushed the head of the bird towards the opening. The bird struck out for the light, the air. Leo closed his teeth around its neck and bit them hard together. The sparrow was too small, its neck a string of ligament and gristle. No matter how tightly he clamped the two rows of his teeth together there were gaps. Perhaps he could extinguish the life of the bird, but not pull off its head, and that would be enough.

All awareness was in his mouth, and face. Suddenly Leo became aware of somewhere else, another part of him. Behind. His hands. Undone. He lifted them and took hold of the head of the sparrow, and with a great shaking of his own head and roar through his teeth he pulled it away from the rest of its body. Then Leo opened his mouth and puked the body of the bird out. He dropped the tiny head.

Around him the others were talking.

'Well done, boy,' said Cyrus Pepperell. He passed Leo a bottle. The boy drank the cider, washed it round his mouth, and spat it out. 'I wagered on you with the missis here and won.'

'I never thought he would,' Vance Brewer said.

'We'll celebrate with sparrow pie tonight,' said Juliana. 'Nice and sweet, not like robin or tit.'

Wilf patted the boy on the back. 'You can keep yon horse,' he said. 'I knew you would.'

Leo turned and staggered away. He made his way to the stable and went over to the white colt and hugged the horse around its neck, sobbing.

9

One evening a week later Leo went to the loft to fetch some hay for the colt and the carthorse. There was an uncanny feeling in the air, something like warmth yet not of the temperature, for it was still cold. What was beginning deep inside the soil and within the roots of plants and trees was discernible in the atmosphere above. Spring.

Leo climbed the ladder. Just as he put his left hand upon the boards above, the white colt whinnied in his stall below and the boy stopped and looked down at him. He told the colt that he'd be but a moment with the food, he was doing the best he could. He stood on a rung of the ladder, his hand still resting on the board of the hayloft, and thought that horses were strange because they understood some things very well and others not at all. It would take a lifetime to know them, and he was already wasting too much of his with sheep.

The sensation when it came he could not identify. Then he could. Pain, intense and searing, in his left hand upon the loft board. Leo stepped up the next two rungs of the ladder with a sense of dread. He rose and found himself looking into the dark brown eyes of a tawny owl. The eyes were rimmed with a pink or reddish circle and around them were feathers that were like tiny Christmas trees when the needles had dropped. He looked into the eyes and could see nothing but the reflection of himself.

Then he looked at his hand. The owl had gripped it with the four talons of its right foot. Blood appeared around the talons. Leo tried to prise them loose with his other hand but he could not. The owl watched him calmly. The pain was unbearable. The boy gripped his left arm and raised his hand off the board and climbed down the ladder. The owl seemed to expect this for it wrapped the talons of its other foot around his wrist as if it were a branch, and let him carry it.

Leo ran across the yard, calling out for help. He held his left arm out from his side with the owl facing behind him, as if covering his back. He rushed into the kitchen. Wilf cursed in amazement at the sight and Juliana screamed at him to get that creature out of her house.

'Bloody hell,' said Vance Brewer. 'The boy's took up falconry.'

'Help!' Leo sobbed. 'Please.'

Cyrus Pepperell studied the boy's arm and the owl upon it.

'You'm up a tree there, boy, and no mistake,' Cyrus said.

'Come back outside,' Wilf told him. He led the way and Leo followed. His friend walked around the side of the house and told the boy to sit on the bench, facing the wood. 'Put your hand on the arm a the bench and sit,' he said. Leo did so and Wilf sat beside him in the dusk.

'There's nothin to do but wait,' Wilf said. 'He'll let go eventually, but you can't make him.'

'I'll die a pain afore then,' Leo sobbed.

'No, you won't. I know it's bad but, believe it or not, boy, there's worse.'

'Is there?'

'There is. I'll tell you what I can't work out, though. And that's what a tawny owl was doin in the barn.'

Leo glanced at the stockboy and found him looking back. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I didn't invite him there.'

'I never heard a such a thing,' Wilf said. 'Never.' He shook his head. As he did so the owl lifted its wings, as if to hide what it had caught from greedy eyes.

'Now listen,' Wilf said. 'Tis better for you if I leave. He'll be off quicker without me here for him to worry about. You just sit there. Don't make no noise nor sudden movement. You have to give im the time to work out what's goin on. Owls look wise but they ain't.'

Wilf Cann stood up and walked back round the side of the house. Leo let go of his left arm with his right hand and wiped the tears from his eyes and looked at the owl. The bird faced the wall of the farmhouse. It appeared to be studying the brickwork. Leo stopped sobbing and sniffed and his breathing calmed. The pain was still intense but he bore it. Darkness deepened with each passing minute. He wondered how long the owl would stay there. It seemed relaxed and content where it was. Leo remembered his brother Sid telling him that an owl inserted its talons into prey and kept them there without the need for muscular effort. Its bones locked into place.

Night fell. Surely the others would not let him suffer all night long. Could he not kill the bird and cut off the legs? But perhaps there was no way to extract the talons. They would then stay in his hand forever. The brand of a bird of prey stamped into his flesh. The owl gazed at the wall. Leo could not see if its eyes were open. It might have fallen asleep. The night was milder than it had been for many weeks. The last of the snow had melted, Leo could hear water dripping and gurgling underground. The long slow thaw was in progress.

Suddenly another bird hooted from the wood. Perhaps a companion. The owl swivelled its head at the sound. It seemed to reassess its surroundings. To become aware of the open air behind it, of the wood beyond. Leo felt the grip of its talons loosen. After another minute or two the owl began to extract them from the boy's hand. Leo did not move. He waited until the owl had removed his talons and waited longer. Finally, the bird looked behind him again and hopped up on Leo's hand and wrist and turned and took off, and flew towards the trees.

Leo got up from the bench and trotted around the house and indoors, holding his throbbing left hand. Juliana was at the table. 'Come here,' she said. The men had gone to bed. Leo stood beside her. She took his hand and he winced. She placed it on the table. It was already swelling. She poured Jeyes Fluid onto a rag and rubbed it on his skin. For a moment the pain was worse than from the owl but he gritted his teeth and held his breath and it passed. He thought it wrong to be treated with the same disinfectant as sheep, but said nothing. Juliana told him that was it, and sent him to bed.

10

In the old orchard, full of gnarled cider apple and a few pear and one or two damson trees, the grass came up earlier than it did elsewhere on the farm. The ewes and lambs were put there. The boy watched the lambs play. One would climb onto a fallen log then suddenly dash off around the orchard and all the others followed. They came to a stop and walked around in the sun or bleated for milk. Each one's mother recognised the sound of her own and made herself available for suckling. Then another lamb would rush off and all joined in.

'About time to cut em, I reckon,' Vance Brewer told the boy. 'We'll put em back in the big barn.'

That night when they climbed up to the attic Wilf told Leo that he would not be seeing him tomorrow. It was one job he refused to assist with. Leo asked him what he meant but all the stockboy said was, 'E uses his own fuckin dominoes. You'll see. Now blow out the candle.'

*

The rainfall was so light the boy did not notice it nor could he feel it on his skin. It left no impression on his clothes, only a slight dampness on his hands. They brought the flock into the barn and put them in a pen. The shepherd told Leo to lift the lambs over the hurdle into another pen, while he whetted his bone-handled shut knife. He then tied a sack around himself, as an overall or apron.

On the shelf beside the shepherd's pipe and morning croust and cider was a packet of twist tobacco. This was not his usual weed, he told Leo, it had been bought by the gaffer for veterinary purposes. He pulled loose some

threads, put them in his mouth and began to chew. He had a bucket of cold water ready too.

‘With a ewe lamb, all we do’s dock the tail. Get yourself a tup lamb for us to start with.’

Leo caught a young ram. Vance Brewer told him to stand against a wall post and hold the lamb tight, with its back against his chest, arms wrapped around it, each hand gripping two legs. The shepherd took delicate hold of the lamb’s empty scrotum and with his sharpened knife sliced it off. Then he leaned towards the lamb and grasped one testicle in his teeth and pulled until the cord broke. This ball he spat into the bucket of water, then pulled the second likewise. The lamb squirmed in Leo’s grip, pushing its head up against his chin. The boy held him tight. Vance Brewer spat some of the tobacco juice from his mouth into one testicle cavity, then again into the other.

‘Put im down, boy,’ the shepherd said.

The boy glanced up. The old man’s unshaven face was stained with brown tobacco and the blood of the tup lamb. Leo held the lamb upon the ground and with the same knife Vance cut off its tail. Leo carried the lamb away, bleating furiously, and lifted it over the hurdle to seek its mother amongst all the ewes.

Vance told Leo that they would give the stones and the tails to Juliana to cook. He licked his lips. ‘She’ll make us a lamb’s tail stew with chopped onion, and a pie-crust on top, summat lovely.’

That night Leo told Wilf that he was right. This farm was an infernal place. He would be leaving in the morning. The stockboy told Leo that he would depart penniless. Leo said that he intended to ask for the wages owed him and that if Wilf left too they could present their demands together and so make a stronger case.

*

In the morning the boy checked the sheep with Vance Brewer as on any other day. They studied the lambs to see that their wounds were healing. All of them were subdued in their behaviour compared to the playful young of two days before. Wilf brought the cows in for Juliana to milk, and took them out again after.

At breakfast, when they had eaten their customary sop, the gaffer said they should get to work.

'Not me,' Leo said. 'I'm leavin today, Mister Pepperell.'

The farmer and his wife and their shepherd stared at the boy as if he had spoken in some strange language they could not understand.

Then the stockboy said, 'Me, too, gaffer,' and all turned to gape at him likewise.

'You cannot,' said Cyrus Pepperell eventually.

'We can,' Leo said. 'I must ask you for my wages. I been here over six month. Call it twenty-four weeks. Half a crown a week. It come to three pound, gaffer.'

Cyrus Pepperell laughed, and said, 'Your horse fodder cost me more'n that, boy. You owes me. You want to leave, you'll ave to give me a good five shillin.'

He turned to Wilf and said, 'I sin you. I minds how you bin lazin about, ever since the boy show up. And now you wish to up sticks and quit on us after all my missis and me done for you? You'll leave on the day I kick you out, lad.'

The farmer might have finished what he had to say then or he might have had much more. Leo could not be certain. Whichever it was he spoke no more, for Wilf rose to his feet and as he planted them upon the floor so he leaned back and then came forward, swinging his fist, and caught Cyrus upon the jaw. The farmer fell back in his chair. He cracked his head upon the flagstones and lay inert, though he may have been unconscious already when he hit the floor.

Juliana Pepperell began to whimper and shrink back from the blow she imagined might be coming her way, but Wilf ignored her. He went instead directly to the bureau in the corner, pulled out a drawer and began to rummage amongst what he found there. Vance Brewer watched through wide, frightened eyes. He did not move, or say a word. Leo rose to his feet.

'Grab us some food,' Wilf told him. 'And some a that best cider of is.'

Leo found a loaf of bread, a jar of jam, potatoes, turnips, and put them along with a flagon of cider in a basket.

'Here's your three quid,' Wilf said, handing him the coins. 'I've took five. No more.' He nodded towards Cyrus. 'Had you best not see to yon gaffer, Juliana?'

The farmer's wife rose, quivering, and took a step towards the prone form of her husband. Leo saw blood on the stone beside Cyrus's head. He turned and went out of the house and directly to the stable. There he bridled the white horse and brought him out. Wilf came from the house carrying the shotgun and a canvas sack containing his best suit. They mounted the horse as on one of their Sunday expeditions, Leo holding the reins, Wilf behind him, carrying the gun, and rode away from the farm.

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11

When they gathered firewood in the trees around their chosen site Wilf searched upon the ground but Leo looked up as the gypsies had shown him and found dry kindling in the branches overhead. Wilf was neither impressed nor distracted.

‘We’re still too close,’ he said.

Leo wished to tell him that his moaning made for a sorry song, but did not.

‘We should a gone further,’ Wilf said.

‘The horse wouldn’t stand it,’ Leo told him. ‘We rode him all day. All the way up over the moor and beyond.’

‘Should a rid him down.’

‘Don’t we need him tomorrow?’

They lit a fire and began to drink the cider. Wilf rolled himself a cigarette and lit it with a burning stick.

‘I tell you what, though,’ Wilf said. ‘My days as a stockman is over, boy. I’ve had enough a beasts a burden. I know you likes your horses but me, I don’t like any of em, not really.’

Leo asked Wilf what he intended to do instead. He said he would seek work as a navvy. Or in a factory some place. ‘Must be plenty a jobs up country,’ he said. ‘Or maybe I’ve had enough a workin. Might help myself to what I wants for a while.’

Darkness fell. The fire crackled. When they had a bed of red hot embers Leo used two sticks to place four potatoes amongst them.

‘Spose us better have a bite a bread,’ Wilf said, ‘to soak up some a this cider.’

In time they grew tired waiting for the potatoes to bake. Leo retrieved one with the sticks and passed it over. Wilf took it but it was too hot and he passed it from one hand to the other for a while before dropping it on the

ground and cutting it open with his knife. He dug out a piece and raised it to his lips, blew upon it, then ate it. Leo watched him chew, his mouth open and inhaling air to cool the food further as he did so. He tried to speak while eating but could not and shook his head. When finally Wilf swallowed he exhaled loudly and said, ‘It will do. Leave t’other one in a while.’

They ate in silence. When they had each finished their first potato Wilf said, ‘It isn’t much, bread and spuds, and it’s about all we got, apart from this fine cider, and there won’t be none a that left in the mornin.’

Leo said they should have brought a pan to cook in. ‘Could a mashed the spuds up with herbs. Garlic. I smelled some back there.’

As the night cooled, the horse came closer to the fire and stood, the forward part of his white form illuminated, looming like the spirit of a horse. A spirit visitor brought forth as if the lads were not cooking their supper but conducting a seance such as Wilf said he had heard of. He asked Leo if he believed in ghosts. He himself did not believe that everyone who died passed directly to the other side. Up top or down below. ‘Some folk ud lose their way, I reckon,’ he said. ‘Some ud get left behind. Or wander off, just like in life.’

Leo said he thought that perhaps Wilf never went to Sunday School. Or he’d attended but was not listening. For he seemed to have forgotten that there was a place where those destined but not yet ready for heaven were obliged to dwell, a place by the name of purgatory, and if we saw ghosts that was who they were. ‘They are waitin to be let in,’ he said. ‘We should give em a wave, that’s what my mother always said us should do.’

They drank. Leo went away from the fire to piss. He looked back and saw the orange flames in the trees, the lad his friend, the horse. All aglow in the darkness.

Wilf asked Leo if he planned to accompany him in search of work. Leo told him that he was headed for Penzance. ‘You could come too,’ he said. ‘We might even find us another horse on the way. Ride together.’

Wilf said he had enough of an idea of the shape of the West Country to know that Penzance lay at its western tip and there was more chance of escape by going east. The land opened out that way. It closed up the other. ‘You realise they’ll be lookin for us,’ he said. ‘The last place I want to go’s back to Bodmin Clink.’

They remembered the second potatoes and ate them, though the skins were charred. The flesh was much softer than the first time. They drank the

cider. Wilf rolled a cigarette and passed it to Leo. Then, though his fingers fumbled, he built himself one the very same. After he had smoked that one Leo gave him the first. Wilf thanked him and said he was a generous lad to give away his last fag and he proposed a toast to friendship. He raised the flagon to his lips and drank. Then he placed it on the ground and stared at the fire.

‘We should a brought blankets,’ he said.

Leo agreed and said so, though he heard the sound come out of his mouth more like a gurgle or a burp than in words. He staggered away from the fire through the trees to piss again and came back. He sat clumsily and gazed at the fire that he might see how it functioned. Where was its engine? What made this twig flame, that branch smoke? What caused those sparks to fly up into the night sky? He tried to see the pattern or logic but was unable to. It made no sense. He told Wilf that he was going to lie down now, though again he doubted whether he had said the words aloud. Wilf grunted.

The boy laid his head upon the unsteady earth. He closed his eyes, and a rolling sleep absorbed him.

*

Leo woke, shivering, in the early-morning light. The fire had gone out, though the smell of woodsmoke was strong on his clothes. His head throbbed and his eyes ached. Blinking, he rose stiffly to his feet and looked around. Wilf was not there sleeping by the fire. Perhaps he had just woken and gone for a piss or a shit and a wash. There was a stream nearby that had made them choose this spot. Leo looked around for the horse. It was not there either. He found their tracks and followed them through the wood. A low pale sun flickered between the trees. After fifty yards or so Wilf’s footprints disappeared where he’d mounted the horse and ridden on, eastward.

Leo looked up at the pallid sky and closed his eyes, then dropped to his knees and leaned forward, until the earth took the weight of his head, and wept. Whether for the betrayal by his friend or the loss of the horse or just his loneliness he did not know. All, probably. After a while he rose and wiped his muddy face. Leo retraced his steps back to the fire and gathered what morsels of food Wilf had left, then he turned west, and walked on.

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Part Seven

THE GARDEN PARTY

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1

Lottie, May–June 1914

Lottie Prideaux discovered that she was invisible by degrees, during the fifteenth year of her life. It was not a sudden revelation. She was already accustomed to passing through the rooms and along the corridors of the manor house unnoticed by the maids, or riding her horse Blaze unseen by the stable lads or farm workers, for all were busy with their chores.

When Ingrid Goettner requested a word with her employer, one day in April, the subject of their conversation stood behind the curtain in her father's library. 'Her studies she is neglecting, Lord Prideaux,' Ingrid told him. 'She is cutting up dead animals instead, and shooting birds with your under keeper, and so on and so on.'

Lord Prideaux murmured to himself, then said that he would have a word with his daughter. No doubt his cousin in Weimar would organise a more rigorous education but he assured Ingrid that he had every confidence in her in the meantime.

Neither father nor governess seemed able to see Lottie, though her feet could surely be spotted easily enough by anyone who wasn't blind.

'Also, she is growing prettier by the day, your lordship,' Ingrid said. 'Yes, it is hard to believe but she is becoming like her mother in this portrait. Lottie might have been *eine hässliches entlein*, but not any more. And one must not blame swans for getting up to mischief.'

*

When William Carew came to visit later the same month, Lottie remembered him well enough from the shooting party the year before last.

He was a brilliant shot, but so shy that he had not said a word to anyone. Now, he told them stories of his travels in the United States of America. In the state of Montana he had shot a huge bull elk with antlers like a leafless tree. He had shot an alligator in a South Carolina swamp. The sole remnant of his old reserve was that he did not look them in the eye as he spoke but gazed elsewhere, as if he had spotted some blemish upon the ceiling, or found the stitching of the tablecloth more agreeable than their faces. He also spoke quietly, so that both lottie and her father had to lean towards him.

‘I stood on a cliff top in California,’ he said. ‘Looking down to where a whale had been beached. Dozens of grizzly bears had come to feast. They went inside the great whale to eat. When they were replete they slept on the beach, until their hunger returned.’

Perhaps Mr Carew had acquired the art not merely of conversation but of exaggeration, too. Lottie wondered why he was visiting. After lunch she changed her clothes and stalked the men as they walked through the garden, listening to her father explain how many farms there were upon the estate, what arable or grazing land each farm possessed, how many sheep or cattle. Perhaps they caught a glimpse of someone in the vicinity but, absorbed in their tedious conversation, merely took her for the gardener’s boy.

*

The girl knew that she possessed a talent for stealth. But it was on Sunday the third of May in the year 1914 that she believed herself to be entirely invisible, through no agency of her own, while seated in the drawing-room taking tea with her father and Alice Grenvil. Her father said that he had never been happier in his entire life. Alice said neither had she but she did not believe it out of the question that further happiness yet lay in wait.

‘In fact, dear Arthur,’ she said, ‘I believe it likely.’

‘Our wedding, my darling,’ he said, ‘shall be attended by our friends and relations, of course, but I should like to throw a party to mark our engagement for all the people of the estate, to share with them this propitious event. In a certain sense the news is as good for them and their future as it is for myself.’

Alice said she thought this was about the most thoughtful gesture she had ever heard of. She would be glad should this be the first of many parties, in

this beautiful house, of which she would be the proud hostess.

Lottie crunched ginger biscuits, apparently making no noise, and listened in disbelief as her father said how much he enjoyed attending the theatre and that he looked forward to many such visits with Alice on jaunts to the capital. How could he have uttered this brazen lie unless he was unaware of the presence of his daughter, who might reveal it for what it was?

‘Would anyone like a refill?’ Lottie asked, lifting the teapot. Both of the others said that they would, waving vaguely at their cups and saucers as they might to a maid.

‘And I,’ said Alice, ‘look forward to getting to know all your horses, Arthur. Your noble steeds.’

2

All the farms on the estate spread the precious manure from their animals upon the fields, but a number of cartloads had to be delivered to the big house, as the gardener demanded. Then he and his under gardener and the gardener's boy dug the muck into the vegetable and the flower beds.

The gardener Mister Satterley was much envied for his independence by the other workers on the estate, for the manor's garden was unaltered since the death of Lady Prideaux. His Lordship did not interfere. Mister Satterley had been liberated from oversight. The garden was immaculate. Terraced lawns led from the back of the house into shrubberies and woodland. The flower beds were shaped into crescents and stars and featured plants of different colours blooming all at once. Small tight clumps of blue lobelia, pale yellow calceolaria, scarlet verbena. Pink geraniums flourished in stone urns. The steps down to the second terrace were festooned with aubrietia and alyssum cascading down each side. The lawns were mown constantly, or so it seemed to Lottie, for any time she looked out of a window one of the gardeners was clipping an edge or pulling the roller or riding the Ransomes' New Automaton like some parody of a carter cutting the hay.

The garden looked just as it must have done in 1899. 'This be how your mother liked it,' Mister Satterley told Lottie. 'And this be how it is.' Alf Satterley was a dour bachelor of less than medium height but so straight a back as to make up an inch or two. He wore an old grey suit and tie. From a distance he might be mistaken for a gentleman amusing himself, but the closer one came to him the more ragged one saw his clothes to be. Yet he was always clean-shaven, his neat moustache freshly clipped. On his head was a scruffy cloth cap the girl could not remember him ever removing, not even while conversing with her father.

Since Mister Satterley allowed no innovation in his domain, so his under gardener and the boy had become accustomed to the yearly calendar of

tasks. There was little need for communication beyond terse orders at the beginning of each day, so that Lottie thought of them as monk-like, silent members of some closed order of gardeners, their days spent in prayer. What could be more conducive to contemplation of the Lord's creation than wheeling barrowloads of seedlings from the greenhouses or mowing the lawns, endlessly, to and fro?

Alf Satterley had no friendships to speak of at the manor, yet he had a soft spot for the girl. Her earliest memories were of being pushed in his wheelbarrow on a bed of pungent grass clippings. When her cousins came at Christmas he patrolled his garden and shooed them off into the woods, yet once they had gone Lottie returned, and to the incredulity of the members of the household she would chase her hoop deep into the flower beds with no reprimand. Flowers were sent to the house each morning in flat baskets. Two china vases, each with a fresh bouquet, were taken upstairs. One for the mantelpiece in the girl's bedroom, the other for that of her great-grandmama, lying motionless the day long in her bed.

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3

‘You looks like you stepped out of a bandbox, Miss Charlotte.’

Lottie looked at her reflection in the mirror, seeing a girl with but a passing resemblance to herself. She was dressed in a long white gown, with a huge hat upon her head and a feather boa wrapped around her neck.

‘Then I should prefer to step right back in,’ she said.

The maid Gladys approached her with a hatpin, but Lottie said that was quite enough for now and divested herself of this uncomfortable attire. Gladys laid the dress upon the bed and marvelled aloud at its beauty.

‘It’s easy for you to harbour such an opinion,’ Lottie said. ‘You don’t have to wear it. I shall have it filthy within minutes.’

Gladys shook her head. ‘You must not, Miss Charlotte,’ she said.

‘I shall.’

She had gone with Alice to London for each of them to be fitted with dresses for both engagement party and wedding, at which the girl was to be a bridesmaid. She believed herself as much corrupted by the role as honoured. Gladys said that she would love to visit London again, as she had when they went to the Derby last year. Once was not enough. Lottie said that she herself wished never to go again.

‘For two days the city was shrouded in a thick yellow fog,’ she said. ‘If I held my arm out in front of me, I could not see my fingers. The Grenvils closed all their windows but still the curtains and furniture were covered in greasy dirt. All the silver and brass was tarnished.’ Lottie pointed to the ceiling. ‘If you looked up you could see a black film had settled on the mouldings. And when you thought about it, you realised that we had to breathe these foul vapours into our lungs, Gladys. Along with the smell of gas. Their entire house is lit by gas, which I hope we shall never have here.’

The maid took other items of attire out of the wardrobes and chests of drawers. Each one was held up and Lottie shook her head to indicate that it

should not be thrown away or else nodded to confirm that it was something she had grown out of.

'I fear Alice will try to move Papa up to London,' she said. 'Especially once I'm sent to Germany and am no longer here to protect him. Oh, don't look so rattled, Gladys, he'd never give up the estate. But I can see her parading in the park every Sunday after tea, with Papa on her arm.'

'And little ones in a pram soon enough, with a bit of luck.'

'Stop it!' Lottie cried. 'Oh, you should see those awful parks, Gladys. The Londoners make so much of them but they're pathetic imitations of our countryside, only they have metal railings instead of wooden fences or hedges. The bark of the poor trees is black and the sheep are weighed down by grimy, sooty fleeces.' She stopped, and frowned. 'The only good thing is the damp pleasant smell after water-carts have sprayed the dusty paths.'

When they had finished sorting through Lottie's clothes the neatly folded stack of discards stood waist-high. 'To whom will you give those?' she asked. 'Shall we take them to the poor of the parish?' She shuddered and said, 'That was another thing I noticed in London – beggars everywhere. Much worse than last year. In doorways. Outside shops, theatres. We went to the restaurant in Debenham and Freebody's, Gladys. One beggar accosted us on the way in, another on the way out.'

Gladys explained that such clothes formed part of the junior staff's salary. They would pass them on to their families. Their mothers would make them up for themselves and the children.

Lottie asked whether there were other such hand-me-downs. Gladys said that there were.

'Such as what?'

'Tea leaves, Miss Charlotte.'

Lottie asked what she meant and Gladys said, 'Tea is made for the drawing-room, miss, then after that tis watered down for the kitchen. Cook likes a brew and so does Mister Score.'

'Well, and why shouldn't they?' Lottie said. 'They both work very hard, they deserve an occasional restitution. I see nothing wrong with it.'

'Then the leaves is dried and given to Missis Budgell, the gamekeeper's wife, for Mister Budgell likes his tea and all. Bones is another thing.'

Lottie asked what a person would want with bones.

Gladys gathered the clothes in a pile. 'When Cook's made soup,' she said, 'her'll wrap up what's left in the stockpot and give em to one of us if

we're goin home to visit. The same with hambones or beefbones.'

The maid lifted the clothes in one great armful, and bore them away.

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4

'Lottie, darling,' Alice Grenvil said, 'would you introduce me to the gardener?'

Alice wore white gloves and a wide hat tied with a chiffon veil under her chin. They walked out of the French windows and across the stone-flagged terrace onto the upper lawn. The gardener's boy was digging out moss from between the steps down to the lower lawn. Lottie asked him where Mister Satterley was. The boy said that he believed the gaffer was in the greenhouse. Lottie turned to go in the direction of the walled garden at the southern side of the house but Alice put a hand upon her arm and said to the boy, 'Fetch him for us, would you?'

The boy put down his trowel and stiff brush and walked away. Lottie sat down on a step and Alice said, 'Yes, there are no seats here.'

Lottie looked around. 'Where?' she asked.

'It is remarkably bare, isn't it? A garden is a place where visitors should be able to find a pleasant spot in which to read or draw or simply enjoy the view.'

'Papa and I don't have many visitors,' Lottie told her.

'Or a quiet sheltered place for conversation, in greater privacy than in the house.'

Lottie pointed across the lower lawn to the shrubbery and wood. 'We've got the jungle,' she said. 'I must have made a hundred dens in there.'

'Dens are indeed for children,' Alice said. 'Places of repose are something rather different.'

Alf Satterley came walking out of the door in the wall. He did not cut diagonally across the lawn towards them, but took the path and thus the two sides of the triangle, his boots crunching on the gravel.

Lottie rose. 'Hello, Mister Satterley,' she said when he reached them.

'Miss Charlotte,' he said.

'This is Miss Alice Grenvil,' she told him. 'To whom my papa is to be married.'

The gardener did not doff his cap nor bend forward an inch in deference as he said, 'Honoured, miss.'

Alice untied the chiffon and pulled it from her hat and looked at the gardener. Lottie judged that his eyes were at the same level as Alice's.

'I was just saying to dear Lottie,' she said, 'what a wonderful job you have done here, Mister Satterley.'

'Thank you, miss,' he said.

Alice turned and gestured with a sweep of her arm to indicate the lawns and beds all around them. 'It is in such gloriously regimented order. Which gives it something of the nature of a blank canvas, do you not think?'

Mister Satterley frowned and said he did not quite follow Miss Grenvil's tack.

'You have done all the donkey work, Mister Satterley, have you not?' Alice said. 'What Herculean labours must have gone into creating this.' She shook her head, as if it were not possible fully to articulate her admiration. 'No,' she said, 'one could really do something with this garden.'

The gardener said nothing nor did his expression change. He stared back at the young woman addressing him, though she was no longer looking at him but rather gazing around the garden.

'A lily pond, for example, rimmed with rushes,' Alice suggested. 'In the middle of this lower lawn. A low brick wall around it, with all sorts of spiky plants, and goldfish swimming in the water.' Alice furrowed her brow, indicating the profound intellectual effort being made behind it. 'Break it up, you see, Mister Satterley. Remove a few of those trees over there, place a seat beneath a pergola with a view to the countryside beyond. Or over here,' she said, pointing along the path so that the gardener had to turn to appreciate her vision, 'create an alley of wooden arches with roses climbing all over them.'

Alice paused, to let the loveliness of what she proposed sink in. Lottie said nothing. She watched Mister Satterley. He turned slowly back to face Alice Grenvil. Lottie could not tell what he would say, or do, and waited. But before he might respond, Alice said, 'Of course, such things are for the future, no doubt. Ignore them, Mister Satterley. Disregard my fanciful proposals. No, I am merely a messenger. Lord Prideaux wished to have your opinion on where to place the marquee. On the lower lawn, of course,

but on this side, up against the hornbeam hedge, or on that side towards the stables?’

The gardener surveyed this section of his domain with narrowed eyes. He turned back to Alice. ‘I should say, miss, that his lordship may have the marquee whichever side you prefer. Please excuse me. I’d best be back to work.’

Mister Satterley turned and walked away along the same route by which he’d come. Lottie watched him go, leaning forward a little as if into a faint wind. When she turned back she saw that Alice had left her, and was walking across the upper lawn towards the house.

5

On the morning of the day before the party the timber and ropes and canvas of a white marquee were delivered by waggon, and four men armed with mallets began to erect it. A convoy of waggons arrived, some bringing trestle tables and folding chairs, others food. Lottie gazed at the list pinned to the kitchen wall. *150 lbs of beef. 90 lbs of ham. 8lbs of poultry.*

‘Someone must be free,’ said Cook.

2 cwt of potatoes. 50 lbs of apples. 70 lbs of cherries. 80 lbs of mixed fruit.

‘Is there no one?’ Cook yelled.

What she called a field kitchen had been set up in the scullery, with free-standing ovens and burners upon which pans bubbled.

Lottie had never seen so many people labouring in the kitchens. All the house maids had become kitchen maids. There was a squawk from the doorway to the scullery and all looked in that direction. Gladys stood and held an egg up for all to see. ‘I was drawin a chicken,’ she said, ‘and this come out.’

The male servants too carried cheeses or bottles or boxes from one room to another. Even Lord Prideaux’s valet wore an apron and stirred a pot of seething meat.

‘Surely, Mister Score, someone can be sent?’ the flustered cook was saying.

‘What do you need?’ Lottie asked her.

‘Oh, we are short of treacle, child. Missis Prowse will have some at the stores.’

‘I shall go,’ Lottie said.

‘I cannot send you, Miss Charlotte,’ Cook told her.

‘No one will know,’ Lottie said. ‘Please. I want to help.’

Cook wiped her brow with a cloth and handed the girl an earthenware jar.
‘Tell Missis Prowse to put it on my slate.’

*

The girl carried the jar to the stables and put it on the bench in the tack room. She went to Herb Shattock’s bothy and asked him where Blaze was grazing. He said that she was in the pasture beyond the training paddock and that he would send a lad to fetch her. Lottie said no, thank you, she would prefer to fetch the mare herself.

‘I had a look at her this mornin. Her’s in fine fettle,’ he said. ‘Takin her to the gallops again, Miss Charlotte?’

The girl frowned. ‘I fear I cannot tell you where we are going, Mister Shattock. It is a secret mission. If I told you, I’d be putting you in as much danger as myself.’

Herb Shattock smiled. ‘In that case,’ he said, ‘you had best go.’

‘You have not seen me,’ she said.

The groom looked around his room and shrugged. ‘I could a swore I eard a voice,’ he said to himself. ‘But no one’s there.’

*

The girl rode her pony past the white ducks on the pond, past Hangman’s Wood, past Manor Farm, and out of the estate and on to the village.

The store was owned by the Prowse family. It smelled of bread but otherwise only an indeterminate aroma derived from all the foods they sold. Mrs Prowse was serving an elderly man. At the end of the counter a boy about Lottie’s own age chopped a loaf of hard white sugar into fragments. His mother said, ‘Gilbert. Not too big.’

Lottie walked to the end of the shop and looked through the door to the bakery. There Mister Prowse reached his peel or paddle into the great brick oven and withdrew two quatern loaves upon it. Crisp, crusty bread. Beside the door were shelves of ironmongery: benzoline and paraffin, lamps and candles.

A woman was served before Lottie. She requested a taste of the cheese. Mrs Prowse inserted a small, tapered implement into the truckle or wheel of

cheese. She withdrew the taper and a length of cheese with it. The customer broke a piece off the end and chewed it. Mrs Prowse eased the twig of cheese back into its slot. The woman said that she would take a half-pound.

On the highest shelf above and behind the proprietress stood large tin canisters. The woman asked for a quarter of one and two ounces of another, in combination. She watched as Mrs Prowse mixed the tea leaves in the exact proportions.

When her turn came, Lottie held up the earthenware jar and asked for dark treacle for the Manor kitchen. Mrs Prowse told Gilbert to weigh the jar for Miss Charlotte. The boy put down the chopping tool beside the sugar and came along the front of the counter. He took the jar from Lottie and removed the cork lid and placed it on the pan of the weighing scales. He added weights to the other side until the jar rose. He told his mother what the jar weighed then placed it on the counter beneath the tap of a large green urn. He turned the handle of the tap and they watched the dark syrup flow into the jar. Gilbert leaned over and looked inside and put his hand back on the tap and after a short while turned it off. As the stream of treacle slowed the boy passed his finger through to catch the last of it and raised his finger to his mouth.

‘I told you before,’ his mother said.

Gilbert returned the jar to the scales and weighed it and told his mother. She wrote the figure with a pencil on a pad, above the figure for the weight of the empty jar, then carried out a subtraction. Lottie read the numbers upside down and did the calculation in her head. She worked out the answer. A moment later Mrs Prowse wrote the number down. Meanwhile Gilbert pressed the cork lid into the neck of the jar and slid it along the counter. Lottie took it, thanked him and Mrs Prowse, and went outside. She carried the jar to where her pony was tied to the rail, wrapped the container in cloth, and placed it securely in the pannier. Then she unhitched Blaze and mounted up and rode on home.

6

Alice Grenvil burst into the dining-room as Lottie and her father took their breakfast. She said that she was sorry to be so early but she had woken at dawn and could not get back to sleep. Her poor maid was forced to help her pack and her father's chauffeur to crank-start the car and drive her over at hair-raising speed but there was no help for it. She was too excited. This was going to be the most wonderful day of her life.

Arthur Prideaux asked his fiancée if she was hungry.

Alice looked surprised. 'Yes, I am,' she said. 'Why, I had no idea.'

Lottie rang the bell and the maid came and laid another place at the table.

*

On the stairs Lottie met her great-grandmama's maid coming down. She said that her ladyship was calm. Lottie said she would visit her anyway. Nellie said that she would look in upon the old lady intermittently through the busy day.

'No,' Lottie told her. 'Once the party starts you're off duty, all of you. I'll see to her. If I need help, I'll find it.' The maid nodded and thanked her and carried on.

The girl climbed the stairs and walked along the corridor, past her father's bedroom and her own and the empty guest bedrooms to the end. She opened the door and walked over to the bed. Her great-grandmother had lain here for many months upon her back. She had shrunk. On warm days all that could be seen was the faint outline of her bony form beneath the sheet, rising at the end to her toes. In recent weeks she had turned upon her side and begun to curl up. It was a fascinating process. Lottie knew that babies grew curled in their mother's womb and believed her great-

grandmama was reverting to this state. Her head was sunk into her shoulders. A few wisps of thin white hair straggled from her cap. In order to take her hand Lottie had to ease her fingers apart, for they were clawed in upon themselves, fists of knuckle and bone. Then she withdrew, as the old lady slept once more.

*

All the people on the estate were invited to the master's engagement party on the sixth of June 1914. In the late morning they set off, some in carts, most on foot. Lottie saw them from a window of the attic nursery. From this height they did not look as if they were possessed of any autonomy but rather, like the members of an audience in a London show Alice had described, mesmerised by a hypnotist. Being pulled all in their Sunday best, on a hot but overcast summer's day, towards the big house. She ran downstairs.

When she reached the landing Lottie stopped stock still. Alerted by a sound, she stood and listened. A far-off gurgling in the pipes? No. A bird trapped in a distant chimney? No. A floorboard groaning at someone's tread? She followed the sound towards its source, and entered her great-grandmother's room. As she approached the bed Lottie saw that the old woman's eyes were open wide and her mouth too. The strange noise was produced when she breathed in. She breathed out silently. Then she inhaled once again with a rasping, fluttering, wheezing sound, incredible from such a tiny frame. Lottie took hold of her hand, and put her other hand on her great-grandmama's forehead, and the noise ceased, just like that, for the old lady all of a sudden stopped breathing.

Lottie stood beside the bed. Nothing had changed except that her frail great-grandmother was utterly still. The girl did not know what to do. But then she realised there was nothing she could do, and nothing to be done, and so only one course of action open to her. She let go of her great-grandmama's hand, kissed her forehead then left the room.

*

The farmers and their carters, stockmen, shepherds, and all the members of their families. The sawyers. Over two hundred people. The grooms at the stud farm, and Herb Shattock at the stables and his lads. The gamekeeper Aaron Budgell and his wife and the under keeper Sidney Sercombe. All those who worked at the Manor itself, indoors and out. Only Cook and her scullery maids had to work this day long, and the master promised they would have a holiday after he and Miss Grenvil married in August and took their honeymoon. Cook was assisted by women from the village, whose daughters also became waitresses for the day.

As the guests arrived they were ushered around the side of the house to the back terrace where they were met by Lord Prideaux and his fiancée and his daughter Miss Charlotte. They shuffled past, murmuring congratulations to His Lordship. Some said the same to Alice but either not knowing her name or in the confusion of the moment addressed her as ‘My Ladyship’. Alice accepted the premature ennoblement, whether out of social grace or presumption Lottie could not tell. Some even congratulated Lottie herself. She tried to stop herself from scowling, and said nothing.

The guests passed on, to be offered glasses of sherry or lemonade and invited to spread out across the lawns. The idea was that they would carry their glasses with them. But it was not thought to suggest this and as no one was accustomed to such behaviour most raised their glasses and knocked back the contents in one, and returned the empty glasses forthwith to the trays upon which they’d been proffered, the sudden shot of alcohol causing one or two elderly cottagers to sway as they stepped off the terrace.

During a lull, the hosts surveyed the scene. Those who had arrived stood or walked stiffly, the men sweating in their heavy suits. The estate workers regarded the house servants as flunkeys; servants thought of the farm workers as dim, slow-witted beings, one step up from the beasts they tended. Various groups kept to themselves or nodded awkwardly to neighbours, even though many were related, exchanging the minimum of stilted conversation. Alice Grenvil sighed. It was her hope that an informal start to the party would relax the estate families. Instead all looked as if they would rather be elsewhere, even at their customary labours. Arthur Prideaux reassured her. It was always like this, he said. Their reserve was a sign of their respect and loyalty, and would ease as the day wore on.

At twelve-thirty a gong was brought out by Mister Score and banged loudly, its reverberating clang not merely silencing but stopping the guests stock still as if it were the prompt for a game, some variant of Musical Statues. Lunch was served. People sat where they wished at trestle tables set up down one side of the upper lawn. The waitresses brought plates with pressed beef and silverside of beef, ham, tongue, galantines, new potatoes with mint, peas, asparagus in butter, carrots. The men drank ale. When they needed to relieve themselves they went down into the shrubbery beyond sheets of canvas erected as a shield. The women went inside, to the lavatory behind the scullery, where they soon formed a queue.

The master and his intended sat at a table on the terrace looking down upon the scene. To Alice's left sat her father Duncan Grenvil, then Lady Grenvil, then some Scotch relations who were staying for the summer. To Lord Prideaux's right sat his daughter. The girl imagined they must look to the guests below like those celebrants of The Last Supper, reproduced in a book of the world's greatest paintings that her father had recently given her for her fifteenth birthday. Beside her was William Carew, then her German governess.

William told Lottie in his quiet voice that she had no idea how fortunate she was to grow up in such a paradise. He himself had the misfortune to be reared in the smoky metropolis. Eton was little relief. He had also visited many beautiful places in the Empire and beyond and thus knew what he was talking about.

Lottie thanked him but said she had a good idea, and that was why she had no wish to leave it.

'Perhaps it is best that you go – not only for your own education,' William told her, 'but also to give the new Lady Prideaux a chance to establish herself without the encumbrance of a stepdaughter.'

Lottie said she did not wish to pursue this line of conversation. She asked if it was true that he was to be employed by her father to manage the estate. He said it was. Lottie said that she herself would be able to do the job if her father would only let her. She was fifteen years old now. Then she asked why a gentleman should wish to take on such employment.

William Carew laughed. 'It's very simple,' he said. 'My own father squandered our inheritance.'

'That sounds dramatic,' Lottie replied. 'How did he do it?'

William shook his head. 'I'm afraid it's merely tawdry. He gambled.'

Lottie nodded. ‘On horses,’ she said.

‘On horses,’ William agreed. ‘On cards. On financial markets. He shot himself. With one of my guns, would you believe? Not a very fatherly thing to do. He left my mother and sisters and me penniless.’ William smiled, as if what his father had done had been somewhat amusing. A good-humoured jape. ‘And who knows?’ he said. ‘Perhaps it will be the making of us. One of my sisters is training to be a teacher. The other, a nurse. I am here.’ He raised his mug of beer. ‘And there is nowhere I would rather be, Charlotte.’

Over to one side of the lawn the members of a band who had come out from Taunton set up their music stands and instruments. The plates were cleared away and desserts brought out. Jam and fruit tarts, stewed fruit, blancmange, custard and jellies. Ingrid admonished Lottie for the gravy stains on her white dress. Lottie said that perhaps she was not fit company for her cousins in Weimar.

Ingrid shook her head slowly. ‘We Prussians, I am afraid,’ she said, ‘are not for our table manners renowned.’

Lottie’s father beside her stood up and tapped one of his glasses with a fork. Indoors perhaps the sound would have been of sufficient volume to hush the assembled company, but outside it was lost amongst the clanking of utensils and the hubbub of conversation, which with the consumption of ale had gradually increased in volume.

Adam Score, though nominally a guest like any other, saw the master’s predicament and took it upon himself to retrieve the gong, which he bashed again and so silenced the gathering.

‘My dear friends,’ Lord Prideaux began. ‘I am in a most privileged position. For I have not one but two families. The first, of course,’ he said, gesturing to his daughter beside him, ‘given to me by blood. The second . . .’ and now he opened out his arms to indicate and so include all those whom he addressed ‘. . . the second by inherited right and responsibility. You are my children just as surely as is my dear Lottie here. Just as you serve me with your sweat and toil, so I serve you and always shall. Which is why I wish to share with you, dear friends, the most unexpected happiness that this beautiful young lady’ – Lord Prideaux turned to his right and indicated Alice – ‘has brought me in my middle age.’

He took a deep breath and sighed. ‘I hope, and I’m sure you too will join me in this, that as well as happiness my future wife will bring us more:

flesh and blood, with whom and through whom this estate will continue to flourish and thrive, unto further generations.'

Here Lord Prideaux was forced to pause, for a general cheering rose from the lawn below him.

'I ask you, dear friends,' he resumed, 'to raise your glasses in a toast to Miss Alice Grenvil, and hope that you will all welcome her to our home, and that she will come to cherish it as we do.'

The guests rose from their seats, holding their glasses and mugs, and drank and cheered his lordship and his fiancée. At a signal from her father, the band began to play, a tune Lottie recognised, though she could not name it. When she looked down at the guests she saw one nodding her head, another tapping his foot, and could feel the music do the same to her – making her want to move in time to it.

Her father and Alice Grenvil rose from their seats and walked around behind their companions and down from the terrace to the lawn. There they moved among the trestle tables to speak with the estate workers and their families.

Lottie watched a group of lads and maidens sitting together at a table. Some, she knew, were cousins. The under keeper Sidney Sercombe. The maid Gladys. Herbert Sercombe, once under carter on Leo's farm, had somehow persuaded the tall red-headed maid Elsie to sit on his knee. Lottie rose. It occurred to her that her invisibility might be a fleeting phenomenon. Adults did not see her for she was not one of them. Children likewise. She was in between. She turned and walked into the house, up the stairs. She went to her great-grandmother's room. All was as it had been before. The smell of roses predominated, but with something else behind it, which could have been the coming putrefaction of the flowers themselves but was not. The girl looked upon the face of her great-grandmama. The powdered yellow flesh was sinking onto the bones of her skull.

Lottie climbed further, to the nursery, and changed into shirt, breeches and boots. She descended the enclosed circular staircase to the cellars then climbed the steps that led back up into the west side of the house. She crept along silently, past her father's office – soon to be occupied, presumably, by William Carew – past the flower room, to the gun room. She took out one of the light Churchills Alice had given her from its case and put some shells in her pocket and went back down to the cellars and through their dank

corridors to the greenhouses and out through the walled garden to the woods.

The sound of the band playing drifted from the lawn. It felt less like man-made music than something rising from the trees and the undergrowth. Lottie walked on and soon the music faded out of earshot. She walked fast, tripping over roots, and came out of the wood into fields. Sheep grazed in one. The next was empty. The girl walked along the hedge. She broke open the breech and fumbled with the shells, inserting one then the other. Then she closed the gun, and walked on. She knew she should walk slowly, warily, but could not. Something moved in the hedge. Lottie raised the shotgun to her shoulder and took aim. The gun trembled in her hands. She lowered it and walked on, sobbing. She did not know why, exactly. There were many reasons. Her great-grandmama's death. Her father's marriage. Exile to Weimar. Thoughts of all that she was losing combined to make her miserable and she could see no end to it.

Lottie walked on to the meadows by the river. They were filled with buttercups among the grass, as if the fields had been planted with heavenly fodder for some ethereal beasts. Horses in the Elysian fields or some such. The girl laid the gun down then let herself fall into the grass and lay there, amongst the sweet-scented plants. The clouds lifted. There had been no need for the marquee after all. The sun beat down. Insects buzzed around her head. She closed her eyes.

*

'Miss Charlotte?' The voice reached her from afar. 'Miss Charlotte?' It was familiar. The girl raised herself to her elbows and looked up. The under keeper Sidney Sercombe came over and stood above her. 'Are you all right, miss?' he asked. He held the gun. It was broken open and the shells were gone.

Lottie rose and walked to the river. She sat on the bank. It was mid afternoon. The lad came on after her and laid the gun down and sat on the riverbank some yards away. Lottie wondered how Sidney came to be there. Had he heard the gun go off? No. She had not shot it.

'Mister Shattock saw you,' Sid told her. 'He asked me to keep an eye on you, miss, make sure you was safe.'

The girl looked across at him. The lad rolled himself a cigarette. It was strange to see him in his Sunday suit. He and the head keeper Mister Budgell wore fine attire for the annual shoots but otherwise dressed in everyday working clothes of frayed corduroy, aged whipcord. Sid licked his cigarette paper and rolled it tight.

'I should like one,' Lottie said.

Sid looked over, frowning. 'I don't know as I should, miss,' he said, but she held him with an unflinching gaze and he relented. 'Shall I roll im for you?' he offered.

Lottie nodded. Sid placed the one he had made behind his right ear. He pulled a cigarette paper from the packet and rested it open and grooved between thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He teased a twist of tobacco from the pouch and pinched it out along the paper. Then it seemed he had a fresh thought or recalculation. He reached up across his face with his left hand and took the cigarette from behind his right ear. Holding the paper and tobacco in its place in his right hand, Sid rose and stepped across and gave the girl the cigarette and his box of matches. Then he returned to where he'd been sitting and finished rolling the one he'd interrupted.

When Sid had licked the new paper Lottie lit her cigarette and tossed the matchbox over. She inhaled smoke into her mouth then removed the cigarette from her lips and blew the smoke out.

'Beg pardon, miss,' Sid said. 'But what made you go shootin? On yer own? What was you after?'

The smoke was foul and acrid and Lottie feared that it would make her cough or even vomit, yet she felt soothed. Whether by the smoke or the action of smoking she was not sure.

'I planned to ride,' she said. 'I was going to go to the stables. But I was in a vexed state, Sidney. I did not wish to impose my condition on poor Blaze. Why should she suffer it? So I came shooting instead. I cannot remember why.'

This inconclusive response appeared to satisfy Sid. He smoked and watched the seagulls who came dipping and swooping along the river in the cooling afternoon. Lottie watched them too. They would go upriver and out of sight then reappear and come back down. Out of sight again then back the other way. The same birds or perhaps always new ones, she could not be sure. She knew they must be taking insects in their beaks but she could not see it. They seemed more as if they wished to dive into the water or become

like ducks and float upon it but did not quite have the courage to do so. On occasion one came so close to the water that its claws brushed the surface like a raptor's talons after fish.

The girl asked the lad if he had heard from his brother or knew aught of him. Sid said he had received a postcard a while back, which surprised him. He'd not been sure that Leo could even write, yet his script was fine.

'What he wrote,' he said, 'didn't make much sense, I suppose . . .'

Suddenly Sid stopped talking and sat gaping at the girl. He looked away then back at her, realisation dawning. 'I is so stupid, Miss Charlotte,' he said. 'I'm sorry. His message said: *I shall return, and see you both again.* Bin tryin a work out ever since who the both of us is. I ad a wrinkle twas me and Mother, and Leo was gone soft in the head. Now I realise this was a message for you, miss. He will return.'

Lottie nodded. 'I know he will,' she said. 'I do not doubt it.' She thanked Sid. The cigarette she held had long since gone out. She flicked it into the water and rose and said that she should get back. She let Sid carry the gun without objection. He followed close behind her. They walked up out of the buttercup meadows and along the hedges of the pasture fields and over the fence into the wood.

Sid said her name: 'Miss Charlotte.' She stopped and turned to face him. He stood stock still, watching something in amongst the trees. She followed his gaze. 'I sin it before,' he whispered. 'Only once. Never sin it so early in the year.'

In this portion of the wood among a stand of conifers stood anthills. Upon one, a jay spread its wings. It shifted position and shuffled about. It took ants in its beak and pressed them into its feathers. Reached in between its feathers and took other ants out. Lottie could not see whether the bird then ate the insects but she thought it must.

'What on earth is it doing?' she whispered.

Sid did not look at her but kept his gaze fixed upon the jay. 'I don't rightly know, miss,' he said. 'I don't think no one does.'

'Won't the ants bite?' Lottie asked.

'That's one a the strange things about it,' Sid said. 'Mister Budgell reckons the bird seems to know to use the sort that don't bite.' He nodded, as if to some proposition of his own. 'I hopes to find out the reason for this strange behaviour one a these days. There must be someone on this earth has an answer.'

They stood watching. The bird seemed in no hurry, but eventually it hopped and took off. Lottie watched the blue flash among its feathers disappear in the speckled shadows of the wood.

'I need to tell my father something,' she said. 'We had best get back.'

She turned and headed on towards the house. The young under keeper followed.

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Part Eight

IN THE WOOD

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1

Leo, May–July 1914

There was a faint wind. It seemed to come and go. In, and out. In, and out. As if some unseen presence was breathing. The boy could feel God, breathing. The sky was a mottled grey. The moon broke through high up, above the grey. During the morning more and more blue came through, mottling white clouds, turning them wispy. By mid-morning the eastern side of the sky was clear blue. It was still murky in the west.

He slept in a wooden lean-to shed in an empty field. It was already early May but the night was cold. He woke trembling uncontrollably. He could not stop his teeth chattering, the top row and the bottom row knocking against each other. He thought he was sick but forced himself up from the ground and walked and realised that he was simply bone cold. As he warmed up, the trembling lessened. After a mile or two it had ceased.

In a wet, green wood there were still odd daffodils in flower, childish splodges of yellow. From a house he passed below came the sound of someone playing solo some kind of flute or horn. Smooth breezy melodies. He recognised neither the music nor the instrument. Towers of brick rose from the earth and through the trees and above them. No longer functional, they were like monuments to the men who'd built the mines beneath them.

He saw things that he had never seen before.

He watched a thrush fly directly along the horizon, from the south to the north, precisely, mathematically parallel to the land, its distance from him unchanging.

He passed a field of swans. Leo could not believe it. They looked like livestock there but could surely fly away. They were wild swans that had congregated in this field, perhaps summoned by some call inaudible to the

human ear. Most sat upon the ground, their legs beneath them like women surrounded by their white skirts, and stretching their long necks they grubbed with their orange beaks at something in the wet grass.

Another night he slept in a railway tunnel. When he woke, water dripped and splashed around him, seeping through the roof. The ground was damp and so was he. He wished that humans could sleep standing up, like horses. He rose and walked out of the tunnel and walked on along the railway line. The moist air smelled fresh from the rain. He counted out the paces from one telegraph pole to the next. The wire strung between them sang in the wind. It buzzed and swung. The track ran flat and straight across the crooked land but if he raised his eyes and looked ahead he could see that it always curved away, and dipped or climbed around the contours of the earth. If he paused and turned and looked behind he saw the track had deviated conversely.

In places the railway was built upon a ridge and the boy looked out across rolling pasture. In others it was dug into the ground so that all he could see were high banks covered in scrub rising on either side. When trains approached, he stepped back and stood and watched the people inside framed like pictures, stationary, motionless, hurtling past him.

The stations announced themselves with large nameplates. Lostwithiel. Par. At each, Leo climbed onto the platform and studied the timetable printed there to reassure himself that he was one station nearer to Penzance. He also found a drinking fountain or tap and slaked his thirst. In St Austell he walked into the station café and bought a ham sandwich and an iced bun. Wilf had taken most of his money but left a few coins in the bottom of Leo's pocket. He took the items and carried them until he was out of the town once more and sat on a bank and ate them. Around him the ground was dusted with specks of white powder, like a fine snow that had fallen briefly yet not melted.

At Burngullow station a branch line curved north amongst tall brick chimneys or towers. Leo looked towards white hills, which seemed in the soft warm light of evening to be of perfect conical design.

He thought that he would seek a hidden place to sleep, but the smell of meat cooking made him salivate. His footsteps led him in search of it. No, he had no choice in the matter. Half a dozen men sat around a pit of blazing logs. Leo watched from a distance. His stomach grumbled. The men's faces, their clothes and hats, were white. Perhaps they were bakers, covered in

flour. One of their number ladled stew into each man's tin or enamel bowl. They ate in silence save for a kind of murmuring or low groaning of satisfaction. Then one looked up and gave a yelp of surprise, and said, 'Dazed if I an't seen a ghost.'

Others raised their heads. The one who had served the food said, 'You'm be an idiot, Tozer, give me more'n a fright than any ghost. Come here, boy.'

Leo stepped closer to the fire, into the sphere of its orange illumination.

'When one a these gannets is done you can ave is bowl, son,' the leader said. 'Sit yourself down.'

Leo did as he was told. 'Beg pardon, sir,' he said. 'Tis I who thought you was all spirits.'

The leader told him they were working in the china clay pits. There was work for men like them – itinerants, tramps. They could stomach some days of it. Tozer there was hosing the clay off the walls of the quarries. Others wheeled barrow-loads up the ever-growing pyramids of waste. He himself had been loading ships at the docks down at Charlestown, carrying sacks of the white stuff up a gangplank all day.

A man finished his stew and belched loudly and spun his empty bowl in the air towards the man who spoke. He caught it and filled it and passed it to Leo along with a wooden-handled spoon.

'Thank you, sir,' the boy said, and ate. He could not tell what animal the gristly meat came from but he judged it one of the finest dishes of his life. There were potatoes and carrots with it, and other vegetables less easy to identify.

One or two of the men rolled cigarettes. Another filled his pipe. One man asked if anyone knew the gingernut maid amongst the women who scraped the blocks of china clay.

'Never give up, do you, Frizzell?' another replied, and others joined in with ribald observations. Leo could not understand everything that was said for each man seemed to speak with a different accent and most of these he had never heard before.

The leader turned from the fire, and called behind him, 'Fancy another bowl, Rufus?'

There came no reply. Leo peered into the darkness. After a while his eyes began to make out indistinct shapes. He came to understand that he was looking at a donkey. When he had scraped his tin bowl he gave it and the

wooden-handled spoon back to the cook and asked him quietly if the Rufus he had addressed was a beast.

The cook explained that the donkey had no name. It belonged to Rufus, who preferred to dine alone. He was one of their number but apart from them.

The man on the other side of Leo overheard and said, ‘He in’t never bin right since the Zulu War.’

‘Neither have you, Tozer,’ said the cook, ‘and you never even went.’

Their laughter had a bitter tang to it. The men passed round a flagon of rough cider. The boy sat amongst them. The cook gave him a blanket. He pulled it tight around himself and slept.

*

In the morning the men rose and walked north towards the tall chimneys and white hills. The one they called Rufus loaded bags on his donkey and set off west. Leo followed him. They walked along the highway. The occasional coach or farm vehicle passed them. Rufus did not acknowledge the boy dogging his footsteps. Neither did Leo close the gap of twenty yards or so between them. An odd, rancid aroma was in the air. He realised that it came from one of them, the man or the beast, he was not sure which. Perhaps both.

After an hour or so the man turned off the road and walked down a tree-lined avenue towards a large house. In front of the house was a semi-circular drive or turning area of shingle. Rufus followed a path around the side of the house. He left the donkey standing and approached the back door and knocked upon it. Leo stood beside the donkey, stroking its neck. It was not the animal that stank. A woman opened the door.

‘Any jobs want doin, missis?’ the tramp asked her.

The woman studied him for a moment. ‘You again?’ she said. ‘Either the seasons is slowin down or you’s speedin up yer rounds.’

‘I was just passin.’

The woman looked past him and said, ‘You got a lad with you now? Learnin the trade, is he?’

The tramp did not turn round but said, ‘He ain’t with me. I don’t know who he is.’

The woman returned her gaze to Rufus and screwed up her face. ‘You stink of old badger fat,’ she said. ‘I thought you washed it off come spring.’

Leo saw the man shrug his shoulders. ‘Still a mite cold at night,’ he said.

The woman led him into the kitchen garden and showed him a bed she wished dug over, and a pile of manure to be applied. She went to a shed and came back with a spade held upright in each hand like a queen bearing her sword and sceptre. She gave the larger one to Rufus and held the smaller spade towards Leo, beckoning him forward. He left the donkey where the animal stood and came and took the spade. The woman turned without a word and went back indoors. Rufus began to dig a trench at the side of the plot. Leo went to the other end and did likewise.

*

They walked side by side. The tramp allowed Leo to lead his donkey by the halter rope. Rufus walked at a slow pace. Leo glanced at him occasionally. He was a man of middle height. He wore no hat or cap. He had wild grey hair and a beard much the same. His skin was tanned and lined. His blue eyes were wide and staring and made him look startled by what he saw. Leo followed the direction of the tramp’s gaze, in case there were something notable, but could see naught save unremarkable hedges, and fields.

The tramp asked Leo where he came from. The boy told him a little of his childhood among horses, and Rufus said that he was a horseman of sorts himself in his youth. An illegitimate one. He had run away from home, for what reason he could no longer remember, and first worked, he said, as a strummer, one of a string of thieves who passed stolen horses from the West Country up to London. He was not proud of it but he was young at the time. After that, three years in a row he spent the spring as a stallion walker, taking a sire from farm to farm, to impregnate the female carthorses.

When he spoke to Leo, the old tramp did so with lucidity and ease, in a West Country accent little different from Leo’s own. Yet at other times as they tramped along the road Leo noticed that he muttered, as if in conversation with an invisible other, walking with them. Perhaps he addressed the donkey. At any moment, like Balaam’s ass, the beast would acquire from an unseen angel of the Lord the power of speech. Or was it

God Himself whom Rufus addressed? The tramp walked slowly along the rough highway, mumbling to God.

In the middle of the day they stopped and ate the remains of the bread and cheese and ham the woman with the garden had given them. The donkey grazed the verge. Rufus said that he should have gone to America, really, as a clear-thinking acquaintance of his had done. This fellow had received a land grant in the Middle West of the United States.

Instead, Rufus said, he had made the mistake of going into the army. He went with the mules. ‘Now it’s just me and this deaf old donkey,’ he said. ‘And my friend that I live with, my old pal, when I’ve had enough a the road. I’ll introduce you, if you like.’

Leo asked if this abode of his would be on the way to Penzance, for that was where he was headed. Rufus said that it was.

‘You’ll like my old pal,’ he said. ‘He’s a good old boy.’

They walked on in the afternoon. They proceeded along a low ridge and when the boy looked up he saw something ahead of them that made him stop. He could not make sense of what lay before him. Rufus too stopped a yard ahead and they each stood and watched whatever it was growing larger, approaching them through the air. Bearing down upon them, flying low and fast along the ridge, straight as arrows. Leo felt his knees weaken. Then understanding rose from his legs to his brain, along with the increasingly loud sound of wings beating. Just as he and Rufus began to duck, the two mute swans rose and flew over them, a yard or two above their heads.

2

They came to a wood. Rufus told Leo that the boy would soon meet his pal. He walked towards a wall of closely growing ash trees and parted branches to let the donkey through. Leo had thought her tired but, revived by her homecoming, she set a brisk pace upon a path that veered between the trees. Rufus followed, Leo behind him. After some minutes they came to a clearing. At its centre was a fire pit. Nearby a log bench, a rustic table. Cooking pans and flagons hung from branches. The encampment was a room whose rustling walls were made of leaves and branches, its ceiling the sky. The trees were of different species. One was of a sort new to Leo. Not its leaves, which he recognised as those of purple beech, but the way its branches grew not approximately perpendicular to the trunk but sweeping out and down to the ground like some grand woman's dark purple dress.

'I shall introduce you to my chum,' the old tramp said. He parted two of the hanging branches. Leo followed him into a dim space around the trunk, to which his eyes soon became accustomed. A mattress lay upon a wooden scaffold two or three feet above the ground. Rufus put his hand upon the smooth trunk of the tree and turning back to the boy said, 'This here is my pal. He has no name. He gives me shelter and friendship. Never asks nothin in return. He's always here when I come back from my wanders.' He stroked the tree and shook his head. Leo could make out letters carved into the bark. 'Listens to my twattle, never says naught back. Not yet at least.' Rufus then turned and addressed the tree, peering up into its higher regions. 'This here young lad's a goin to rest with us.' He turned back to Leo. 'Let's get us a fire goin,' he said, and walked back out into the clearing.

*

Just as a kitchen is furnished with cupboards and shelves stocked with implements or produce, so was Rufus's camp. Glass jars hung by twine made from bramble stems, stripped of their skin and plaited. These jars were filled with walnuts, hazelnuts, wild shallots pickled in spiced vinegar, blackberry jam. Leo tried to identify the contents of each jar but usually failed. Dried mushrooms. Pickled damsons. Dandelion leaves. Plums, greengages. Ledges and niches were cut into parts of trees for storage. The ham of a badger which Rufus had smoked over the fire and cured like that of a pig hung in the canopy of a birch, and he cut slices from it and made a stew. Leo wondered if insects did not help themselves to the hanging meat. Rufus said they probably did but had done him no harm, there were none hereabouts like the mosquitoes of Africa.

Water came from a spring. A brick enclosure had been built around it, with a wooden lid. Rufus lifted the lid and placed a bucket upon a slab of rock, and the bucket slowly filled with cold, clean water.

The boy said he thought that tramps lived upon the road all year. Rufus said that most did, no doubt, but some had an abode of sorts to which they retreated and where they kipped for as long as they could stand it. At such times he was more of a hermit or recluse. Until the urge to light out rose once more. At least so it was for him.

Rufus cut a number of willow sticks and planted them in a circle. He had Leo help him pull the tops of the sticks towards each other and tie them. Then the hermit sat down, clutching his stomach. He told Leo in gasping breaths to continue threading those other, slender lengths around the curved uprights to create a latticework. By the time that Leo had done so, Rufus had recovered from whatever pained him. Over the frame they stretched pieces of canvas and hide. The hermit told Leo this was his guest room, for the boy's exclusive use.

3

The next morning, after they had eaten reheated stew and drunk camomile tea, Rufus gathered a set of clothes, as old as those he wore day and night but washed, which constituted what he called his summer attire. He hung these from branches. With a stick Rufus mixed the hot ashes in the fire with the thick sediment of cold ashes beneath, then removed his clothes. He was a solid man, with a great barrel chest and belly, heavy thighs, a thick stub of a knob. He kneeled beside the fire and with a long-handled spoon ladled warm ash from the pit and rubbed it into his skin. The ash stuck fast. When he was done he was covered from neck to ankles in grey dust and his face too for good measure, ash adhering to the badger fat. He rose and stood, a ghostly figure.

‘Come,’ the old man said. He pulled on his boots. ‘I shall wash off this fat and these ashes.’ He walked out of the clearing. Leo followed him. The donkey followed after. They walked through the trees then out of the wood and across three fields. The sun shone upon them. The boy was sure they would be seen. What would a witness make of such a sight? Rufus was like a man who has seen the Lord, and repents in dust and ashes. Pursued by his one young acolyte.

Or perhaps those who lived nearby knew the old hermit and accepted his eccentricity.

They came to a pond. It was home to lilies and ferns and, though greenish from a distance, up close Leo could see through the water for it was fed by an audible spring and a similar amount must drain away. There were no beasts grazing, to raise the mud with their hooves. Leo tested the temperature with his finger. The water was icy. Rufus walked slowly into the pond. He appeared impervious to the cold. He neither gasped nor shivered but proceeded with the dead calm of a sleepwalker. By the time he reached the middle, the water was up to his waist. There he promptly sat

down, closing his mouth, for the water came up to his nose. Then he shut his eyes and leaned forward, and it was as if some sly invisible hand ducked Rufus's head underwater.

The old man rubbed and worked the ash first from his hair and face and beard then, standing up, the rest of his body. At some point he began making odd noises, grunts and hoots. The donkey watched, impassive, like one who has seen all this before. Soon Rufus came up out of the pond, his hairy skin pink and clean, and set off back to the wood at a fast pace, shivering. Leo trotted to keep up with him.

'Us'll c-c-catch c-c-carp in there,' Rufus said, teeth chattering.

Back in the clearing Leo got the fire blazing and the old man, once the water was dried off his skin, pulled the garments from where they hung and put them on. His trembling subsided. Leo made more tea. He handed Rufus his mug, and it struck him, now that it was absent, how strong, and unpleasant, the rancid stink of the badger fat had been.

4

Sugar, Rufus obtained from sycamore trees. He showed Leo how. ‘The tree needs to be the right age,’ he said. There were some at the edge of the wood. ‘Forty or fifty year old.’ He chose one and made an incision in the bark, and placed a jar below the cut which he tied in place with twine around the trunk and to a higher branch. Leo watched a colourless sap squeeze its way out of the tree. They attached half a dozen jars to other trees likewise. Then they sat and waited for the jars to fill. Leo asked if the trees did not suffer from the injuries that Rufus inflicted. Either these sycamores or indeed those in his camp that he cut for shelves and so forth.

The hermit said that he did not believe that trees feel pain as men do. It was a good question, he said, and he was glad Leo had asked it, for it showed that he and the boy shared a kinship of the mind. He himself had contemplated the nature of both. Men and trees. He said no more but gazed out from the wood and out across the quiet field before them. Occasionally he muttered something, but only to himself.

Leo waited for Rufus to expand upon the subject but he did not. So eventually the boy asked whether Rufus had reached conclusions of any kind.

The old man gazed out a little longer, then he turned to the boy, his eyes wide and piercing. ‘I believe,’ he said, ‘there is bits missin from the Bible. Whether to keep them hidden from the likes of us or because they were not found by those who compiled it, I cannot say.’ He nodded as for emphasis, or as a sign to the boy to pay attention. ‘In the beginnin God created the heavens and the earth, as I expect you knows.’

Leo nodded.

‘The spirit of God moved over the face a the waters. A mist rose up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. Plants growed and I

believe trees was the most important of them. To keep watch, you see, on those to come.'

'Sentinels,' said the boy. 'I believe horses was given the same role.'

'Is that right?' Rufus asked.

'I have heard it,' Leo told him.

Rufus murmured his interest, then continued as before. 'The Lord God formed man of dust, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.' The old hermit shook his head, as if in regret. Perhaps that God had created man too soon.

'When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and lost their innocence, and knew good and evil, what did God say?' Rufus looked again at the boy with his startled, startling eyes. 'Do you remember?'

Leo thought that he should recall from church or school what God had said, but he could not. The hermit's piercing gaze did not help.

'God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us."' Rufus shook his head again but this time he was smiling through his curly, ragged beard. 'We became like gods, you see,' he said. 'But do us live like gods? No. We live like trees. Come, boy, let us see if them jars is fillin.'

The sycamore sap they poured into a pan back at the camp and boiled on the fire until the bulk of it evaporated, leaving a sweet residue of syrup. 'Birch is less sweet and might be better for you,' Rufus said. 'They say it's good for the bladder. But I prefers sycamore myself.'

5

It took Rufus little time each day to take care of his fundamental needs. He lived off what he had hanging from the branches of his outdoor abode. He assured Leo that there were many days in the year, most of them in autumn, when he was obliged to slog, foraging and conserving food for the following seasons. Rufus said that if Leo were still here then he would show the boy the site of every apple and damson tree, wild plum or bullace, greengage, walnut, hazel. But still, the boy wondered why his father and brothers and all he knew in his childhood laboured so intensively. The old hermit preferred to while away the hours wandering in the vicinity of his wood, pausing, watching. Talking to himself. He gave the impression of a man waiting for something, of whose imminent arrival only he was aware.

Rufus smoked a pipe into whose bowl he pressed not tobacco but a concoction of his own made from dried herbs and weeds. Coltsfoot, sage, marshmallow leaf, moistened with diluted sycamore syrup. He added other herbs as he came across them, mint or lavender or suchlike. Leo considered the smell of the smoke more pleasant than that of tobacco. Rufus agreed with this opinion and offered the boy his pipe. Leo took in a lungful of smoke and coughed it out. He thought that he would puke.

‘Oh, aye,’ Rufus said. ‘It do take some gettin used to. Good for the lungs, though.’

Leo told the hermit that he would like to learn how to live off the land, how to glean the hidden harvest, but that he would have to leave soon. He had business to attend to in Penzance, seeking his mother’s family. Rufus said that, of course, the boy was free to leave at any time. Leo nodded. ‘I do not know what I will find there,’ he said. ‘There may be naught.’ Rufus told him he could stay for as long as he wanted. He should consider the bender his own.

*

One afternoon they observed a falcon gliding high above a field. It disappeared into the white sky then reappeared. It might have been putting on a display just for the two of them. Then they saw it come sliding out of the clouds, falling, all the way to the ground. It took off again with something in its claws. A twitching, quivering ribbon or coil of something. ‘Is that a viper?’ Rufus asked. ‘My eyesight ain’t so good as once twas.’ They watched the falcon rise, the snake thrashing in the air, till both vanished far above them.

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6

When they went back to the pond with rudimentary fishing tackle, they spent a day waiting for the carp to bite, contemplating the surface of the water. In the afternoon Rufus said abruptly that he would sleep and the boy should not bother him. He curled up and lay on his side. Leo could see that Rufus was not sleeping, for though his eyes were closed his face was contorted with pain. He held his gut as he had before. The boy said nothing. After a while the hermit sat up and said how well he felt, a good kip, that was all he needed, and took up his rod. They caught one carp each, and back at the camp grilled them and ate them with blackberry jam.

*

Rufus had a catapult and taught the boy to use it. It was little different, the hermit said, from the slingshot with which David smote the giant Goliath. Leo proved adept and hit the triangular targets Rufus constructed from twigs and set on branches. He soon came to know the feel – the weight and shape and heft – of pebbles suitable for the purpose, and collected them like large coins in his pocket. He noticed that when the old man pulled the string back from the forked stick and held it taut, his big hands trembled.

After dark they walked across the pale cloudy land to a different wood. Rufus said that pheasants roosted there, on low branches. They crept through the undergrowth. Rufus touched Leo's arm. The boy looked up. He could see the birds, their formless shape against the grey sky. The old man took aim at one and sent the pebble swishing through the air. It missed the bird by so wide a margin as not even to disturb it. Rufus passed the catapult to Leo. With his first shot the boy struck the bird. It tottered, and fell slowly from the branch, then plummeted to the ground. He carried the floppy carcass by its claws back to their clearing. The old man hung it up and on

the day following showed the boy how to paunch and pluck it. They made a stew and ate it. Leo said that he had eaten chicken and this tasted similar. Rufus said this was because they were hungry and had only hung the young bird overnight. An older pheasant hung for longer would taste much stronger, but the boy said that as far as he was concerned it tasted vitty just the way it was.

Rufus explained that the taste of an animal depended in part upon what it in its turn had eaten. A gamekeeper had kindly if unknowingly fattened the pheasant for them. The best rabbits came from a coombe where wild thyme grew, he would take the boy there. Leo asked what badgers ate. Rufus said that their diet was as varied as any animal he knew of. He himself had seen them consume grass, blackberries, wasps, snails, earthworms, mice and fallen apples. He thought a brock a fine animal and snared but one a year, for its meat and its fat. For which crime he believed it possible that his illness was punishment.

The old hermit seemed to have little adherence to a pattern of wakefulness in the hours of daylight, and slumber in those of night. There seemed to him little difference between the two. He wandered off at night muttering, though without a word of explanation to his guest, and made up the sleep he needed the following day.

One night Leo was woken by loud desperate yells. Some angry. Others terrified. Wide awake he crawled from his bender and stood outside the weeping beech.

Rufus shouted, ‘Leave it! Run! Run!’

There was a pause, then another man pleaded, ‘No, please don’t. Mercy. Mercy.’

Leo stood in the dark, listening. He understood there was no other man, only Rufus, now whining.

In the morning Rufus told Leo that he had suffered one of his nightmares. ‘I would not believe you could sleep through it but ye did,’ he said. ‘Noisy as it was.’

‘Aye,’ Leo said. ‘I heard naught, Rufus.’

7

Some days Rufus did not emerge from his quarters beneath the weeping beech. Leo called to him. Rufus called weakly back that he needed no food, only a little more sleep, and would get up in a while. Leo pottered about with the donkey, went for short wanders, came back to see how Rufus was. It was time for him to go but he could not leave the old man.

One morning Rufus was up before Leo. He declared that as it must be about the middle of July it was time to pay his rent. Leo was taken aback for he had assumed the tramp when in residence did so incognito. The idea of a formal agreement was intriguing. He followed Rufus through the wood and up out of the valley until after a mile or so they came to a large farmhouse. Behind the house was a yard where Rufus accosted a man and demanded ladders, rope, shovel, bucket, brushes, the usual. Once these were gathered the old hermit hoisted the heavy wooden extension ladder over his shoulder and bore it away. Leo managed awkwardly to pick up all the other implements and followed. He watched Rufus carrying the ladder, and it occurred to him that when the Lord bore the Cross towards Golgotha, perhaps there was a lad like himself who carried the hammer and nails and suchlike utensils.

They walked further from the big house. Rufus said that water had been piped to it since 1894. They came to a group of six cottages, arranged in attached pairs on three sides of a square. The fourth, open side had three strips of allotment or vegetable garden. The well was in the middle of the yard shared by all the houses. Equidistant from each back door and kitchen, for the use of home and garden both. It was very beautiful in its simplicity.

The well was perhaps four feet in diameter. The summer had been dry and the surface of the water was a long way down. Rufus drew some water in the bucket that was there already and invited the boy to drink some. The morning was warm but the water was deliciously cool.

They removed this bucket and rope and lowered the ladders into the well, extending them as they did so. When it came to rest the uppermost rung was just below the top of the well. ‘A perfect fit,’ said Leo.

Rufus said that he would start but Leo should watch him so they could take turns. Holding a stiff brush, he climbed over the edge and onto the ladder, and down a few rungs. Leaning against it, he began to scrub the brick walls, which were covered in some kind of dark moss or other matter.

The old hermit worked the brush with remarkable vigour. Soon, though, he slowed down, and after a while longer he climbed out and Leo took his place. Periodically they threw a bucket of water at the wall to wash off the loosened dirt. The work was slow and tedious, but they made gradual progress, shifting the ladder so as to be able to reach right around the wall before descending further.

When they reached as far as they could without stepping into the water below they withdrew the heavy ladders and set to removing the water. Rufus reckoned the well to be about a third full. He showed the boy his recommended technique. Holding the rope tight, he dropped the bucket upside down. The idea, he said, was to knock the air out of the bucket, so that it would sink, and turn, and fill with water.

Leo copied the old hermit’s method, then quietly adopted his own style, lowering the bucket to the surface then flicking his wrist to turn the bucket into the water. They emptied the buckets by throwing the contents behind them. That part of the yard became a wet mess.

At some point late in the morning a girl appeared with food and drink. Rufus thanked her and asked her to leave the provisions on the bench nearby, saying they could not stop for they were working against time. Against the inflow of water from whatever underground spring fed the well.

The removal of the water revealed a thick sediment of silt or muddy sludge. This Leo was sent down on a rope to shovel into a bucket that Rufus pulled up. Each bucket was heavy. Leo was at the mercy of the rope and of Rufus’s strength and concentration and grip upon the rope. He hoped that they would hold.

Up at the surface the old man emptied each bucketful in a pile on the ground. ‘They can chuck this on their gardens,’ he yelled down, his voice echoing in the brick chamber. ‘Beautiful soil, I reckon.’

By the time he had shovelled up as much of the silt as he could, leaving little on bare rock, Leo’s muscles moaned with complaint. He called up to

announce that this bucket was the last one and watched it rise. He wondered whether the ladder or at least a rope would be sent down again. What if Rufus suffered some palpitation of the heart or was otherwise spirited away, leaving Leo abandoned at the bottom of the shaft? Water would trickle in and eventually he would drown. They would find him floating. He had too lurid an imagination. The ladder came down.

At the top, Leo stretched his arms and shoulders, grimacing. Rufus laughed and said, ‘Who’s the one what was liftin them buckets full a mud?’

They sat and ate the cheese and beef sandwiches the girl had brought for them, and a bottle of tepid tea.

‘This is how you pay the rent on your small portion of a backwoods no one had a use for?’ Leo said. ‘I reckon your landlord’s drove a hard bargain.’

In the afternoon they scrubbed the walls below what had been the waterline when they started, then extracted a few buckets of scummy water. They withdrew the ladders for the last time. Leo asked if Rufus customarily did this all on his own.

‘Normally they gives me two lads to do as much as you done, boy,’ the old man told him. ‘Sometimes three.’

Finally Rufus drew Leo’s attention to the bucket that was used by the residents. It was full of water. Rufus asked him to look closer and he saw that there were two or three shapes in it like short thick worms. ‘Leeches,’ Rufus told him. ‘To keep the water clean.’ They lowered the bucket until it stood upon the damp rock, and tied the end of the rope to a hook on the outer wall above ground.

‘The spring water’ll feed in and come up over the top a the bucket in due course,’ Rufus said. They carried the implements they’d been given back to the farmyard and left them leaning against a wall. Then Leo returned to collect the plates and bottle the girl had brought them. These they took to the back door of the farmhouse. The same girl answered the old man’s knock. She thanked him. He told her the sandwiches were much appreciated, and turned to Leo, who nodded in agreement. The girl told Rufus that Mister Devereaux was in his garden and should like to see him.

The garden was a lawn, surrounded by flower beds. As Leo and the old man entered it, they disturbed some black birds, which flew up from the grass. A man of middle age was sitting upon a bench. He rose and beckoned

them. He was tall and had white hair, though his face was not that of an elderly man. They sat, Rufus in the middle of the bench, Leo beside him.

'I heard you have an apprentice, Rufus,' the man said. 'I suppose this means that my wood will have its tenant for another generation, does it?'

The old hermit said that he could not answer for the boy, but neither man invited Leo to do so for himself so he remained silent. Instead the farmer asked Rufus if birds could smell.

Rufus pondered the question for a while but clearly could not answer, for he merely repeated it. 'Can birds smell?'

'They do not have noses that I can see, only beaks, so I cannot believe that they are able to. But sit quietly and watch.'

The two men and the boy sat on the bench looking out upon the garden. They remained like this for some time. Leo studied the flowers. There seemed to him to be many herbs mixed up amongst them. Rosemary. Sage. Upon the lawn first one then another of the crows they had disturbed returned. These birds walked very slowly across the grass. Periodically each paused and inserted its beak into the ground.

'You see?' the farmer said. 'You see, Rufus? They are surely eating insects' eggs or larvae. How do they know they are there unless they're sniffing them out?'

The hermit nodded. 'I never heard a such a thing. It don't make no sense to me. I should say they be listenin.'

'Listening?'

'Aye. They hears the beetles feedin on stems and roots a grass, and then they peck em out. Either them or their larvae as you say.'

Mister Devereaux scratched his head. 'Well,' he said, 'I never thought of that.'

8

They walked back in silence. Then Rufus said, ‘Why is us here, Leo?’

The boy was unsure what the old man meant. Why were they taking this route back to the camp? Or why was it the two of them were here, together, at this moment? Or why were they here, in this landscape, this county, this kingdom?

‘I do not know,’ he said. ‘Why is we here, Rufus?’

The old man stopped. He turned to Leo and shrugged his shoulders. He looked at him with those startled blue eyes and the boy wondered what they had seen. ‘I know not either,’ Rufus said. ‘Unless it be to look down deep into the heart a things.’

‘What things?’ Leo asked.

‘It don’t matter,’ Rufus said. ‘There at the heart of anything you’ll find it.’

‘Find what?’

When he saw the boy’s serious expression the old man grinned. ‘Whatever you choose to call it,’ he said. ‘Any man can call it what he likes.’

The old man turned and resumed his journey. Just as Leo caught him up he stopped again. This time he laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Leo felt his old friend’s weight, that Rufus was using him for balance. ‘Just bear this in mind,’ he said. ‘The deeper you goes, the further you be from the surface. That’s the danger.’ They stood like this for some time, as if Rufus judged the boy needed to ponder the matter. Then he lifted his hand from Leo’s shoulder, and they walked on.

9

They sat at the fire. Leo cooked stew but Rufus said he was not hungry, despite the work they had done. He drank blackberry wine. It probably made him sicker, he said, it was terrible bad stuff, but it helped, too. ‘I don’t know what I got,’ he said, ‘but it’s a killer. I seen it happen to others. Grow sick and weak and thin, lose all their muscle and fat, what’s the use a that?’

‘We’ll get you to a hospital,’ Leo suggested.

‘You know where there’s a hospital hereabouts?’ Rufus asked.

‘Mister Devereaux will know. He will help us.’

Rufus shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I do not want no hospital.’

The donkey stood close by. It seemed to Leo that like his lost white colt, the beast derived some ruminative pleasure from watching the flames, just as men do. With this notion Rufus agreed.

‘I went to Africa with the mules,’ he said. He gazed at the fire. After a while he spoke again. ‘We trained them mules so that if our ship couldn’t get to port they could swim ashore. The best pack animal there be.’

Leo said he knew nothing of mules, and wondered whether they possessed a temperament and intelligence similar to horses.

Rufus said that he could not see why not, since they were a cross between a mare and a donkey, with big ears like a donkey and a mare’s tail. So one might expect them to have much in common with the breeds of their parentage.

He discoursed upon the subject of genetics. ‘See, boy, a hinny is a cross between a stallion and a she-ass. It will have a horse’s small ears and a donkey’s short tail. The forequarters of a cross resemble those of its father, the hind quarters those of its mother.’

Rufus said that mules possess remarkable powers of endurance, can withstand long periods of thirst, cope with dramatic changes of climate, and are not fastidious as regards food but will scoff whatever is available.

'Their hide is tough,' he said. 'Which helps protect it from galling.'

Leo asked what it was like in the army. In the war.

Rufus said that mules are generally cheerful and clever beasts. They appreciate proper handling. If treated badly they will rebel. They have a fearsome kick, as everyone knows. But if treated well, they are easy to groom and keep in condition.

'Did you see much fighting?' Leo asked.

Rufus sat a while in silence. 'There were some,' he said, 'who reckon mules is no good on account of their tendency to stampede under fire. But our company trained the habit out of em and they only let us down when it was real bad.'

Rufus stared at the flames with his wide open eyes, trembling a little as if the warm evening were cold, the flames cool, then shook himself loose from whatever reverie possessed him.

'How did you train the mules not to give you away?' Leo asked. 'If you was creepin close to the enemy and one a they animals suddenly neighed?'

'No,' Rufus said. 'That would a been no good. They can make a hell of a racket once they get started. No, they had to be devoiced, a course they did. The animals was brought in, one by one. There'd be four of us, with a short rope each, which we tied to the hooves. On the shout a three we turned em over. They was so surprised they made no fuss.'

Leo remembered his father single-handedly casting the mean hunter for Herb Shattock, in the master's stables.

'Then the veterinary surgeon come with a chloroform rag,' Rufus said, 'put it over the mule's mouth. One of us soldiers had to sit on the mule's head, but we had to take that job in turns or the chloroform would knock us out too. As soon as it went to sleep the surgeon cut into the mule's throat and took out the voice box.'

Leo asked what a voice box looked like.

'Like a tiny piece a jelly,' Rufus told him. 'The vet put on a dressin. We undid our ropes and waited for the water man. When he come with his buckets, he threw water over the animal and it looked up, all glass-eyed, and struggled to its feet. It tried to make a noise but no sound come out. The whole thing took no more an ten minutes.'

After some while considering this account, Leo asked the question that troubled him. 'Was horses cut the same way?'

The old man nodded. 'Horses, ponies, mules, the lot.'

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10

It was morning. Rufus was still abed. Leo groomed the donkey. The old man said she was not used to such treatment and might not appreciate it, but she seemed to.

The boy did not hear the intruder but Rufus did. He came out from beneath the weeping beech. With a finger to his lips he motioned Leo to keep quiet, and with eyes downcast Rufus tilted his head the better to listen in a particular direction. Then Leo too heard the footsteps approaching. Rufus nodded, suggesting that he recognised them. He looked at Leo, still nodding, as if he assumed that Leo did likewise, or was confirming some conjecture he had made earlier.

Mister Devereaux walked into the clearing. He carried a long leather case.

‘Good morning, Rufus,’ he said. ‘And you, boy.’

‘How goes it?’ the hermit asked him. He sat upon their bench. ‘Will you join us?’

‘I should like to, Rufus, but I can’t today. Perhaps when you bring the gun back I shall have more leisure at my disposal.’

‘You have a job for me?’

Mister Devereaux gave the case to Rufus, who laid it across his thighs.

‘I do. There’s a fallow buck on his own. Lives in that wood on the far side of the pond. At night he comes and helps himself to Sarah’s roses.’

‘I’ll take care of it,’ Rufus told him.

‘I realise it’s entirely the wrong time of year, but keep as much venison as you can smoke. There’s a dozen bullets in there. It’s my W. J. Jeffery. The four-oh-four.’

Rufus nodded. ‘Should do,’ he said.

‘Good hunting,’ said Mister Devereaux, and took his leave.

The old man sharpened two knives. One was much the older of the two and had been sharpened countless times before. Its blade was half the depth it remained at the hilt. Its wooden handle, though rubbed and scarred, Leo reckoned not to be its first. The other knife was younger. Rufus sharpened them one after the other on a whetstone, testing the blade on sticks until he was satisfied.

Then he took the rifle from the case and studied it. He told Leo that it was not much more than ten years old and had been made for Mister Devereaux by the famous gunmaker. He asked Leo if he was much of a deer hunter. Leo told him of his brother Sid, who for his own amusement liked to creep up on a roe deer, to see how close he could get without it knowing he was there. If he got close enough, when he frightened the deer it would bark in alarm before running away. Rufus asked if he could do likewise. The boy confessed that he himself lacked this capability.

Rufus said that he had clearly acquired the wrong brother. He could also do with a dog or two at such times. As a boy he had hunted otters. His father's otterhounds were rough-coated animals, of Welsh extraction. Their cry or howl came out of their chests. It was the most beautiful, in his opinion, of all hounds' cries. As he spoke he handled the rifle to feel the heft and balance of it, and stroked the walnut stock, murmuring with satisfaction.

A hundred feet or more away from where Rufus took up position stood a tree whose trunk separated into two not far from the ground. Rufus lay on the ground and aimed with his shallow V rear sight just below the V in the tree. After each shot he hauled himself to his feet and walked all the way over to study where the bullet had entered, then made minute adjustments to the sights. After the fourth shot he said that would do and they set off, Leo leading the donkey.

They sat upon the warm ground in the middle of the wood beyond the pond, each leaning against the trunk of the same tree. Rufus said that they should wait, that patience was a better course of action in a case like this than running around in search of one solitary fallow deer. This buck would come to them.

And so they waited. Leo was alert. Any sound might be their prey and he looked about him. But no deer came and in time his attention wandered. Insects buzzed in the summer sun. Birds warbled from the canopy of leaves

above him. Breezes shifted the leaves and the sunlight rippled as it filtered through them. He watched the changing patterns in the undergrowth around him as he would the flames of a fire. He recalled waiting for Lottie on the morning of their fateful picnic, and wondered whether when he returned she would remember him. Of course she would. How much altered could he be?

The boy sat with the old hermit and waited for this deer to show itself. Perhaps it was all a ruse, cooked up by Rufus and the farmer. There was no errant buck. They wished to teach him some lesson. He closed his eyes and slept and saw a bird. '*but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*' He saw the bird but the bird was himself. Half boy, half bird. Then he saw another, a heron, which rose from a rock beside a pool and flew away in the slow, regal manner of its species.

The sound of the shot woke him. A boom, resounding among the trees. Leo scrambled to his feet and over to Rufus, who knelt on one knee. The rifle rested in the V of a stick he must have cut for the purpose, whose other end he'd inserted in the soil.

'Help me up, boy,' he said. The old man staggered. Leo held him upright. 'It's only my stiff knee,' Rufus said. 'I can't hardly unlock it when I been kneelin any length a time, see?'

They walked over to where the deer lay. 'Shot him through the shoulder,' Rufus said. 'At the base a the neck there.' He showed Leo the exit wound, a small hole barely larger than the bullet itself, above the right shoulder. He asked whether the boy had ever dressed a deer. Leo said that he had not.

Rufus kneeled and slit the dead deer's throat. He explained that the carcass must be bled. Dark red blood spilled liberally onto the ground and soaked into the dry soil. Next, he said, they should remove the glands inside the buck's rear legs, which secrete a powerful-smelling musk during the rut and if left will contaminate the meat. Rufus removed these using the same knife that he had used to bleed the animal. When he had done so he tossed the tiny glands into the undergrowth and inserted the blade of the knife into the ground. Then he asked Leo to fetch the donkey. When the boy returned Rufus was standing up, some yards from the dead buck. He asked Leo to uncork one of the water bottles they'd brought in the pannier and to pour water over his hands. Leo now saw that Rufus's hands were covered in

mud. He washed them, rinsing off the mud he'd used to absorb any scent he might have picked up from the glands.

They laid the deer upon its back. Using the second knife Rufus cut the skin around the deer's anus. Then he leaned forward and took hold of the penis and lifted the scrotum and cut around its base and kept cutting towards himself, towards the anus, until he could pull the creature's genitalia away. He threw it off to one side and stood and looked up to the sky, with his eyes closed and mouth open, and gasped. He rubbed his back with his left hand and with his right hand, though it held the knife, his stomach.

Leo feared the old man would lose his balance and fall. He held out his arms in readiness. 'Is you all right, Rufus?' he said.

The old man breathed heavily, his eyes still squeezed shut, sweating. He swallowed and opened his startled eyes wide. 'I'm fine,' he said, and lowered himself upon the ground beside the deer. He spread the deer's hind legs and made a small incision in the muscle wall around the middle of the pelvis. He inserted two fingers and lifted the tissue away from organs and entrails beneath, and in the V thus made inserted the knife and cut up through the middle of the deer, following his fingers. Rufus paused periodically to get his breath back, as if this were the most arduous labour, though the boy could see that it was not. Rufus shifted position, shuffling on his knees along the side of the carcass. When he reached the bottom of the ribcage he stopped and showed Leo the sternum or breastbone. Leo leaned over to get a closer view. Rufus said that in truth he could now do with a bigger knife, but that this one would suffice.

'Move away,' he told the boy. 'You's too close there.'

Leo stepped back. Rufus grasped the handle of the knife with both hands, placed it under the breastbone, then thrust it forward and up and through the bone, his hands on the knife shooting into the air. This he repeated, right up through the ribcage and on up the animal's throat. He remained there, breathing heavily, for some time. Leo waited.

'I'll cut loose the trachea now,' Rufus said, 'and the gullet.' He then opened out the ribcage and showed Leo the deer's vital organs. Its heart and lungs. He showed the boy the diaphragm and cut it loose on either side.

'What I intends to do,' Rufus said, 'is to take hold of the trachea and gullet and pull them and all the innards of the deer down and out in one fell

swoop. But first I'll split the pelvic bone.' He shuffled back to the lower end of the carcass. 'Mind you avoids the bladder here,' he said.

Rufus used the knife as a saw upon the bone. He admitted that a saw with teeth would do the job better. He held the bladder and perhaps other organs out of the way with his left hand as he cut the bone with his right. In time it gave and he opened the two sides of pelvic bone apart.

'Help me up, boy.' The old man rose awkwardly and stepped along the side of the animal to its forelegs, and reached in and took hold of the trachea and oesophagus. When he pulled them up all the other entrails followed suit. Once or twice he paused to cut the diaphragm loose where it was sticking. An entire amalgamation of the animal's innards came loose and out through the channel he'd cut through the pelvic bone and, earlier, the anus. All this he hurled into the undergrowth.

Leo helped the old hermit roll the deer onto its front so that any blood remaining in the chest cavity might drain away. Then they lifted it together and threw it over the back of the donkey. Leo retrieved the rifle and they made their way back to their own wood.

*

The carcass smelled of blood and meat and the smell was growing sweeter.

'The day's too hot,' Rufus said. 'A course it is. You should always butcher cold meat. Tis madness to cull a deer in summer.' It was a hot day but the temperature could not account for how heavily the old man was sweating. 'But Mister Devereaux might have his reasons. I do not question them. And it'll be easier to pull off his hide while it's warm.'

They hung the carcass by its rear legs. Rufus made a cut in the hide on those legs, a neat line on each side from the thigh up as far as the tarsal glands around the knees. He told Leo that he must cut upwards through the hide from underneath, not down, for if he did so he would find hairs in the meat.

Rufus then bent down and made the same cuts in the forelegs, except that it seemed that his vision was shot, or the co-ordination of his brain to his fingers, for his knife wandered in zigzag slices from the knee joints up through the armpit to the open chest.

The old man cursed. He returned to the top legs and began to peel the hide off where he'd made the first incisions. When the hide did not lift easily he cut the tissue that held it to the flesh beneath. Then he stepped back and put his hands on his knees, and stared at the carcass, on his face a furious expression, as if the deer in death were in some way defying him. He lowered his gaze to the ground and he held the knife out to Leo. 'You do it,' he said. 'Cut around the knees.'

Leo cut the skin around both hind and forelegs as best he could.

Rufus had retreated and sat upon a log. 'Give me the knife,' he gasped. 'Go behind him and grasp hold a the hide with both hands and pull it down.'

Leo did as he was asked. He gripped the hide and pulled it. It did not come at first, but he summoned all his strength. He discovered that he had more than he'd ever had before. The skin came down and off the carcass.

'Beautiful,' Rufus said. 'You looks like some gentleman taking the coat off the back of a lady there, boy.'

When he had the hide free Leo laid it on the ground. Rufus rose and without a word set to butchering the carcass. This time he did not ask the boy to help. He seemed indeed to have forgotten he was there. Leo watched him in disbelief. The old man attacked the carcass like a butcher suddenly blinded, cutting chunks of flesh and dropping them to the ground, muttering to himself that he must get the meat to the farm and the Devereauxs' cool larder or pantry as soon as he could. The boy knew enough from seeing pigs butchered that the old man was not working in accord with the skeleton or frame of the animal but extracting crude chunks of flesh. The hermit was covered in blood and gore. The hanging carcass was a gruesome spectacle. Eventually Leo could watch no longer and said, 'Rufus, please, stop. What are you doing?'

The old man paused, and looked up as if he had heard a voice, not from the boy behind but from the crowns of the trees above. Then he turned. He grinned. 'There you are, boy. Where you been? Pick up a piece a this meat. Us'll have ourselves a good venison stew this evenin.'

11

The hermit had willed himself to full strength to shoot the deer. Then he relapsed. He sighed and stared at the fire. The stew was delicious but Rufus hardly touched his. Instead he swigged his blackberry wine.

Leo said nothing.

The old man sighed. Then he took a deep breath. ‘Don’t let me give you the idea that transport’s a good choice, boy,’ Rufus told him. From the grimace on his face it seemed to hurt the old man to talk. ‘It is not. I hope you got that. Choose somethin else.’

Leo did not know of which choices Rufus spoke. He was unaware of having any.

‘Bein somewhat of a horseman, you might be thinkin on joinin the cavalry. Keep out a that too, boy, whatever you do.’

‘I have no plans, Rufus.’

The old hermit drank the wine and talked more easily. He told Leo that the number of horses killed in the war in which he’d served was unprecedented, and in the next would only be worse. When General French relieved Kimberley, he said, the cavalry rode five hundred horses to their death that day.

‘At Ladysmith,’ he said, ‘we was ordered to slaughter our horses for food. After the meat, we boiled down the bones and the bits to a kind a jelly. Hot water was added and we drunk it like beef tea.’

‘Wait up there,’ Leo said. ‘Ladysmith? I thought you was in the First Boer War, not the Second.’

Rufus stared at him with his wide eyes. ‘How old do you reckon I am, boy?’

Leo looked at the hermit’s leathery wrinkled features, his wild grey hair. ‘Seventy?’ he said. ‘Eighty?’

Rufus laughed. The laughter turned to coughing, which in turn became what sounded like sobbing. Eventually he recovered, and took another swig from his bottle. ‘Think I’ve had my three score year and ten already, do you?’ He shook his head. ‘I’m not quite fifty yet, boy.’ He asked Leo if he was any good with boats.

Leo thought of the ferry on which he and the white colt had crossed the Tamar. Was that a boat? If so, it was the only one he’d ever sailed in or floated on.

‘I’d go on the boats if I was signin up now,’ Rufus told him. ‘One a them battleships. That *Dreadnought*. They say tis like a floatin hotel. They got to look after you, see? You ain’t goin nowhere, and neither is they.’

Leo said he had not looked beyond seeking brethren in Penzance. An uncle. Cousins, perhaps. He had no particular wish to travel the high seas.

‘I spoke with a man,’ Rufus said, ‘had work loadin in the Plymouth dockyards. He told me the Germans have been buildin the big ships, and we have too. Bigger and bigger battle fleets. Us to protect our Empire, them to create one. But I been considerin the matter. And I can’t see but one end to it.’

Leo asked what this end will be.

‘Them ships is built for war,’ Rufus said. ‘And war is what they’ll bring.’

Leo took their bowls to the bucket and washed them. When he came back to the fire Rufus asked him, ‘What do you look like?’

Leo pondered the question. It was more like a riddle. ‘How do I know what I look like?’ he said.

‘I shall tell you,’ Rufus said. ‘Like a damned baggabone who’s stole some younger boy’s clothes.’

Leo rose and, standing, bent forward the better to see himself. The hems of his trousers were up around his ankles. The sleeves of his jacket above his wrists. He was like a parody of Dunstone, the old boy back on the estate. Now that he considered the matter, he realised that the jacket was tight across his shoulders. The trousers pinched his belly.

Rufus rose with a grimace and stepped around the boy and pressed his own back against Leo’s. ‘Stand up straight.’

Leo stood and felt Rufus’s rough palm flat atop his scalp. Rufus stepped away and came back around and stood before the boy. He still held his hand on top of his own head.

‘Be as tall as me, boy. How’d you do that?’

Leo frowned. ‘You must a shrunk.’

Rufus turned and struggled over to one of the oak trees at the edge of the clearing and reached into one of the small niches he had cut into its trunk. He withdrew his hand and showed Leo a pair of gold coins. ‘I been savin these for somethin, I never knew what,’ he said. ‘Now I do. You must buy yourself a new suit.’

*

On the day following Rufus got up though he could barely move without wincing in pain. He gave the boy some strips of dried badger ham wrapped in dock leaves for the journey. He said he would have liked to come too and help but hoped that Leo would understand, he would not be able to cope with the crowds in the town. Leo said that he did.

‘Find a tailor first, mind,’ the hermit said. ‘Let him get the measure of you. He can’t cut a suit on the spot.’

‘I shall.’

‘There might be a tailors who can, but I never eard a one.’

‘That will be the first thing I do, Rufus.’

Leo told the donkey that he was honoured to have made her acquaintance.

There was one more thing, Rufus said. He told Leo that he had something to ask him. He did not know how to, but he must. It was a request.

Leo interrupted and said that he probably should leave now. Not a moment later. He’d been here long enough, too long, already.

Rufus agreed. It was time for Leo to leave. But before he did, there was this one thing he could help the hermit with. ‘It seems a shame not to use the gun as we got it, see?’

‘I do not see,’ Leo said.

‘Will you help me, boy?’

‘How?’

‘How? Shoot me, a course.’

Leo turned and walked around the clearing. He said that he could not.

‘I can try it on my own,’ Rufus said. ‘But it would be cleaner if another did it.’

Leo walked in a circle around the hermit, unable to look at him. Then he stopped and stood before Rufus. He looked at the ground. He said that he would not do it, he was sorry, he could not. Rufus told him to dry his tears, it did not matter. It was too much to ask.

‘I cannot shoot you, Rufus,’ the boy sobbed. ‘I cannot.’

‘You go and tell Mister Devereaux, boy. Go and fetch him. You’ll do that for me, won’t you?’

*

Leo left the wood and walked to the big house. The same girl as before answered the door. Leo asked for Mister Devereaux. The girl fetched him. Leo requested that he come to the wood. Rufus had for him.

Mister Devereaux walked straight to the clearing, Leo walking behind. The landowner said nothing but parted branches of the weeping beech and entered. Leo remained outside. After a short while Mister Devereaux came out carrying the gun and said that it was done. Rufus had made as good a job of it as could be hoped for. He asked whether Leo had seen a dead body before. Leo said that he had but one, that of Isaac Wooland, the stockman on the farm his father worked on, who was kicked by a cow.

Mister Devereaux nodded. ‘You do not need to see this one,’ he said. He turned and looked around, and said, ‘You could do with your own tack, boy. You can have his if there’s anythin you want. Indeed, you can rest here if you wish.’

Leo explained that he had to go to Penzance, he had only stayed this long as Rufus declined. Mister Devereaux shook the boy’s hand and said that he was going home. He wished Leo a good journey.

Leo said, ‘Is us not goin to bury him?’

‘Why?’

The question did not make sense. ‘Tis Christian, in’t it?’ Leo asked.

Mister Devereaux shrugged. ‘Rufus would never forgive me if I gave him a church burial. Wherever he is now, he’s gone from here. What’s left there’s nothing but meat and bone. Carrion. We can bury it and feed it to the centipedes and worms, or we can leave it where it is for the birds and the flies. Seems to me to be about the same difference.’

‘I do not mean to be rude, sir,’ Leo said. He bit his lip.

‘You may speak your mind,’ said Mister Devereaux. ‘You think I am callous, is that it?’

‘You do not seem sad,’ Leo told him.

The farmer nodded. ‘I am sad,’ he said. ‘I am very sad. Believe me.’

The donkey stood some yards away. Whether or not she was aware at all of what had happened Leo could not say. He recalled what the Orchards had done to Belcher’s horse. He gestured towards the beast. ‘What about the donkey?’ he asked.

Mister Devereaux nodded. ‘We’ll look after my brother’s donkey.’ He turned to Leo, and after a moment said, ‘You look surprised. It is no great burden. She can see out her days in a corner of a field.’

‘I did not know you was brothers,’ Leo said.

The landowner shrugged. ‘All our lives,’ he said.

12

The late-summer day was warm and the sky clear. Leo walked through waist-high grass. There were purple corncockles and yellow buttercups. The seeds at the top of the grasses had turned brown on the green stalks. Thistles grew, taller than the boy, their purple flowers like blobs of paint. Poppies were crimson smudges and there were blue cornflowers too in pale ripe corn.

In a pasture shorn close by sheep a section of the field was covered with the brown cones of molehills. To the smallest insect, he thought, they must be like a range of mountains. Into his head came the word, *Himalayas*.

There were black butterflies he'd never seen before. Perhaps all over the world different kinds of butterfly inhabited their own patch. Or some did so, while others spread far and wide, according to their temperament.

In a wood he walked through, all was quiet. There were purple foxgloves. A breeze soughed through the trees, stirring the leaves. Then the breeze died and the leaves were still and the silence returned. He stopped walking. Stillness and silence. The wood was holding its breath, the trees aware of him. Waiting for him to walk on. He did so.

All about him Leo could sense the energy of plant life that burst forth out of the earth, of creatures, from the smallest specks in motion. In the grass adorned with daisy and buttercup, the black crows on yellow flowers, gulls drifting inland from the sea. Black flies of some kind flew around him, less like autonomous insects of the air than black scintillae dancing at the edge of his vision. He felt a strange new energy inside him and understood that he was not separate from what he saw but part of it.

Leo slept in a hay barn and walked into Penzance in the morning. The air tasted briny and the light was dazzling. There was a great amplitude about the vistas before and around him and the sky overall. The harbour was dry

save for puddles. Askew across the mud, boats leaned over as if ailing, waiting for the tide to bring a cure.

At the first tailor's he came to on the steeply sloping main street Leo entered and said that he needed a new suit. The man looked him up and down and said he could see that for himself. He called Leo 'Sir' and apologised but said that he would need proof of Sir's ability to pay before proceeding further. Leo showed him the gold coins. The tailor laid out for the boy a selection of swatches of material. Leo chose a grey serge of medium thickness. The man asked him to stand straight and measured him with his tape. He licked his pencil and wrote the figures in a book. When all the necessary dimensions had been recorded, the tailor scrutinised the figures and did some sums and informed Leo that the suit would cost him nineteen shillings and sixpence, half the payment in advance or in other words now. The rest upon collection, which could be as early as this time tomorrow if the young gentleman should wish to proceed. Leo said that he did. He gave the tailor a gold sovereign. The tailor went to his till and came back and gave the boy his change.

He walked up to the top of the street and turned to his left and walked on and down towards the sea. He could have closed his eyes and reached it, for he could smell salt and fish and seaweed all drawing him towards them. He walked along the Esplanade of which his mother had spoken. Women in black skirts and white blouses, wearing straw hats and carrying closed parasols, strolled along. Some pushed prams, or chastised older children who strayed too close to the steep drop to the beach, though iron railings ran right the way along. Dogs that seemed to belong to no one trotted jauntily along the Esplanade. Old men sat on the benches gazing out to sea. Behind them, a building announced its function with a large sign: *Mount's Bay Hotel*. Next door, the *Queen's Hotel* was more discreet. A flagpole rose from some kind of tower or balcony upon its roof, though on this day no banner flew. Horse-drawn carriages rolled along a metalled road in front of the hotels.

Leo leaned forward against the railings. Below, children played on the sand and shingle beach. Parents or others lounged. They looked to the boy indescribably bored. He could not understand why they did nothing. When a woman all in white rose from a bench behind him and moved away, Leo took her place. From there he watched boats of different sizes move lazily across the great wide bay, and out on to the ocean. He thought of what the

hermit had said. The ships looked like they were skating slowly across the surface of the sea, but he knew this to be an illusion. They were huge, heavy vessels, half-submerged in the water. And the ocean was deep and vast.

He did not know how long he sat there. Perhaps he dozed. He considered returning to the safety of the wood. To live as Rufus had lived, the tenant of Mister Devereaux. How easy it would be to live in the clearing, to sleep in the shelter of the beech tree. No one to hurt or bother him. He could be alone there.

When he realised he was shivering he looked about him and saw that many of the sightseers had gone from the seafront. He rose and followed the smells of cooking and bought fish and chips, served in newspaper, and a lemonade, which he consumed sitting on a wall.

As it grew dark Leo walked back into the town and saw through a gate a large house surrounded by gardens. Those nearest to the house were formal, those closer to the wall around the outside were relatively untended. He climbed over the gate and found a shed full of mowers and tools and other gardening implements. The shed still held warmth from the sun. In a corner he found canvas sacking and lay down and was soon asleep.

*

In the morning the boy walked back to Market Jew Street and to the tailor. The suit he had ordered was ready. He tried it on and the tailor told him it was a good fit, there was a little room for growth which was just what a lad of his age required. Leo did not know enough to do other than agree. The new serge was a little scratchy on his skin. He bought a shirt, socks, and underwear and put them on in the changing cubicle. When he emerged the tailor told him all he needed now was a tie. Leo thanked him, but said that he would rather do without. His cap and his boots would also last him longer. This, the man said, was a shame, for they spoiled the effect of the new clothes. Leo shrugged. He paid the tailor what he owed him and left.

A little further up the street Leo found a cafe, and bought a pasty and a mug of tea. He asked the woman who served him where the post office was and she sent him in the right direction. There he made enquiries and was passed from one person to another until he stood before a man of middle age who reckoned to know most of the adult population of the town, if not

personally then at least by their address. Leo told him his mother's name, Ruth Penhaligon, and age, which he judged to be thirty-seven years. The postman wondered whether she was a daughter of Captain Richard Penhaligon of Leskinnick Terrace, who died not three or four years back. No, Leo said, that was not possible. Both her parents had died years ago.

'Of course,' the postman said. 'Did she have a brother name of Thomas?' When Leo nodded to indicate that it was so, the postman said, 'I'll show you where she lived. It be just down from where the Royal Mail coach is sat. There be no Penhaligons there now, mind. Nor been none for some while.'

They walked up past the Market House which the postman pointed out and past the Public Buildings and St John's Hall and out of the centre of the town into Alverton Street. A pair of Royal Mail coaches stood outside the First and Last Inn. The postman said their horses were fed and watered in the stables at the back, and their drivers inside the inn likewise. They walked on a hundred yards and stopped in front of a terraced house of two storeys and dormer windows in the roof.

The postman left him and Leo stood before the house. The front door had a decorated stone lintel and surround. Large sash windows were on either side. A three-sided oriel window jutted out above the front door, with sash windows on either side as below, so that the facade of the house had a pleasant symmetry. It must belong, Leo reckoned, to people of some standing. He understood all at once his mother's airs, her desire for her children's education and betterment, her frustration at their failures. Why she had left Penzance in the first place, how she had made her way across two counties, to settle with an ill-educated horseman, became no clearer than it had ever been.

Leo knocked on the blue door of the house next door. There was no response so he rapped hard once more. After some time an elderly lady answered and demanded to know who was making this racket. She wore a black lace cap upon her head, and a black dress. When Leo began to tell her who he was and the purpose of his intrusion she yelled at him to speak up, and so he began again.

'I know my mother had a brother,' he finished. 'I wonder if you know where he went, missis?'

The woman squinted as she studied the boy's face. 'You look nothing like a Penhaligon,' she said. 'Nor speak like one. Yes, I know where Thomas

went. Up there.' She pointed a bony finger towards the sky. 'He was a good man who respected his parents and his neighbours and loved God, who took him to His bosom.'

Leo stared at the old woman. He asked her when and how Thomas had died.

'Pleurisy,' she said. 'Tuberculosis. Pneumonia. The poor fellow.'

'Did he have children?' Leo asked.

The woman shook her head. 'He was frail,' she said. 'No wife. No children. You'll find no more of your Penhaligons hereabouts. Now leave me. You should be ashamed of yourself disturbing a lady in her rest time.'

'Where shall I go?' Leo heard himself ask, though he thought he meant only to ask it of himself. It came unbidden from his mouth.

The old woman pointed down the street, west, away from the town centre. 'Follow that road you'll come to Land's End,' she said. 'From there it's a short swim to America.' Apparently pleased with herself at this witticism, the woman grinned, showing an almost full set of yellow teeth, then closed the door.

Leo turned east and followed the road back to the centre, down Market Jew Street and out of the town and away, and on, to walk back across Cornwall, towards the port city and the boatyards of Plymouth in the County of Devon.

Part Nine

DUCK BREEDING

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Lottie, Summer 1915

The girl walked to the cottage in the early morning. Birds greeted her from the trees and though she could identify few she whistled their songs back at them as best she could. When she reached the cottage she let herself in through the front gate and walked around the side to the garden behind.

Even before her arrival the ducks were quacking loudly to demand their release. When they heard her, the volume increased. She did not oblige them but lifted the flaps at the back of the shed to see how many eggs had been laid. One after another she counted them. Six. Two more still to come.

Lottie went instead to the hatching shed. There, on clutches of duck eggs, sat hens. She was not yet accustomed to this surrogacy. Chickens incubating ducks. It tickled her. Each hen could manage a dozen eggs. Lottie took their tin hoppers to the feed shed and refilled them with corn. Then she took the waterers to the well.

Florence Wombwell opened the back door of her cottage and came hobbling out on her sticks. She asked Miss Charlotte as she did every morning if she would like a cup a nettle tea. Lottie declined. The girl renewed the waterers and took them back to the hatching shed. None of the hens moved but remained where they were, peering silently at her from their gloomy nests inside orange boxes, one hen in each of three partitioned sections. Each hen would sit upon her clutch for four weeks.

Lottie closed the door of the hatching shed and returned to count again the duck eggs laid that morning. The clamour of the ducks to be let out had risen. She counted seven eggs. Still one more.

From one of the three duckling sheds came a fainter quacking than the full-grown ducks'. From another a twittering sound. Each shed housed ducklings of a different age. The fourth was still empty, for the breeding season was only three-quarters through. Lottie lifted the portals and the ducklings came out into their runs. These were shallow pens made of thin

boards eighteen inches high, fixed tightly in place with stakes. From the run with the oldest ducklings, Lottie selected the one she reckoned the largest. It would be ten weeks old. She lifted it with one hand around its neck then put her other arm under its body to take its weight and carried it to the plucking shed. She returned to the pen and selected three more likewise.

Lottie checked the eggs again. The last one had been laid. She went around to the front and opened the door, and the white ducks shoved and tumbled out of their captivity. Within moments, however, the drake assumed his place in front and the eight female ducks settled into a line behind and they set off at as fast a pace as they could, waddling comically like rollicking sailors just stepped upon dry land.

Florence Wombwell was in her kitchen seated upon the stool, her sticks laid against the wall. She had two pans of water on the stove, one with chickens' eggs boiling, the other with rice.

'We shall soon need more boards from the sawmill, Miss Charlotte,' she said.

'Yes, Mrs Wombwell.'

'And we shall need more sittin hens. I used a get em from Ruth Sercombe over Manor Farm. Lovely heavy crossbreeds they was, with nice feathers on the legs.'

Florence Wombwell's elder son had gone as soon as he could. Her younger son was the only provider for his crippled mother and did not have to go, but Lord Kitchener's campaign had persuaded him and he soon followed likewise.

'The little chicks all there?' Florence Wombwell asked. Lottie assured her that they were, she had counted them. Mrs Wombwell said the trouble was a chick was vulnerable to almost any animal. 'I once saw a wood pigeon take one,' she told the girl. 'Twenty year or more ago, so pigeons might a become more peaceable creatures since then, but I shouldn't bet on it.'

They shelled the eggs and chopped them up with the rice and added a little fine meal. Lottie carried this mixture to the duckling runs, along with scalded greaves. These were residue from the tallow-chandler, dried skin and glutinous shreds of animal matter from which the fat had been squeezed or rendered to make tallow for candles and soap. The greaves were mixed with a pollard of wheat bran and a little barley meal. Lottie shovelled this into bins in the runs and the ducklings waddled over and gorged themselves upon it. They put on weight almost as she watched them.

The four full-grown ducklings she had selected were quacking in the plucking shed. Lottie herself called it the killing shed, though not out loud. When she'd first helped Mrs Wombwell some weeks earlier she could hardly bear to watch her kill them, with her arthritic, clumsy fingers. Yet she had soon grown used to it and when she volunteered herself it was clear her young hands were better suited to the task. More efficient. Perhaps what afflicted Mrs Wombwell's legs had spread to her upper limbs. Now Lottie preferred to perform all the daily slaughter herself so as to minimise the poultry's suffering.

She picked up the first duck and took it back outside. With her left arm she held the duck tight against her body, her left hand around its neck. With the other hand she gripped its head behind the skull, with her thumb under its beak. The girl stretched the neck of the bird and pressed her knuckles into its vertebrae and pulled its head back. Then she swiftly yanked the head, dislocating the duck's neck, in as confident and abrupt a manner as she could.

When all four ducks had been slain Lottie laid them on the bench in the plucking shed and went to the cottage and told Mrs Wombwell the birds were ready. It was as if it was now the cottager who had become squeamish. Florence Wombwell said that she would go and dress them now. Lottie said that she would be back later. She went out of the door and walked around the side of the cottage and back to the big house.

Breakfast awaited, and then lessons. Lottie had not gone to Weimar. Instead her governess, Ingrid, had with great reluctance returned to Prussia. Lessons now were intermittent. William Carew had been teaching Lottie Latin and Greek until he'd left for France some months ago. Once a week the vet Patrick Jago tested her knowledge of anatomy and gave her instruction in veterinary medicine. Her father read history with her until one or the other of them nodded off. Gibbon, Carlyle. Her stepmother Alice tutored Lottie in playing the piano and sketching, though it was clear the girl had little aptitude for either.

*

At midday Lottie returned to the cottage. She changed the straw in the ducks' shed and filled their feeders with corn then asked Florence

Wombwell if this was a good day to take the half-grown ducklings to the pond. Mrs Wombwell said it was.

Lottie raised one of the wooden boards. Those ducklings nearest spilled out of the pen and others swiftly followed. The girl guided them to the lane and she followed behind. They were not hard to control for all wished to keep close together. Those on the outside of the phalanx did not allow themselves to be separated from the main body and pushed their way back into it, condemning others briefly in their turn. The girl copied the sound the little birds made, breathing in through her teeth as she did so, while the gang bustled along.

The pond was at a midpoint between three of the six farms upon the estate and a number of the cottagers or farm workers bred ducks who spent their days there. As soon as they saw the water Lottie's ducklings quickened their waddling pace. Those breeding ducks and drakes who were already on the pond saw them and made towards the water's edge in welcome. The ducklings rushed into the water. They swam and dived and flapped their wings with the appearance of familiarity or custom, as if this visit to the pond were their regular indulgence, yet it was their first visit and last. It would supposedly help them to feather properly.

Later the girl herded the ducklings home again. When she had secured the wooden board she heard the sound of trundling wheels and went inside the cottage. Florence Wombwell sat in the chair beside the stove.

'He's here,' Lottie told her. 'You stay there. I'll fetch them.' She went to the cool chamber or larder where Mrs Wombwell, having cut off their heads and feet and plucked them, had placed the carcasses of the four dressed birds in a hamper. The duck man came to the door. He took the hamper from the girl and gave her an empty one, and an envelope. Lottie went back inside and gave the envelope to Florence Wombwell and took the new hamper to the larder. When she came back out Mrs Wombwell requested that the girl allow her to give her something at least of the money for her trouble, but Lottie refused. She told Mrs Wombwell that her sons were heroes. And that if she were a boy she would like to have joined the cavalry, and be now in northern France as they were. She said she would be back later to shut up the drake and ducks after they had made their return journey, and the ducklings likewise.

In the afternoon the girl saddled her horse. A warm rain fell, as it had not done for many days. Everything that grew – each flower, tree, weed, vegetable, shrub, cereal, grass – grew from the soil. The rain fell lightly on the thirsty land and the roots of all the plants absorbed its life-giving moisture. The smell that rose into the air held all this information, somehow. Lottie rode her pony Blaze out to the gallops. Closing her eyes, she raised her face to the rain and relished it upon her skin. No one else was there, but in her mind the boy Leo Sercombe rode beside her.

Patrick Jago had told her that thousands of horses and mules were shipped out to the South African war and died there: some from bullets and bombs but most from sickness, starvation, ill treatment. He told her that in this present war they were of no use in battle, not against machine guns. She did not believe him. When she reached the gallops she reined Blaze in and leaned forward and told her she was the finest and the bravest horse in all the Allied lines. The German trenches were a hundred yards distant. Lottie told the pony she must not be afraid of the explosions or the smoke. Then Lottie drew her sword. It was a wooden copy of her great-grandfather's sabre made for her by the estate carpenter. She would have liked to use the iron original but it was too heavy. Leo, and many others too behind them now, awaited her order. They drew their swords. She spurred her mount and as Blaze cantered towards the enemy lines, Lottie raised the wooden sword and pointed it forward, yelling for the world to hear the one word: '*Chaaaaarge!*'

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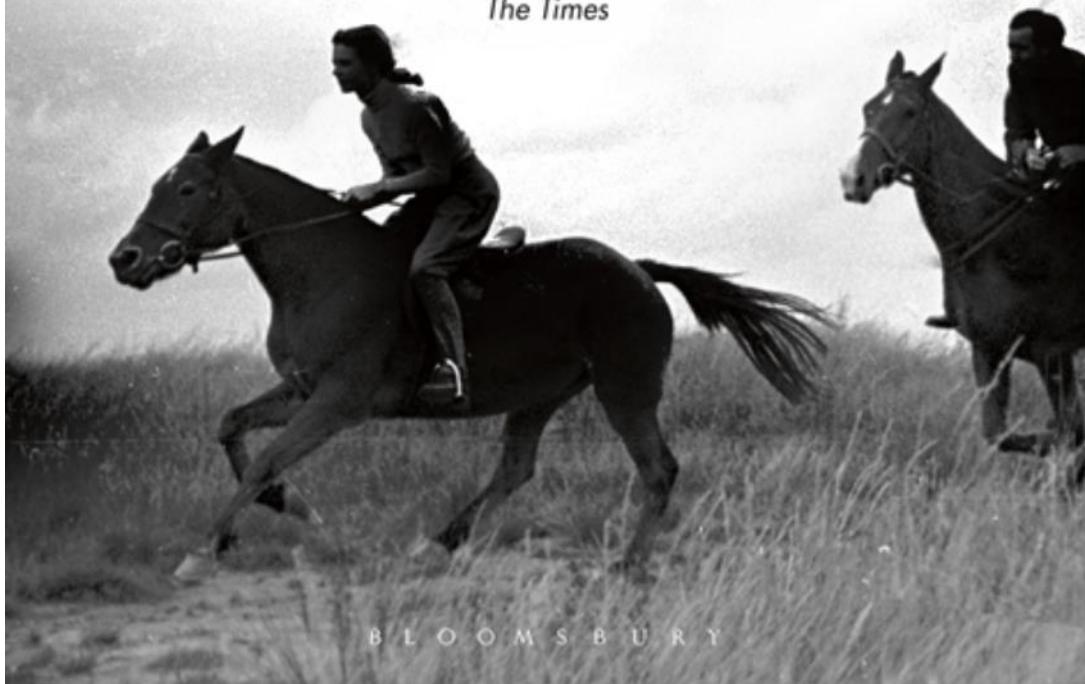
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THE WEST COUNTRY TRILOGY

TIM
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THE
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‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you’

Isaiah, 43: 1–2

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Principal Characters

Leopold (Leo) Sercombe
Charlotte (Lottie) Prideaux

The Battle:

Willy Burd, stoker
Jimmy White, boy seaman
Lieutenant Pyne, 'Y' Turret officer
Petty Officer Jeffers
Sergeant Nutley

The Vet:

Patrick Jago, veterinary surgeon
Herb Shattock, Lord Prideaux's head groom
Arthur, Lord Prideaux, Lottie's father, owner of the estate
Alice, Lady Prideaux, Arthur's second wife
Duncan, Lord Grenvil, Arthur Prideaux's friend, Alice's father
Maud, Lady Grenvil, Duncan's wife

The Scuttle:

Able Seaman Victor Harris
Jamie Watt, Orcadian boy horseman

The Salvage:

Ernest Cox, entrepreneur
Tom McKenzie, Bill Peterson, Sinclair MacKenzie, divers

The Grey Thoroughbred:

Muriel Furst, Lottie's fellow student

The Return:

Wally Luscombe, farmer
Agnes, Ethel and Myrtle, his daughters
William Carew, ex-estate manager, war veteran
Helena Carew, William's sister
Gladys Whittle, née Sercombe, cousin of Leo, housekeeper at the big house
Sidney Sercombe, Leo's brother, head keeper on the estate
Gracie, Sid's wife, and their children Stanley and Elsie
Levi Hicks, gypsy horse dealer

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Part One

THE BATTLE 1916

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1

6 a.m., Monday 29 May 1916

His Majesty's Ship *Queen Mary* was a coal-firing battlecruiser. When, every few months, she ran low on coal, she required a delivery of three thousand tons. Today was such a day. The crew were woken early. Leo Sercombe and the other boys smeared their eyelids and eyelashes with margarine or Vaseline, and poked it up their nostrils.

When Leo was a child he thought his father a hard taskmaster. Albert Sercombe ruled the stables with a rod of iron and the men who worked the horses bent to his will. But there were only four of them. On this battlecruiser well over a thousand men and boys were crowded. There were endless rules, discipline was rigid and strictly enforced. It was unbearably oppressive until you accepted it.

Yet coaling days were different. It was like no other drill or job. All hands were piped 'clean into coaling rig' and could wear what they liked. Men attired themselves in overalls, dinner jackets, plus fours. One officer was kitted out in his red hunting jacket, jodhpurs and riding boots. What had ever made him consider these worth bringing on board, Leo could not fathom. Perhaps he wanted to be reminded of horses. One old seaman wore a dress. On their heads perched equally odd coverings: a topper, a turban, berets, bandanas, three-cornered tricornes. Everyone on board took part, excepting only the captain, the medics and the paymaster. Even the

schoolies and the chaplain had to join in. It was like a party. Except the participants did not dance. They worked.

The collier ship was made secure alongside. Four gangs from HMS *Queen Mary* were allocated to each hold. A gang was made up of four men and one boy, one gang to each corner. They scrambled down onto the collier. As a boy seaman, Leo did not shovel coal. He was not yet strong enough. Instead he held a bag for the men, who in their haste to fill it thwacked his knuckles. Each bag when full weighed two hundredweight. Ten bags thus made up a one-ton hoist. The hoists were swung to the decks of the *Queen Mary* by derricks.

On the decks of the ship each bag was transferred from the hoist to a barrow, wheeled to a chute and emptied. At the bottom of the chute Willy Burd and the other stokers loaded coal into the bunkers.

As the derrick came back round to the hold of the collier, if the next ten bags were not ready for the hoist the other gangs let that corner have it.

It was back-breaking work with barely a pause, for the gangs were in competition with each other. A fanny or jug of lime juice was passed around. Leo blew the coal-dust scum away from the surface and drank. There was a thirty-minute break for lunch: two slabs of bread with bacon or cheese washed down with a basin of tea. Then the men lay down on the decks, eyes closed, till they were piped back to work.

Every hour, signal flags were hoisted at the yard arms, indicating how many tons of coal had been stowed during the previous hour. Today, the whole squadron was coaling together, across the Firth of Forth, so that competition was all the more intense, between as well as within ships. Vast clouds of filthy black powder rose from the holds and from the ship's bunkers, settling everywhere. The Royal Marine Band, perched precariously on top of the centre gun turret, played 'The Sailor's Hornpipe', 'Drunken Sailor' and other sea shanties, with soot rising around them and their instruments, until they all resembled coloured minstrels from the music halls.

The air was thick with suffocating dust. Leo could not imagine what it was like for Willy down in the bunkers. By six o'clock in the evening these were filled. All hands now turned to washing down the ship from truck to keel. A tug steamed slowly around the vessel, washing down the upper works with high-pressure hoses.

When the *Queen Mary* was clean the hands could go below to wash themselves and their clothes. There were no showers. Boys were given one bucket of cold water between four of them. Afterwards coal dust stuck for days to those who'd smeared their eyebrows and eyelashes with Vaseline, and they looked to Leo like some odd species of owl.

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2

9 a.m., Tuesday 30 May

The ship lay at anchor in the Firth of Forth. On the day following the coaling, after morning division, HMS *Queen Mary* was prepared for gymnastics. Older men, those over thirty-five, were excused, and instead kept busy rigging different sets of apparatus across the upper deck of the battlecruiser for their younger colleagues. All the other hands fell out and made their way, by divisions, to different exercise stations. The bugler played a G note, and gymnastics began. Leo Sercombe's division climbed onto the roof of the casemate for the four-inch guns, on the forecastle deck. On its port side a horizontal climbing rope had been erected, from hooks screwed into metal stanchions. The boys took turns wriggling along it.

The night had been cool but the sun was rising bright and burned off the last of the mist that clung to the water. Battlecruisers and other ships lay at anchor all up and down the Firth, placid as rocky outcrops in the unruffled tide. When the bugler played a G note again the boys' division climbed down to the deck and, one after another, jumped over the horse. Then they moved round the bows to the tug-of-war, and on to the trapeze, to parallel bars, to Swedish drill, shifting around the ship each time the bugler played the note.

Leo spent the afternoon on a wooden platform slung by ropes over the side, painting the upper hull. Seawater corrosion meant that hands were continually redecorating their ship. Chipping away flaking grey paint, sanding the surface, applying a fresh coat. One part or another always stank of fresh linseed and turpentine.

Now and again Leo glanced behind him at the leisurely pace of activity across the estuary. A collier cast off from a destroyer depot-ship. Picket boats traced overlapping lines between cruisers and shore as if weaving some intricate watery thread. A tug chugged upstream towing a line of barges, only the smoke belching from its squat funnel indicating the strain it was under. An oiler berthed beside one of the new battleships that had oil-fired engines. Long tubes connected the two vessels. Pumps began to inject the fuel into the great ship as if with a fresh infusion of blood.

It was almost 6 p.m. Some of the officers were yet to return from an afternoon ashore, in Rosyth or Edinburgh. Leo cleaned his paintbrushes in white spirit. Jimmy White was polishing brasses. His hands were black and his face too for he was forever scratching a tickle or wiping off sweat. Leo gazed periodically out over the starboard side, to Queensferry, and beyond, where the vague bluish shapes of the Pentland Hills rose in the far distance. Jimmy must have noticed for he said, ‘Ain’t you never goin to get used to bein a seaman? You looks like a maid peekin at the land like ’er lover boy’s over there.’

Leo smiled and turned back to his brushes. ‘I like the lie of it,’ he said. ‘Can you not imagine ridin up into they hills?’

Jimmy did not reply to this but said instead, ‘Aye, aye. Here we go.’ The boy turned and looked up and watched as a long string of flags was hoisted from the masthead of the *Lion*. Activity around him on the lower deck ceased as others noticed too. When the string settled, Jimmy said, ‘Raise steam for twenty-two knots. Bank fires at half an hour’s notice. Looks like we’re off on another bloody exercise, mate.’

A bugle call augmented the flags. It was played aboard the *Queen Mary*. With ships anchored beyond Rosyth up as far as Charlestown, Leo now heard the faint echoing notes of their bugles, like Canada geese calling to each other across the estuary.

Leo and the other painters stowed their equipment. The crew formed in divisions on deck. Leo’s job while raising steam was in the team weighing anchor. Other seamen in his division hoisted a boat inboard. There was no

frantic commotion. Each officer and hand knew his role, having performed it many times. Watertight compartments were closed, gangways raised. Men uncovered the guns and the searchlights. Jimmy's job was passing slip-wires at the buoys.

Down below, the stokers got busy at the boilers. Smoke rose from the funnels. Leo's pal Willy Burd was a stoker. He was two years older than Leo, four inches shorter but twice as strong, all muscle. One of five hundred stokers to power the battlecruiser's coal-fired engines, Willy had trained in the Portsmouth Naval Barracks, shovelling stones instead of coal into disused boilers. Leo himself had undergone basic drills in the bunkers and stokehold, as every boy had to do, and he had no intention of going down there when he was fully grown.

Yet his friend, inexplicably, loved the arduous labour. There were two classes of stoker. Willy was second class and a trimmer, or lumper, running the coal in a wheelbarrow from the bunkers to the boiler rooms. The first-class stokers were firemen, who either hurled coal into the furnace or, wielding nine-foot-long pokers, shook and broke up the mass of clinker while a colleague held a shovel in front of the furnace door to protect the fireman's face from the heat. The temperature in the boiler room, furnaces roaring, reached a hundred and fifty degrees. The firemen sprayed fuel oil on the coal to increase its burn rate. The fire bed flamed to a white heat. They wore blue-tinted glasses, and were scalded frequently.

The ship had forty-two boilers, arranged in seven boiler rooms, to drive her huge steam turbines. Willy was proud of these engines and informed Leo that they were capable of seventy-five thousand horsepower, to overcome the vast inertia of their massive battlecruiser and then to drive her through the water. 'That means the strength of seventy-five thousand horses. Not little ponies either,' he'd told Leo. 'Your gurt big carthorses, boy.'

Leo was in the starboard anchor team. Each huge anchor weighed ten tons, and was winched into the anchor bay by a capstan engine, the great chain links clinking together and crunching tight.

Three hours after the flags had been hoisted, the fleet moved through the Firth of Forth at dusk: six battlecruisers and four of the mighty dreadnoughts. Leo had never been aboard one but Jimmy White told him they carried crews of three thousand men. It was hard to imagine.

There was one seaplane carrier, and all the light cruisers and destroyers. Four thousand yards' distance was kept between the rear ship of one squadron and the leading ship of the next. They sailed under the bridge and past Edinburgh and Leith on their starboard beam. Though the engines hummed and throbbed, Leo had grown so used to the sound that it was as if the fleets sailed silently out onto the ocean with the only noise the swish of the waves. He could feel the churning of the screws, a vibration all through the ship's thirty thousand tons as she gathered way. Ahead of them the minesweepers cleared a safe passage, as they set off on this the latest of their customary sweeps of the North Sea.

Willy would be sweating down below but Leo was still in the anchor bay shivering with cold, for in case of emergency the anchors had to be kept ready for letting go until the ship was clear of harbour. Finally, the order was given and they cranked the anchor home into its hawse-pipe. The chain was hove taut and secured, and Leo and the rest of his crew climbed up from the bay.

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3

1 a.m., Wednesday 31 May

The mess-decks never lost the odour of unappetising food slowly cooking. The ventilation system, from whose fan motors came a faint perpetual hum, issued forth stale air. On winter nights coal stoves were lit and the crew slung their hammocks, hung snugly together. Men learned to sleep on their backs. The atmosphere became dense and suffocating, thick with condensation, which sweated on the casings and dripped onto the bodies of the snoring men.

Summer was now upon them. Leo was one of the first to request to sleep outside, in the open air. Hooks had been inserted all over the casings for this purpose. There were two cats on board the ship. The older one, a big black beast they called Billy Bones, ignored Leo, but the younger one, Jane Hawkins, sought him out. She sprang into his hammock and curled up on his belly. Leo scratched her behind the ears, and she purred her approval.

Leo had kept a space beside him, and when Willy's night shift was done his friend climbed up from below and came outside.

'Still awake?' he whispered.

'Aye,' Leo said. The cat raised itself up, annoyed at this intrusion, and jumped down from the hammock.

'Off to catch herself a rat,' Leo said. He asked Willy whether he had noticed anything different down below.

'Coal's the same colour as it usually is, if that's what you're askin,' Willy said.

Leo said he thought he'd detected a certain nervousness in one or two officers. Like they had been told something the men had not, and were trying to hide it. Willy said this was wishful thinking. Leo was an optimist and a dreamer. This voyage was just another flap. Another stunt. Down in the lower holds where the likes of Leo never went it felt the same as ever. Leo should not get his hopes up.

'I don't hope for nothin.'

'Don't you want action? All you gunners do. Everyone up above does.'

'I ain't everyone.'

They lay in their hammocks. There were a few others sleeping out, scattered across the deck, some snoring. After a while Willy, speaking quietly so as not to disturb them, asked Leo what his friend did want.

'I've got a mind to apply to be a diver,' Leo said. 'I liked goin underwater when I was a boy, and I reckon I could work down there.'

Willy did not reply at first. Perhaps he was trying to imagine what it was like beneath the surface of the ocean. Then he said, 'Not for me, mate. Down in the bunkers we're already workin below the waterline. A single torpedo in the wrong spot'll do for us. We're close enough to water where we are. I don't want to get no closer.'

They lay in their hammocks, the sky open above them, black and sparkling with pinpricks of light.

'I was speculatin,' Leo said. 'There's lads in the trenches a northern France lookin up at these same stars tonight. My brother Sid, a gamekeeper on the estate I grew up on ... if he ain't been called up he might be out trampin the woods, and pausin to contemplate 'em too.' He studied the stars himself. 'There's a girl back there who could be standin on the roof of her house right now, gazin on the same sky.'

Willy said his mother's latest letter informed him that two more lads from their street in Bristol had gone missing in action in Flanders, presumed dead. She wrote of how glad she was that he'd joined the Royal Navy.

Leo agreed they'd made a wise choice. The only worry he had was about once their service was over – how they'd adjust to life on dry land.

'We'll relish it,' Willy said, yawning. 'Don't you worry about that, mate. We'll relish it for the rest of our lives.'

Leo pondered this welcome prospect. But another misgiving arose. ‘I fears I’ll have forgot which end of a horse is which,’ he said.

‘You’re the oddest mixture of a man I’ve come across,’ Willy told him. ‘Tomorrow you’re not bothered about, but you worry over what might come to pass in ten years’ time.’

Leo smiled to himself. ‘And you, Willy,’ he said. ‘What’ll you be good for? A stoker on a train?’

Leo waited for a reply, but when it came it was not in words but snores instead. He closed his eyes. Even soothed by the motion of the big ship, he found it difficult to get to sleep. He could not say why he was nervous. He was sixteen years old, and he was one of thirty-four boy seamen on HMS *Queen Mary*. The full crew of officers, men and boys numbered one thousand two hundred and eighty-six. Numbers placated his unsettled nerves. He ran the other ranks on board through his mind. There were thirteen midshipmen. Three surgeons. Thirty-three petty officers. One chaplain, the loneliest man on board. One sailmaker, a remnant, in this age of steam. Five signal boys. One plumber and two plumber’s mates. Leo’s anxiety eased. The numbers made him drowsy. One cooper. Two blacksmiths. But no horses. Two blacksmith’s mates. This ship was no place for horses. Only for cooks and stewards. And musicians. There were a dozen band members, plus the two buglers ...

The boy slept.

4

7 a.m., Wednesday 31 May

On the huge vessel pounding across the sea the day dawned grey and cold. After Leo had lashed and stowed his hammock, the boy made his way to the upper deck, trousers turned up to the knees, bare-chested. Jostling with other boys, he washed at one of the large water butts, then presented himself for inspection. The petty officer passed him and Leo went down to the mess-deck and poured himself a basin of thick hot cocoa from the kettle and took a biscuit. He consumed these while standing.

Back up, Leo joined a line of boys strung across a deck, armed with long-handled scrubbers. Water was hosed over the boards and the leading seaman yelled, ‘Scrub forward. Scrub aft,’ and so they worked in rhythm. Then they mopped up the water and dried the deck and finally went down to breakfast. Leo was hungry, as they all were, the more so now that they were at sea. The others wolfed their food, but Leo ate his porridge methodically, and drank sweet tea. As his fellow eaters rose from the table, others squeezed into their places on the bench. They smelled of damp serge and mothballs. Leo spread his cube of margarine on a half loaf, and ate it patiently.

‘Come on, bumpkin boy,’ someone said. ‘You goin to chew the cud all fuckin day?’

Leo swallowed his last mouthful of tea. He rose and, with one hand on the shoulder of the boy to either side of him, levered himself up and swung

his legs out behind the bench. There were clocks all over the ship, a recent innovation older hands insisted there was no need for. Leo changed into his duck suit, pulled a jersey over it, and at 8 a.m. fell in on deck. He was sent back to the mess with Jimmy White to scrub out and prepare breakfast for the next batch of seamen. At 9 a.m. he fell in at divisions on the upper deck amongst the men of his turret. They stood facing inward. Between funnels and casings Leo glimpsed divisions of stokers on the starboard side, and caught sight of Willy Burd amongst them.

Lieutenant Pyne inspected Leo's division for cleanliness in dress and person. The drum and fife band were on the far side of the turrets amidships, between the funnels. The brass band were on the near side and they struck up. All the men, the entire crew, turned to their left and began to trot around the ship. Leo skipped over hatches, slid down ladders. If you forgot how big your ship was, the exercise reminded you. It was like running around a one-and-a-half-acre field, strewn with obstacles. The band played with quickening tempo, and the runners increased their speed, leaping over obstacles ever faster until they were sprinting and knocking into each other and the music reached a crescendo. Then it ceased abruptly. All crew fell in, panting and sweating.

Petty Officer Jeffers called his turret crew to attention, then ordered them to stand at ease, and they were able to get their breath back. The PO stood with his legs apart, shining boots planted on the deck, and in his deep booming voice detailed hands for instruction or for work. Rifle drill signals, rope-splicing practice. Messenger and call boy duties. Leo was the last named.

'Sercombe, accompany me to inspect the turret.'

Theirs was 'Y' Turret, towards the stern of the ship, and they made their way there. PO Jeffers strode straight-backed across the swaying deck as if marching on a solid, flat parade ground. Leo tried to match his regular stride and could not for with each step he had to compensate for the motion of the vessel. Yet on dry land Petty Officer Jeffers was one of those seamen who walked with a rolling gait. None of the boys imagined they would ever do likewise, but if they stayed in the Navy long enough most surely would.

They inspected the turret from bottom to top. Down in the shell room they counted the ammunition stocks. They made sure the ready-racks had been refilled. Up in the gun room the PO studied the log to make sure the guns had been sponged out and greased. He enumerated each object he

assessed, whether reminding himself or to educate the boy Leo was not sure. Perhaps both. Leo listened anyhow and nodded. ‘Spare lengths of flexible piping,’ the PO said, his basso voice resounding around the gun room. ‘Urinal buckets. First-aid dressings, plenty of ’em. Biscuits and corned beef … good. Drinking tank.’

When they had finished, Leo requested permission to speak. He asked the PO if he thought this was just another exercise.

Petty Officer Jeffers frowned. Planting his feet apart he said, ‘Who do you think I am, boy? The captain? They’ll tell us when they reckon we need to know.’

The sun came out and shone across the wide, deep sea. Hands were given a make and mend. Leo went to the dry canteen and bought cigarettes for Willy Burd and climbed up and dossed down on the quarterdeck. There Willy found him, after he had been released from the stoking rota. Leo gave him the cigarettes. Willy handed over the money, and thanked Leo for saving him time, and lit one. Leo did not join him. He did not imagine the pleasure derived from smoking would merit the punishment should a boy not yet eighteen be caught. Cells for three days on low diet, bread and water.

They looked out from the quarterdeck. The wind beat on the grey metal around them as the ship ploughed through the leaden-tinted ocean.

‘What do you reckon?’ Leo asked. ‘Twenty knots?’

‘Nineteen,’ Willy said.

They could see the *Lion* and the *Princess Royal*, other battlecruisers, ahead of them. Behind were the *Tiger* and *New Zealand*, and further back the four battleships.

‘You know, p’raps you was right,’ Willy said. ‘One a the lads below reckons he overheard an officer say the Grand Fleet itself is a few miles right behind us, steamin out a Scapa.’ He took a final drag of his cigarette and threw the dog-end in the spit-kid.

The *Queen Mary* was as steady as a log in a placid stream as she forged on in *Princess Royal*’s broad, white wake. Willy said that it was a lovely old day, a fine day for a battle, perhaps today would be *Der Tag* after all. Jimmy White joined them at that moment, having just done the dog watch. He told Willy that there was no chance. This was just another sweep and they would

find nothing, for the Huns were like rabbits in their warrens inside the port of Wilhelmshaven.

'The only craft they've guts enough to send out's them fuckin U-boats,' he said. 'Or they sneak out for a quick raid on our coast, chuck a few shells at Hartlepool or Scarborough, maim a poor civilian. The only thing they're bold enough to meet us with is mines.'

Leo watched the two battlecruisers ahead, and light cruisers and destroyers that steamed ahead and either side of them like eager guard dogs around a flock of regal sheep. You grew up in a crooked valley in the West Country, nestled between the moor and the Quantock Hills, and you could not imagine how vast the sea was. How bare. That you could look all around these broad vistas and see only an empty horizon. Yet a battlecruiser steamed across the ocean with over a thousand men on board, confined in a kind of floating hotel, indeed, as Rufus Devereaux, the hermit tramp who'd shared his woodland glade with Leo, had called it.

Leo looked up. Occasionally, he saw gannets fly over, in one direction or another, no land in sight. And there were smaller birds, too, with black heads like plastered-down wigs, and red beaks. Arctic terns. Willy called them sea swallows and it was true they swooped through the air with great elegance. Their migration was a phenomenon. Not just their infallible compass, but their single-minded intention.

A rumour was passed along that someone had spotted a Zeppelin, high up in the sky above them, but Leo and Willy and Jimmy all peered and could not see it.

'I been on polishin all this week,' Jimmy said. 'You can ask Leo. I've polished portholes. Fire-hose nozzles. Brass dogs and bollards ... and don't even get me started on the fuckin ward rooms. Can you smell the ammonia on me? I can smell it. Can't get it out a my nostrils.'

Now that he mentioned it, Willy said, grimacing, he too could detect Jimmy's perfume, and he shifted himself away.

Leo smiled. He and Jimmy White had trained together at Devonport. Months learning how to heave the lead, steer a boat, knot ropes. Explosives, fire control, heavy gun drill. Most of their cohort were now scattered across the fleets. They were Boy Seamen Second Class.

Jimmy said that last night's stewed corned beef was coated with cinders. 'Just my luck to be on one a the last coal-fired ships. I bet the oil-fired engines don't coat every fuckin thing with cinders.'

Willy asked Jimmy if he was trying to put him out of a job. Leo suspected that Willy had first attached himself to them because he found Jimmy's endless grizzle of complaint amusing, before he became Leo's best pal. 'Just because the stokers beat your gunners at the miniature rifle shootin,' Willy said. 'I heard the captain's considerin swappin us round. Get your lot down in the coal bunkers and us lot up in them lovely clean turrets, seein as we're better bloody shots.'

Jimmy scowled, lost for words for a moment. Then he said, 'Somethin wrong with the bloody rifles, there was, everyone knows that. Anyways, at least a gunnery crew won the cricket.'

Willy laughed out loud, so trivial was the boast.

Not all the upper-deck recreations were competitive. Leo's favourite was roller skating, up on the fore-deck. Neither Willy nor Jimmy could see the point in it. Some men liked to skate in pairs. Leo preferred skating alone. Places were also told off for boxing and wrestling. Two weeks earlier they'd had an inter-ship assault-at-arms with the *Princess Royal*. All of *Queen Mary*'s weight classes were represented by stokers.

Willy Burd asked Jimmy White if he knew that Leo was of a mind to train as a diver. Jimmy said, 'He's got a screw loose, don't he? Goin down in the drink when he don't have to?'

Willy admitted that in this case Jimmy had a point, he was obliged to agree.

They lay in the sun and dozed. The bosun's mate came out and called, 'Hands to tea.' The trio rose from the deck and joined the crowd making their way below. 'You know, I thought I might see summat a the world if I joined the Navy,' Jimmy said. 'And all I've seen is the North fuckin Sea.'

'You shouldn't have joined just before a war,' Willy said. He went further aft to find a less busy ladder.

'I'll see you later,' Leo called after him.

'Not if I see you first, mate,' Willy yelled back. He ducked through a hatch and disappeared.

Jimmy said, 'He's been comin out with that line ever since we come aboard and he still thinks it's funny.'

Leo smiled. 'It is.'

'How do you figure that then?'

'The more times he says it, the funnier it gets,' Leo told him. 'Don't ask me how.'

Jimmy White shook his head, with an expression upon his face meant perhaps to convey that it was his misfortune to have to indulge these immature lads, though he was one himself. Just then the bugles sounded off, with the call for 'Action Stations'.

'Bollocks,' Jimmy said. 'We've been lyin around all afternoon and they call an exercise action at teatime.' He cast around him for a clock, and shook his head. 'See? Bang on three-thirty.'

Leo did not have time to tell Jimmy that a further note had sounded while he nattered. The extra note signified 'At the Double'. Leo was already running. If Jimmy had not heard it himself he would realise soon enough that this was not an exercise. The ship was like an ants' nest, suddenly, men dashing this way and that, some yanking jumpers on. They ran down to their shell rooms, or up to controls. Hands struck down mess stools and tables, and bedding in officers' cabins, and other inflammable objects. Leo took the first hatchway back up from the mess-deck. Stokers were closing bulkheads and shutting watertight doors, and rigging hoses that could be left running on the upper deck to keep it wet. Above, extra white ensigns were hoisted at the mast and yards.

Leo climbed a ladder to the fo'c'sle deck and came up the starboard side, and sprinted aft past the funnels, the lashed-down cutters and whalers and pinnaces, past the captain's gig and the sixteen-foot dinghy below the torpedo control tower. There he shot down the ladder using his hands to slide.

Hammocks were being put up. On some ships they were struck down as a fire precaution, but on HMS *Queen Mary* the captain preferred them slung, to check flying metal. Damage control and fire parties stood back out of the rush as they assembled at their meeting points, and were cursed whenever they got in someone's way.

Leo raced along the deck towards the stern, to 'Y' Turret. He swung himself up and inside through the hatch. Petty Officer Jeffers climbed in shortly behind him and shouted, 'Turret's crew, number!'

Jeffers watched the men take their positions in the gun room. Gun layers, trainers and sight-setters stood at their stations by one or other of the two guns. Number ones stood at the loading-cage levers, facing the breeches. Number twos in line with their breeches, facing the muzzles. Number threes

in front of number twos. Number fours at the sides, facing inwards to the breeches. The spare gun layer also had the job of recording the number of rounds fired.

Boy Seaman Leo Sercombe was the only hand in the turret without a specific task. The boy was a general dogsbody. He would pass food or drink as required, bring the urinal bucket, empty it when necessary. He might be ordered to fetch something or, if the wireless packed up, run with a message. Now he stuck close to Petty Officer Jeffers.

The second captain of turret and numbers five and six were beneath the gun room, in the working chamber. Further below were another petty officer and eighteen men in the magazine, and a similar number in the shell room right down at the bottom of the turret. The men there wore masks with goggles, respirators and anti-gas apparatus. The first time Leo had seen them, in the din of iron doors banging and machinery clanging, he was startled. They looked like demons. Fallen angels kept in chains under gloomy darkness.

All were correct from top to bottom. PO Jeffers pulled the hatch shut and the crew was closed up. He went to the cabinet at the rear of the turret. Leo followed. It was sound-proofed so that the turret officer, Lieutenant Pyne, could hear as he spoke over his Navy phones to the control top and to the transmitting station below.

Lieutenant Pyne had an air of simultaneous impatience and calm. He gave the impression that he resented being stuck in the cabinet and would much rather be in the gun room with his men. Leo saw that they liked him. He knew every one of their names and would ask a question out of the blue about their family, or say something that was peculiarly apt. The only words he had so far addressed directly to Leo were that what he missed most about being in the Navy was hunting. As if he knew of this boy seaman's love of horses, the officer had described his favourite mount, a white hunter that he prayed had not been purloined for the French campaign but was still in its stable at home awaiting his return. Leo asked him what their countryside was like for riding and the lieutenant told him his home was in the Midlands, which was neither flat enough nor hilly enough. Which he supposed was also its saving grace.

'Very good, PO,' he said now. Behind Lieutenant Pyne stood his snotty, or midshipman, assistant. 'Better get the hands to test the loading gear.'

Once this was passed, men had a moment of peace in the gun room. Some had practices or superstitions of their own to be observed. The lieutenant unstrapped his watch and emptied his pockets. He reckoned that any unnecessary articles, that might complicate wounds, should be removed. One of the sight-setters placed his tobacco tin in the biscuit box. Sergeant Nutley wore a thin shirt whose arms he'd torn off at the shoulders, to allow him greater freedom of movement. He also had a hunting knife hanging by a lanyard from his neck, which he used for cutting the rope grommets that protected the driving bands on the projectiles.

Leo could feel the increase in speed, the engines working harder far below them. Now and then the ship seemed to shiver or tremble. He did not imagine any of the others, busy with their tasks, noticed.

Lieutenant Pyne stepped out of the cabinet and announced that he wished to say a word. The men in the gun room turned their attention towards him. The lieutenant said that they could expect to meet anything from a light cruiser to the biggest battleship of the High Seas Fleet, and that 'Y' Turret's foremost duty was to get off the maximum number of rounds.

'Let us hope that we shall imminently be permitted to do what we have trained to do, and hoped to do, for many months now,' he said. His voice did not carry like the PO's, so he shouted, that all the hands could hear him. 'Every man on every battlecruiser in this fleet knows that the crack gunnery ship is this one. The *Queen Mary*. And the finest turret on the *Queen Mary* is this one. "Y". I trust you will not miss a single salvo, gentlemen.' He looked around the room, and smiled. 'Not a single bloody one.'

The men roared their approval and said they would waste no opportunity to welcome the enemy to the party. All Huns were invited. They described exactly what any German ship that came within range could expect. A bomb shoved down its gob. A shell rammed up its arse. Leo looked around at the other fourteen seamen inside this steel box. The atmosphere today was different from on any of their many drills. He inhaled a peculiar smell. Musky, rank. It came from the men, sweating from deeper pores, primitive glands, some true authentic depth of their being, preparing them for battle, turning them into warriors.

Altogether one turret held across its four floors almost a hundred men, each allotted his own task. The order came to load the guns with common shell. Down in the shell room the projectile for the left gun was clamped and guided onto the tray in the cage. Each projectile weighed over half a

ton. The cage rose hydraulically to the magazine room. There, four quarter charges were manhandled into compartments of the steel box above the projectile. Each quarter charge weighed a little over fifty pounds, the weight of a bushel of barley. Leo's father had carried sacks of four bushels. Few men could. The cage rose again, into the gun room.

When the cage reached the open mouth of the gun a rammer shot out, butting the tail of the projectile and propelling it into the breech. Then the rammer flicked back, and as soon as it was clear of the tray the flap door of the cage sprang open and the two lower quarter charges of cordite dropped down into the tray. These were rammed in, then the upper quarter charges dropped likewise and they too were rammed into the gun. The rammer withdrew, the cage dropped, the breech door slammed shut, and one of the sight-setters unlocked a bolt that had been holding the left gun steady. The crew stood down. Then the right gun was loaded likewise.

Leo had no idea what was going on outside the confines of their turret. There were no windows in the gun room. The guns were loaded there but fired by the gunnery officer from his position on high, up above the bridge. His crew had rangefinders and trigonometrical calculating machines to assess the trajectory of the shells, bearing in mind the distance, course and speed of the target. They passed directions to the turrets, via a transmitting station deep down in the ship, of the guns' required elevation and angles.

The order came through on Lieutenant Pyne's headphones and he said, 'Bring the guns to the ready.'

The trainer moved the whole barbette or upper part of the turret with a single handwheel that operated hydraulic controls. The gun layers and the sight-setters inside the gun room aligned the guns. They followed a system of electrically controlled pointers on dials, and when each gun was in the correct position, electric circuits were closed and Leo knew that the 'gun ready' light would come on in the director tower. The gunnery officer there could now press a trigger and fire when he wished.

In the gun room the crews waited. Sergeant Nutley broke a small piece of cotton wool off a wad and rolled it into a tight ball and stuffed it in his left ear, then did likewise for his right. He saw Leo watching him and offered the wad to the boy, but Leo shook his head. PO Jeffers and one or two of the older men accepted. The two five-man crews stood by. Lieutenant Pyne and PO Jeffers watched and waited.

The lieutenant's eyes were wide in concentration and excitement, lids drawn back, like a horse's. 'I do believe, PO,' he said, catching Leo's eye as he did so, 'we're about to blood our guns.'

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5

3.50 p.m., Wednesday 31 May

The guns were once more brought to the half-cock. Each hand was concentrated, like men at a shoot, though they could see nothing of what the big guns were aiming at. Leo observed the sweat breaking out on their faces. Already half the crew had removed their upper garments. The gun room smelled of grease and oil and men. Then it seemed to Leo as if not only himself but everyone else around him held his breath, as if all knew that the gunnery officer far above them had decided to fire. Sound ceased, movement stilled, time stopped. Then Leo heard or thought he heard the warning bell in the transmitting station ring in the distance, and both guns fired together with a great crashing concussive explosion.

Leo flinched. When he opened his eyes the men were already working. Now the routine began, with new shells and charges sent up and the guns loaded, and reset as necessary, and fired. The sweet smell of cordite was added to the stink of men in the steel room. The PO told the guns' crews to go steady, for he thought them a little too swift, as if each crew was trying to outdo the other, and they settled to a concerted, synchronous rhythm.

Leo watched the men. They performed their tasks with mesmeric repetition. They got off each round in under a minute, sending the projectiles, each a thousand pounds in weight, at a muzzle velocity of over two thousand feet per second, pounding into the midst of German ships up

to ten miles away. Amid the din of guns and smoke there was much yelling of information and orders. The crews were like tiny models of men, serving the huge guns of this ship that was a great monster of war. Leo heard a scattering percussion and realised it was the rattle of a hail of shell splinters on the ship's side. So the enemy were straddling them too. He had forgotten they might do so. But the day had come at last and Leo knew, as all did, one thing with certainty. We will win, because our ships are better, our guns bigger, our crews more skilled.

How fortunate he was to be in a turret. His mate Willy Burd was down below, barrowing coal to the boilers. When the big guns went off, Willy had said, he could feel the ship sink down and rise up in a shudder. Dust was shaken out of crevices. The air was filled with black dust. It was surely Hades, the worst place to be.

It was true that you could not see out of a turret except through the periscopes, to which only Lieutenant Pyne, PO Jeffers and the turret-trainer had access. Some said gunners were moles just not underground, but still, it was good to know you were close to the open air. Outside, the barbette was protected by thick armoured plating. PO Jeffers sat watching his sweating men at their gleaming oiled machinery. He had told Leo he'd marked him down as a gunnery lad; the boy had only to watch and listen and his chance would soon come to join a crew.

The PO took a look through his periscope, and stepping closer Leo heard him say quietly to himself, 'Good God above.' Then he leaned away from the periscope. He blinked and looked around, and seeing the boy right there beside him said, 'Take a look, lad.'

Leo peered through the periscope, amazed at the privilege. It took him some seconds to make sense of what he was seeing. At first he thought it was a kind of optical illusion, like some naval version of a what-the-butler-saw machine. He could see in the smoky distance enemy ships, the red flashes of their guns firing. And lying becalmed between the *Queen Mary* and the far-off German line, both sides' shells hurled over her, salvo after salvo, lay a three-masted barque with full sail. Leo recalled once as a small child seeing such a ship; it must have been in Watchet Harbour. But this one was bigger and more beautiful. The poor merchant seamen aboard her were trapped in the middle of this modern conflagration, their ship somehow sailing into the battle from another century.

6

4.10 p.m., Wednesday 31 May

A shout went up that something was wrong. The regular sounds of loading ceased. The left gun rammer wasn't working. One of the crew had opened the breech too soon after the gun had gone off. The PO took a lever to the rammer and twisted and shifted then rushed it back and forth until it ran true once more, and they resumed firing the guns.

They fired constantly for many minutes, one deafening twin salvo after another from their thirteen-and-a-half-inch guns, and with each salvo the ship shook. 'Right gun?' 'Ready!' 'Left gun?' 'Ready!' Leo watched the clock above the cabinet. Almost two salvos a minute. He could not believe how much more intensity the crews attained than during training. Shells came up from the shell room with messages chalked upon their sides. *This one for Kaiser Bill*, read one. *Sink the bastards*, another. The noise of each explosion inside the turret was so loud it gave those close to it a percussive shock and resounded with a great ringing boom. Leo saw that some of the gun crew had blood trickling out of their ears. He fingered his own and although they felt dry he now regretted not taking the cotton wool Sergeant Nutley had offered him.

A request came up from the magazine. The quarter charges were filled with cordite, a blend of nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose, gelatinised with petroleum jelly to lubricate the bore of the gun. Men in the magazine had to

remove the charges' sealed lids, and the fumes of the cordite, acrid and sweet, like putrefying meat, were released into the room. The petty officer in charge down there asked for permission for his men to go out on deck. Lieutenant Pyne said they could come up as long as the firing rate was not affected. They ascended in pairs and Leo watched them climb out of the hatch. As soon as they reached the fresh air they threw up their lunch on the deck. Then they came back in and went down to make way for the next pair.

Leo felt a sudden unsteadiness in his feet. He flexed his knees to keep upright. Above the crash of the turret guns, and the roar of the smaller four-inch guns being fired in between, he wondered if he had heard, faintly in the distance, a sound like a dresser full of crockery falling over and all smashing at once. He looked around. No one else seemed to have noticed anything. Then he caught the eye of one of the sight-setters, who was frowning at him, and said or perhaps mouthed the words, 'Ship's been hit.'

There seemed to be a fault in one of the air blasts, for when the crew opened the gun, smoke was still in the barrel. It hung in the already stuffy air of the gun room, the smell strong and unpleasant. The PO ordered the breech-blocks open, to let the smoke out. Now they could hear enemy shells hitting the water close to the ship, with a crashing that jarred Leo's eardrums.

Suddenly Lieutenant Pyne came rushing through from the cabinet and announced that the control top reported their target, the third ship of the German line, was dropping out. All the men in the turret cheered.

PO Jeffers had a look through of the periscope. 'She's goin down by the bows,' he called out.

They resumed firing, presumably at a new target. Then all of a sudden the whole turret seemed to tremble and the ship beneath them shook. The roof of the turret was pulverised with all manner and size of metal. Leo choked with dust that blew into the gun room. The turret-trainer reported the front glass of his periscope fouled or blocked up.

Another explosion shook the turret. Someone yelled that the bastards had found their bloody range. Leo went over to the pressure gauge and saw that the pressure had failed. At that moment came another explosion, far larger than the ones before. Leo was thrown off his feet and tossed around the gun room. It was like being thrown from a horse but worse, for it was as if the earth had tossed the horse. He felt at any second his head or limbs would be smashed. By some miracle they were not. Leo came to rest, winded, dazed.

His breath came back slowly, and he climbed carefully to his feet. The PO and a few others were dangling in the air on bowlines. The left gun appeared to have fallen through its trunnions and smashed up the crew members behind it. The floor of the gun room was bulged and warped. There was utter silence, an incongruent atmosphere of peace that did not make sense. Then sounds returned and Leo realised it had been not silence after all but his own temporary deafness.

Petty Officer Jeffers unhooked himself and went back to the cabinet. Leo followed him. The PO asked, ‘What do you think has happened, sir?’

Lieutenant Pyne said he had no idea. The PO said the guns were useless and they might as well get to the four-inch guns outside and offer any help they could. It was better than staying and being sitting ducks.

‘We don’t know what’s out there,’ said Lieutenant Pyne.

Leo volunteered to take a look. The PO said, ‘Go on, lad.’ Leo climbed up and put his head out of the roof of the turret. The four-inch battery below him was all smashed up. A shell landed in the water and sent a great spout of liquid into the air, which fell into where the battery had been. Then, as the ship tilted, the water flowed back out, freshly red.

There was fire all around. A cloud of smoke blew past, leaving a stink of high explosive. He turned and looked amidships and saw dead men being laid out on deck, side by side. He saw burned men with their heads and hands wrapped in cotton wool, and bandages with slits for their eyes, wandering about the deck like ghosts. Then the ship lurched and these walking cases and other men on deck fell over, all ten or twenty of them, and rolled and skittled down to the port side.

Leo climbed down and reported that the small guns were no good. ‘The ship’s got herself a terrible list to port, sir,’ he said. He realised now that a number of men were groaning. Either Leo could not hear them before or they were too shocked by their injuries at first to cry out. Lieutenant Pyne told PO Jeffers to clear the turret, the PO yelled the order, and those men who could climbed out. Leo waited. He watched the PO go across and give a hand to a seaman coming up from below. Jeffers asked the man why there were no more coming up behind him from the magazine or the shell room and the man said it was no use, the water was right up, and Leo saw then that the man’s clothes were sodden and he understood that the ship’s hull was breached beneath them and all the men in the magazine and the shell room were drowned.

And if water was flooding into the engine rooms then stokers were surely drowning. Willy Burd was down there.

The PO told Leo to go on up through the cabinet and out through the top. He and Lieutenant Pyne would follow. Leo climbed out of the turret and as he descended the ladder at the back the ship listed further to port. He gripped the rungs tightly and hung on. The man before him, the drenched seaman who had climbed up from below, stepped off the ladder and slid down the deck to the port side, smashing against a hawser and bouncing off it. Leo froze, clutching the ladder. He had no idea what to do.

‘Here, lad.’

He looked up and saw Sergeant Nutley, holding on to the rail on the starboard side. Next to him was the sight-setter who had told Leo the ship was hit. The setter looked from the sergeant to the boy and took hold of Sergeant Nutley’s hand and let go of the rail. Sergeant Nutley held the rail with his right hand and clasped the sight-setter’s hand with his left, at full stretch.

‘You can do it, lad,’ the sergeant yelled.

Leo dropped from the ladder and kicked off it and caught the sight-setter’s leg. He scrambled up his body. Then he clambered up and across Sergeant Nutley too, clutching his trousers, grip slipping on his sweaty torso, till he reached the rail. The sight-setter followed likewise and the three of them clung to the rail together. Leo saw that many others were doing so too, all along the starboard side.

There was another explosion at the far end of the ship, forward. Smoke billowed from fierce flames. Above the smoke, a boat – a dinghy or pinnace – soared, spinning like a little toy.

Leo held tight to the rail. Men were coming out of hatchways and slipping and sliding down the steeply inclined deck to the port side, where they slammed into a scrum of bodies pressed against the rail or toppled over them and flipped into the water. The sight was grotesque and the boy felt something like laughter lift from his stomach; it rose in his throat and came out of his mouth as vomit. He saw a man stagger out of the smoke, his clothes and face and hands as black as a chimney sweep’s. Then he too lost his balance and fell. Leo prayed that he would see Jimmy White or Willy Burd, then he prayed that he would not. Blood pooled and swilled across the deck. The decks were all warped from the heat beneath them, and where they were still dry the resin under the corticene linoleum crackled with a

noise like burning holly. One of the cats, Leo could not tell which one, flew out of a smoking doorway and disappeared behind a lifeboat. A man limped into view, and Leo saw that his right foot was hanging off his leg by no more than a single tendon or muscle. He looked up at the man's bespattered face and recognised the chaplain. The horsemen who had been foretold had come. Fire and smoke and sulphur would issue from the horses' mouths. The second angel would pour his bowl into the sea, and it would be like blood, and every living thing in the sea would die. Seven angels with seven bowls of the wrath of God.

More men emerged from the smoke. Some had managed to put on respirators, but it would not save them. They clung to whatever they could on the listing decks. Most fell and tumbled as the others had before them.

'The bow's going into the drink,' someone said.

When he heard this, the boy understood that their great ship was sinking. What he could not understand was why the enemy was still firing. Heavy shells landed in the sea alongside, raising enormous spouts so close that tons of stinking water crashed onto the ship, a wet stench like spent fireworks, soaking and suffocating all the men there. Or he heard shells shrieking and tearing the air like ripping canvas as they passed overhead. Could the German gunnery range-finders not see that their target was doomed, their mission completed? Why fire at dead men? Why bomb the drowned? Leo cowered, trying to shield himself even as he hung on to the rail. His comrades flinched as shells landed and splinters careened all over the ship. The air was full of them. When they flew close the boy heard their ominous hum. He caught glimpses of polished steel as it flashed past. Men let go of the rail as they were hit and fell abruptly backwards into the water or down across the deck.

Still more of the crew crawled out of turrets and hatches, coming out of the fires as the ship burned. The boy could hear her now, roaring, crackling, new flames sprouting here and there and joining the one great conflagration. She still pounded forward, her very speed fanning the flames that devoured her. The sound was like the roaring from an open furnace door. Perhaps the boilers down below were all out of control and powering the inferno, gutting their ship with fire. The boy remembered stories of Viking funerals. The bodies of warriors put to sea on their burning ships. Perhaps he and all his fellow crew had been already dead when they launched. There was a new smell in the noxious fumes. Like meat roasting.

Then Leo saw paper blowing out of the after hatch on the quarterdeck. Reams of white paper streamed out, spare rolls of chart paper from the gunnery office. Like pennants or bunting wildly celebrating freedom, they went trailing away over the side of the ship into the bubbling sea.

Petty Officer Jeffers was suddenly there beside them, clutching the starboard-side rail. ‘Come on, you lads,’ he yelled. ‘She’s going under. Into the drink.’

‘She’ll float for a long time yet,’ Sergeant Nutley called back. Leo wanted to believe him, for no seaman wished to leave his ship for the great grey waves of the North Sea. But he could not. Someone had shouted that the bow was sinking but he must have been wrong for Leo could see it now sticking up in the air. And looking the other way the stern, too, many of its metal plates red hot, was lifting up off the surface of the sea. HMS *Queen Mary* was broken amidships.

The PO did not pause to persuade anyone further but clambered over the rail and slid over the slimy bilge keel and dropped into the water. One or two men followed. Leo did likewise. The boy entered the cold water and began to swim hard away from the ship. He was vaguely aware of others around him doing the same. He did not know how long he swam for or how far he got, twenty-five or thirty yards perhaps, when there was suddenly a huge explosion behind him, greater than any of those that had blown already.

The boy took a deep breath and dived under the water but then he was sucked down anyway by the shock waves of the explosion. He looked up and saw through the water a distorted vision of a storm of debris flying through the air, pieces of the ship large and small, great chunks of metal and fragments of wood, but he could see less and less as he was pulled deeper into the sea by the suction or backwash from the huge bulk of the great ship sinking and Leo knew now that this was it. He gave up, for had he not been told that to fall into the drink and drown was not the worst way to die so long as you did not fight it? No, he need not struggle. The boy relaxed and sank. Death did not have to be the horror Leo had just seen. This was easy enough. But then it occurred to him that there was something he still had to do in his life, though he could not at this very moment quite remember what it was. And so he fought against the suction. And he found that it was growing weaker, if he kicked and paddled hard he could prevail against it,

and so Leo Sercombe rose and in time broke the surface of the water and gulped air.

The boy felt sick, and spewed and retched. He had swallowed not only saltwater but also oil. The filthy taste of it was in his mouth and throat. He could see a thick black layer all over the surface around him. He saw wreckage, and men's heads bobbing in the foul water. Were they alive or dead men floating? There were great numbers of fish lying on the surface, different kinds of them, stunned by the detonation. The water rose and fell. Whether this was further reverberation from the sinking ship or the natural swell of the sea Leo did not know. Something floated close by. He reached out and grabbed it. It was a large hammock, or part of one, with a big timber spar, and he was able to grasp the rope that fanned out from the spar along its length. He wished to pull himself up onto the timber but doubted whether he had the strength to do so. But then the swell of the sea lifted him and with a little effort Leo reached over the timber and hung on.

Smoke wafted through the air. There was mist too, more in the distance. Amongst the debris all around him were floating brass cylinders, by which a smoke-screen was made, for it was easier to aim at an enemy out of smoke than into it. Perhaps there was mist or fog to the south and so in terms of weather the German gunners had the advantage. That would explain the inexplicable.

Gradually Leo became aware of ships moving by, and he turned to watch the dreadnoughts of the Fifth Battle Squadron steaming past, firing their huge guns. So Willy Burd was right, they had all come out behind the *Queen Mary*, out of Scapa Flow. Too late! The enemies' shells landed in the water around him. The battleships ploughed on. In their wake the water rose and fell more strongly. Now the Huns were in trouble. In the added turbulence, Leo hung on, until the ocean calmed again somewhat, and he clung on more. He would hold on until help came. He could do that. He must do that.

It seemed a long time before destroyers came. They zigzagged to and fro, dodged oncoming shells, slashing and churning the water. They did not stop for the survivors but sped on into the battle, flinging themselves from tack to tack. Perhaps their crews could not see the men floating there in the water. Their swell, too, roughed up the sea. Leo held tight to the timber.

Then he saw that one destroyer had slowed. Though it was under fire it turned to port and lowered its whaler. His hopes rose. But he watched and

saw that the whaler could not be forced through the wreckage of parts of the *Queen Mary*, the debris was too thick on the surface. So then the guns' crews and the upper-deck hands of the destroyer hung over the side on fenders and lines and nets trying to haul any survivors that they could reach aboard, even as they began to steam ahead once more. Enemy shells still fell about them. The men of the destroyer struggled to pull survivors out but these men in the water were covered in oil and so the crew were unable to hold onto them. Leo could not tell how many they saved, a few, but he saw they would not save him for the boat veered away. He thought it would have been a help if they had left the whaler, perhaps he could have made his way to it. But they had hauled it back on board.

When the sea was calm once more, and empty of vessels, the boy looked about. He saw fewer heads bobbing above the surface now. Dusk was falling. The green-black water was bitterly cold. The smell of the fuel oil was almost as horrible as its taste. Leo saw something moving slowly towards him. He could not work out what it was, nosing its way through wreckage just beneath the surface. Then he understood. A torpedo. It slowed down and floated past no more than twenty feet away, and came to undetonated rest.

How much time passed then? Around the boy, men went under. Whether they lost consciousness and sank or let themselves go deliberately Leo could not tell. To see the destroyer stop to help then leave had been a cruel blow. He clung to the hammock spar. His eyes felt a new sensation and Leo could not work out what caused it. Then he realised he was weeping, or trying to. 'My God,' he cried out. 'My God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Darkness fell over all the sea. Leo cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. He fell asleep.

8.40 p.m., Wednesday 31 May

When the boy awoke he was halfway off the spar of the hammock. With a great effort he managed to haul himself back. He felt very sick, full of fuel oil, his stomach, his innards, clogged with it. His eyes were blocked up and he could barely see. He felt his jersey and found it thick with oil but rolled back one arm and wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. He got rid of enough of the thick oil to be able to see again but his eyes ached badly. Which was worse, the pain in his eyes or the cold? He shivered and his teeth chattered and he felt the chill deep and resident down in his thin bones. '*He casts forth his ice like morsels,*' a voice said. '*Who can stand before His cold?*'

But just as he began to understand that there were many stations on the way to death, you did not choose which one would be the last, before he could contemplate the matter in his exhaustion, so just then more destroyers appeared, all lit up on the horizon, and came closer, and one slowed. Leo rose up on the spar of the hammock and waved. In doing so he lost his grip and fell back in the cold water. He hardly knew whether he was alive or not, conscious or unconscious. Perhaps now he was dreaming, and the boats were part of his delirium. But then the destroyer was there, huge above him, and he saw that a line had been thrown. He caught it and held on with his cold weak hands and would not let go even if he lost consciousness, no, he

would not, and they hauled the skinny boy in his oil-sodden clothes up onto the decks of the destroyer.

Leo did not know who they were. A man spoke English but perhaps he was an educated German. Or a spy. Leo could not speak. He could not see, or hear, or think.

When he came to, he was lying on some kind of settee or bunk. Someone told him he was all right, another that he should not struggle so. He could not see who spoke and concluded that he was blind, but it did not matter much. The Lord had smote him with madness and blindness and confusion of mind. He would grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness. He was given brandy or whisky or other spirit to drink, and fell back asleep. He dreamed of a white hunter standing in a stable somewhere in England, waiting for his master.

When Leo woke again it was to find a surgeon bathing his face. His eyes caused him awful agony and the surgeon cleaned what he could of the oil away. Leo asked where they were going and someone said, ‘The lad can speak and is one of ours, I was right.’

The surgeon said they were steaming at reduced speed back to Rosyth, for they themselves had been badly hit after they had picked him up. Despite the pain, Leo slept again. They reached the Forth in darkness. He woke and heard someone tell the surgeon that as they passed under the bridge just now railwaymen had thrown lumps of coal at them, yelling that they were cowards who’d run away from the enemy.

A hospital boat came over. The boy joined half a dozen wounded men. They were taken to Queensferry Hospital. There he was made comfortable in bed and fell asleep. He woke to find a doctor waiting to clean his eyes. He said he had not wished to disturb the boy before. When he had finished he applied a bandage. He told Leo that they would change this daily for a week. He said that he hoped the boy’s eyes would be all right again in time.

Leo asked the doctor for news of survivors of his ship. HMS *Queen Mary*. For names. The doctor paused. Leo could not see him but he sensed the man look away, then he turned back and said there were plenty of other survivors, he did not know how many for certain, he could not say. Leo was unsure whether or not he believed him.

Part Two

THE VET 1916–1917

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1

The veterinary surgeon Patrick Jago lifted the pony's foot and examined it. A stable lad held the halter. The girl watched.

'I suppose I am too big for Blaze, poor boy,' Lottie said. 'Or he is too small for me.'

Herb Shattock, her father's head groom, told Jago that he had considered corns, quitter and canker, and did not believe the problem was any of those.

'Perhaps the likeliest explanation is the simplest,' said the vet. 'When was he last shod?'

'Four days ago,' Herb Shattock said. 'But yon Crocker won't be at fault, I'll guarantee that. I don't say as he's never drove a nail into the sensitive parts a the hoof, but he don't hide it when he does. Then we deals with it. And his son, he's learned as good as Crocker himself.'

'But that's the son who's gone, Mister Shattock,' Lottie said.

The vet walked across the loose box to where he'd laid his bag of tools.

The groom frowned. 'Aye,' he said. 'Jacob's back on the farrier work. The other son's not much good.'

'The cripple?' Patrick Jago asked. He returned to the side of the pony. 'How old is Crocker now?'

'Can't be no more'n a year older'n me,' Herb Shattock told him. He nodded in the general direction of the village. 'We was in the same class at school.'

The veterinary surgeon tapped Blaze's hoof with his hammer. 'Remove the shoe, please,' he said.

Herb Shattock told the stable lad to fetch pliers and clippers. Lottie held her pony's halter and spoke to him, reassuring him that he was in good hands. The lad returned and took the halter once again, while Herb Shattock set to removing the shoe.

'We've always struggled with their feet, of course,' Patrick Jago said. "*Then were the horsehoofs broken, by the means of their prancings.*" *Judges.*'

Lottie understood that it was she who was being addressed.

'Entire Roman armies had to be disbanded in consequence of their horses' hoofs wearing out.' The vet laughed. 'I blame those endless stone roads of theirs.'

Herb Shattock stood with the pony's leg between his like a smith and clipped all the turned-over ends of the nails, then he levered the shoe off. Lottie could see that Blaze was discomfited by his doing so. Another lad meanwhile brought a bucket of warm water.

'William the Conqueror is generally credited with introducing the art of shoeing into this country,' the vet continued. 'Though I've not heard any evidence for that. On the farms of your father's estate the horses are generally reshod every four to six weeks, I'm glad to say.'

The lad holding Blaze's halter said, 'No foot, no horse, sir.'

Herb Shattock lowered the pony's foot and stepped away. Patrick Jago took his place. The vet lifted Blaze's foot and with the knife that he called a searcher cut the horn of the hoof, explaining that he was looking for a bruised area. Then he passed the knife to the groom and asked for his pincers. Herb Shattock handed these to him and he pressed them into the foot, until the animal flinched. He asked for the water bucket and cleaned the foot. Then he dressed away the sole of the hoof, following the black spot with the point of his knife. Out of the bottom of one nail-hole came a dirty, thin, dark-coloured fluid.

Lottie asked what this was. Herb Shattock said it was gravel, and the vet declared this to be an obscure local name for a kind of pus or feculence. Once this dark matter had escaped, the vet told Herb Shattock to prepare a cold bran-poultice with a tablespoonful of carbolic acid or phenyl or indeed any good antiseptic if he had some other preference.

'When the inflammation has subsided,' Patrick Jago said, 'dress it with a tow and tar ointment. Protect the hoof with a leather sole, and put the shoe back on.'

Lottie asked what tow and tar consisted of. The vet explained that it was a mixture of one part of green tar and three parts hard fat, melted together. Herb Shattock said that he would prefer to use palm oil if the vet did not object. Patrick Jago said that he did not, palm oil would surely work just as well. Such an ointment was useful in general to counteract the brittle nature of a horse's hoof. He had seen it used often for sand crack, while a student at the Royal Veterinary College in London.

'I've hardly ever seen the condition here,' he said. 'Sand crack appears to be a lot less common in the countryside.'

Herb Shattock agreed with this observation. Patrick Jago collected his tools and walked out of the loose box. The groom accompanied him. The girl followed. Herb Shattock asked the vet what he thought of stopping the feet of a horse. Lottie had never heard this expression. The groom explained that it referred to the practice of stuffing the bottom of the feet with matter of a moist constitution.

'Numerous authorities are against it,' Patrick Jago said. 'I myself am undecided.' He asked Herb Shattock for his opinion. Lottie looked from one man to the other. She thought that she could listen to them talk of horses all day.

'In my experience,' the groom said, 'there's two kinds a weather where it may be useful – a long hard frost or a hot spell, when a horse is workin every day on a hard dry road. The moisture of the horn's liable to become exhausted. Then I am in favour of stoppin the feet. Keep 'em moist and pliable. The horse don't half appreciate it.'

The vet nodded. He asked what Mister Shattock used for the purpose.

'I've not yet found nothin to beat equal parts a cow-dung and clay,' he said. 'Applied alternate nights.'

Patrick Jago considered this potion. 'Ideal,' he said. He shook hands with the groom. He told Lottie that her pony would be ready to bear weight again within a week but that she was probably right. She was a full-grown woman now, if slender yet, but she had likely reached her full height and could ride a much larger horse. If neither of her father's remaining hunters appealed perhaps Lord Prideaux should look out for a new one for her, though he

conceded it would not be easy to find one in wartime. He walked across the yard towards his own horse tethered to a ring.

Lottie told Herb Shattock that she would be back. He said that he and the lad would attend to the horse. She trotted after Patrick Jago. When she reached him he was putting his tools into a saddlebag.

'Mr Jago,' Lottie said. He turned. 'Would you take me on your rounds as your assistant?'

The vet frowned. He asked what her father would think of the idea.

Lottie said they had already discussed it. 'Father believes it would be good for me,' she said. 'He thinks I am in need of a useful role. If I were older he would not discourage me from joining the Ambulance Service.' She was intent, serious, then her eyes widened suddenly, and she said, 'It was practically his idea, actually.'

Patrick Jago tightened the strap of the saddlebag. 'It is often hard physical labour,' he said. He looked her up and down, in her trousers and waistcoat. 'I'm not sure you would be up to it.'

Lottie said that she was strong. With her left hand she rolled up the right sleeve of her white shirt and flexed her bicep muscle and said that she could ride or fight as well as any boy her size, he had only to ask her cousins, and she had no fear of hard work. The vet said he had no doubt that Lottie told the truth.

She said that she would cut her hair. 'None need even know that I am a girl.'

Patrick Jago smiled, raising his eyebrows, and said that he thought that would be a fine trick for such a pretty girl to pull off. He put his foot in the stirrup and mounted the horse. 'Both my assistants have been conscripted,' he said. 'Let us try it, Lottie.'

She watched the vet surgeon ride away, then she ran to the house. She found her father in his study and told him that Patrick Jago had just asked, practically begged, her to help him in his work. He was desperate, she said, for his assistants had gone to the trenches.

Arthur Prideaux took off his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His estate manager William Carew had long gone, with a cavalry regiment, and Lord Prideaux was once again managing the estate himself. He peered at the papers on his desk. Perhaps they absorbed him such that it took him some moments to turn his attention from them to his daughter.

‘Jago’, he said, ‘does all kinds of veterinary work, does he not? From lapdogs in Bampton town to bulls on the moorland farms.’

Lottie agreed.

‘You could help him with the small animals,’ Arthur Prideaux said. ‘A girl could do that. Why not?’ He nodded to himself, frowning. ‘You could assist with his evening surgery. We’ll need to find you somewhere to stay, at least during the week.’

Lottie rushed around her father’s desk and embraced him.

‘Thank you, Papa,’ she said. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’

She skipped out of the study and climbed the stairs. On the landing she passed a large portrait of an ancient Prideaux, which one she could not remember, astride his horse.

‘Silly Papa,’ Lottie said to this unknown ancestor. ‘Does he think that horses are small animals?’

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2

They rode the buggy in darkness onto the farm, near Withiel Florey. Patrick Jago had not been here before and did not know the occupants. A lad met them and led the way to the stables. There they found a shire mare standing huge and forlorn in her loose box. Around her and outside the box, looking on, were a number of men, grim and exhausted.

‘We never needed a vet before,’ the farmer said, by way of introduction.

Patrick Jago ignored him. He addressed instead a man who stood in his shirtsleeves, with a hand upon the rump of the great horse. ‘Are you the carter?’ he asked.

The man nodded. ‘I can’t figure it,’ he said.

The box smelled of shit and straw, urine and blood. Lottie saw that the litter on the ground around the horse was soaked. She watched the vet examine the mare’s hindquarters. The two tiny forelegs of the foetus were presented.

‘We been pullin and pullin but it don’t come,’ the carter said. ‘Tis as if it’s caught up with another one, but I don’t believe there’s twins in there.’

‘We’ve not needed a vet before,’ the farmer repeated.

‘How long has she been in labour?’ Patrick Jago asked. No one answered. He looked around but all kept their heads down.

‘We’ve great hopes for this foal,’ the farmer said. ‘The sire’s—’

‘The foal is dead,’ Patrick Jago told him. ‘Let us try to save your mare.’ He turned to the carter. ‘Ten quarts of linseed jelly.’ The carter motioned to

his lads and they trotted out of the stable. ‘And strain it through a cloth,’ the vet called after them. He asked Lottie to fetch the enema syringe from the boot of the buggy. When she returned he explained to her that all the mare’s waters had been expelled, there was no more. Her uterine contractions were surely exhausted, the uterus most likely tight as a steel band around the foetus.

While the potion was being prepared, Lottie Prideaux laid out the vet’s parturition instruments upon a bench brought into the box. The finger knife, with its ring to slip over the middle finger. The hand knife, with a cord for the wrist. The short, three-and-a-half-inch hook, with four and a half feet of cord attached. The long hook knife, with its two-and-a-half-foot wooden handle. The crutch, of equal length. They looked like instruments of torture, not aids to birth, yet Lottie knew a foetus could be stillborn and stuck, and have to be dealt with savagely.

When the lad returned, Lottie drew the jelly into the enema syringe while the vet stripped to the waist. He took the syringe and inserted its nozzle into the mare’s vagina, past the forelegs of her dead foal, and pumped the jelly into her womb. He told Lottie, who stood close by him, that the linseed jelly would distend the womb and float the foetus. ‘I hope it will also act as a lubricant,’ he said, ‘in place of the natural water.’

The syringe had to be refilled a number of times. The vet demanded more light. The farmer barked orders and lads scuttled away and returned with hurricane lamps, which they hung from rafters. Patrick Jago requested the long hook. Lottie brought it over to him. He said that the head of the dead foal must be bent back in one way or another. With its nose pointing forward behind the elbow, or with its nose pointing back towards the flank, or with its head turned over onto its back, if she could imagine those fatal configurations. He slowly inserted the long hook. ‘I will try to put it into the eye-socket,’ he said. ‘We need to press the foetus back into the womb and then manipulate the head into its correct position.’

Patrick Jago fished around with the hook. He could not see into the darkness of the womb. Lottie watched his face. Though his eyes were open it was clear that he saw nothing of the stable but rather what was in his mind’s eye as he attempted to interpret or decipher what he discovered with the hook. He continued for a long time, adjusting and readjusting the handle. Occasionally he took a deep breath, as if to signify his hope that he

had a catch, and began to tug the hook slowly out, only to sigh with disappointment as it slid too easily free.

The great shire mare stood calm all this time, suffering the pain and the indignities that had been wrought upon her and continued to be. Did she know that her foal was lost, that its heart beat no more inside her? That these human beings were intent upon saving her life? Lottie did not believe so. No one spoke to her, or stroked her. Not on this farm. She wished to do so herself but did not. She glanced around and saw that one or two more people had gathered, including a woman of the same age as the farmer. They looked to her with their stern faces in the yellow light like macabre spectators at some morbid entertainment. As if they could not help themselves, though they wished to save their prize mare, from taking pleasure in watching her suffer.

Patrick Jago withdrew the long hook and gave it to his assistant and asked her for a length of cord. Although so little had been achieved so far, the vet's bare chest was already marked by spots of the linseed jelly and blood and other matter. He looped the cord around one of the dead foal's pastern joints and twisted it tight and told the carter to hold it taut.

'Pull it when I tell you to, not before,' he said. He asked Lottie to fetch the long embryotomy knife. This he introduced carefully into the mare as he had the hook, and pushed it in half as far.

'We need to get on to the shoulder,' he said. He manipulated the knife, telling Lottie that he was now cutting the skin, and dividing it down the limb. He then withdrew the knife and asked her to use her fingers to detach the skin from the shank-bone, and pull it loose.

Lottie removed her jacket and rolled up her sleeves, and felt along the limb for where the skin had been cut.

'Ain't the lad gonna take off his shirt?' the farmer's wife called out. Perhaps this was meant as a joke to lighten the morose proceedings, but none laughed. Patrick Jago ignored her. He asked the carter to tug gently but steadily on the cord. Lottie found the loose skin and separated a little of it from the limb. She tied a piece of thin cord to the flap of skin and extracted her hands from the mare and pulled the cord. At first it would not give but when she applied all her strength she could feel the skin tearing off the flesh beneath.

The vet reintroduced the long knife and cut the muscles between the shoulder and the body. The carter kept pulling on the cord fixed around the

dead foal's pastern until, with a grotesque watery sound of snapping bone or gristle, and rent flesh, the foreleg came away.

Jago wasted not a moment to celebrate this revolting success but exchanged the long knife for the hook as before and tried once more to secure the head and turn it around to a normal presentation. He was not able to but this time did not spend so long, but set to repeating his operation to remove the other foreleg of the foetus. Again Lottie pulled loose the skin. Again the vet cut the pectoral muscles and the carter tugged with all his force, and the foreleg was yanked and ripped off the body of the dead foal so abruptly that it came slithering out of the vagina of the mare and the carter staggered backwards across the wet straw of the loose box with the severed limb, like a man astounded by what he'd been given, struggling to retain his balance.

Lottie looked up and saw that a girl now stood at the head of the mare. She had not seen her enter the stable. The girl stroked the horse's neck. She was looking at Lottie, and when their eyes met did not look away but kept staring directly at her.

The vet now inserted the long crutch and pushed against the foetus. Robbed of its support, it slid easily back into the bottom of the womb. Once again Patrick Jago did not waste time but with both the long hook and the short hook, with four or five feet of cord attached and a wooden handle at the other end, he got the head round and was able with the carter's assistance to pull the mutilated body of the dead foal out from the mare, a messy bundle of flesh and jelly and blood. As she felt her offspring's delivery, the exhausted mare appeared to stumble, her knees buckling at the relief or the disappointment, Lottie could not tell which. Recumbent, on her side, the big horse breathed softly, her flanks trembling.

As the carter's lads took away the foetus of the foal, Patrick Jago told Lottie that if they had called him earlier he might have saved it. His bare torso was now covered in bloody gore and filth. He told the carter to water the mare immediately, and to mix a simple powder of four drachms of nitrate of potash and two of carbonate of iron in her mash each night for one week.

'And either move her to a different box or stall or change this straw immediately,' he said. The girl knelt beside the mare, still stroking her neck, still staring at Lottie.

The farmer's mood was changed. He seemed to have forgotten the prize foal and was grateful to have his mare alive. He insisted that the vet and his assistant come to the farmhouse to clean up and enjoy the breakfast they deserved.

They returned the instruments and ropes to the cart, stumbling through the darkness. Patrick Jago told Lottie that he was glad to see someone had thought to take it upon himself to stable their cob, and no doubt give it some hay. Lottie thought of the girl with the wide eyes.

Though it was warm in the farmhouse kitchen Lottie kept her jacket on, covering as it did her blood-spattered white shirt. The farmer's wife served them porridge with cream and honey. Lottie was sure that after what she had witnessed she would have no appetite at all, and would sit mute and unfed while the vet and the farmer ate and talked, but to her surprise her hunger was great. She had little idea what time it was. The farmer's wife put plates with three eggs each and four rashers of bacon before them, and cut slices of bread from which steam rose. Lottie spread a slice with yellow butter.

The farmer proclaimed that he had never called a veterinary surgeon before, he thought he might have said so already but wished to repeat it. 'I'll never have that quack horse doctor again,' he said. 'With his blocks and his pulleys. Near as dammit killed my best mare. But you saved her, Mister Jago. With your young lad there. You saved her with all your fine tools.'

They drank sweet creamy coffee, then Patrick Jago said they must be on their way. When they stepped outside Lottie was surprised to find the sky pale grey and the barns and hayricks discernible in the pre-dawn light.

As they drove the cob slowly back to the surgery in Bampton, Lottie asked if there were further abnormal positions a foetus could be aligned in beyond those Mr Jago had outlined. He said there were. Many. She must study the plates in Thompson's book.

'There are times one is forced to do what we have just done, or similar butchery, to a live foetus, and kill it in order to save the mare. There are other times when a foal or calf is of more value than its mother, and we must perform a Caesarean section to save the offspring, and run the risk of losing the mother.'

The vet handed the reins to Lottie and while she drove, he filled his pipe and lit it. 'When I say risk, I should add that of the half-dozen Caesareans I have performed on mares, I have lost the mother every time.' Patrick Jago

sucked on his pipe. ‘It can be a savage business, Lottie. Reproduction is the most extraordinary miracle in the whole of nature, yet it can go wrong in so many ways. A paradox of obstetrics I imagine one will never fully comprehend.’

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3

The surgery had belonged to Patrick Jago's father, who was awarded his diploma from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in the early sixties and then surprised his contemporaries by retreating at his wife's request to set up practice in her small home town in Devon, close to the Somerset border, below the moor. Patrick was their only child, and followed his father's calling. When his father died, from the infectious disease of glanders, picked up from a horse, Patrick took over the practice. His mother still lived in her home beside the surgery, and Lottie now lodged with her while Patrick and his wife lived across town.

What had once been a two-stall stable up against the house, Patrick Jago's father had converted into a surgery. In the gloomy loft above the stable and adjoining coach house were dusty glass cases in which were mounted obstetrical monstrosities the old man had collected. Lottie climbed the steps and wiped the dust off the glass. She studied calves with two heads and three eyes. Lambs with supernumerary limbs sprouting from their backbones.

New stables and kennels had been built in the garden. At the back of the surgery was a dispensary or pharmacy. Patrick Jago had inherited his father's factotum, Edgar Riddell, who stood for hours every day at a granite mortar, grinding vegetable roots and barks to powder, for incorporation into tonics and cough mixtures, with a heavy marble pestle.

Today Lottie was not with Jago on his rounds, and there were no visitors to the surgery, so she assisted Edgar compounding ginger and aloes with black treacle into physic or horse balls. They pounded hard lumps of carbonite of ammonia, mixing the powder with gentian and fenugreek, aniseed and ginger, and pushed the mixture into four-ounce parcels wrapped in brown paper and sealed with wax.

They prepared pint-and-a-half bottles of cattle drench containing many ingredients infused over a gas-ring in a large cauldron, filling the dispensary with herbal odours. Edgar Riddell made black draughts for the relief of colic and permitted Lottie to cut their corks level with the neck of the bottle and to seal them by dipping each one, upside down, into a saucepan containing an inch of boiling pitch.

Edgar did not talk much. At the end of his working day he shooed Lottie out of the dispensary so that he could tidy up on his own. His last task was to polish the mahogany benches, blackened by age, with a beeswax and turpentine concoction he had prepared himself.

While Edgar cleaned his territory, Lottie stepped into the surgery. She told Jago sitting at his desk that she found the preparation of these powders and electuaries strangely entralling.

The vet laughed. ‘It’s terribly out of date,’ he said. ‘All these ingredients, painstakingly prepared. Wholesale firms can sell us stock medicines ready for dispensing. But how can I let Edgar go? And the thing is, they trust him, you see, Lottie. When a farmer or horse-owner calls to settle his bill, he invariably looks around the dispensary and is tempted by those shelves of drenches to take a dozen or two away with him, to replenish the harness-room first-aid cupboard.’

Lottie asked the vet to tell her of his studies to become a surgeon, at the Royal Veterinary College in Camden Town in London.

‘We lived in diggings,’ he said. ‘We were mostly the sons of veterinary surgeons or registered practitioners. One, of a quack. The others of yeomen farmers. None of us great scholars, it must be admitted. I was the only one I knew who’d been to any kind of public school. An extremely minor one, I should add.’

He told her how in their second year they were admitted to the dissecting room, a dank and evil-smelling place. A supply of aged ponies was kept in readiness in the college stables. Two or three at a time were shot, and

prepared by an injection into their arteries of red wax, and into their veins one of blue.

‘The carcases were laid out on trestle tables. Each of us was allotted a portion. As our dissections proceeded, quantities of flesh were discarded upon the concrete floor around us. After a day or two this meat rotted and stank. You could see the pieces undulating under the influence of blowfly larvae. I had the advantage over some, as the son of a vet, of being somewhat inured to the sight of corpses and the smell of putridity, but most of my fellows would no sooner enter the dissecting room than have to rush out and be wonderfully sick. Until they learned not to have breakfast on dissecting days.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m sure by the time you go, Lottie, it will be very different.’

‘Me?’ she asked, astonished. ‘Surely I cannot hope to maintain this lad’s disguise forever. Neither do I wish to.’

‘No,’ Patrick said. ‘I mean that a woman will be admitted to the College one day. Why should the first one not be you?’

4

Lottie rode home three days before Christmas. She stabled the horse she'd inherited from Jago's old assistant, and spoke with Herb Shattock. A lad carried her saddlebags to the house. Lottie walked to the back of the house and entered by the kitchen. The cook fussed over her and would not let her go until the girl had tried her new sponge.

'You can't wait for lunch, my lovely,' she said. 'Not after a long ride like that.'

That was where Alice found her. As they embraced, Alice caught sight of the recipe on the kitchen table. She told Cook that it was not right to use so many eggs in the Christmas pudding, when in London and no doubt other towns and cities eggs were in short supply and people had to do without. She said there was a more suitable recipe in yesterday's newspaper and she would find it. She smiled at Lottie and walked out of the kitchen.

Cook did not understand. 'The hens is still layin,' she told Lottie. 'If a lot a the men is gone, there must be more eggs for the rest of us, like it or not.'

'I suppose Alice ...' Lottie began '... Lady Prideaux, I mean, would say that eggs can be boiled and dried and powdered, and sent to the troops.' Lottie was not sure she would ever be able to conceive of Alice as her stepmother. Her widowed father's young second wife, not five years older than Lottie herself.

Cook said she did not think that dried and powdered eggs sounded very tasty, for soldiers or anyone else. Alice returned with the recipe, which she

had torn from the newspaper, and placed it on the table. Cook leaned over it.

'Look, you see,' Alice said, 'it uses no eggs, and only one large spoon of sugar.'

Cook squinted and read aloud, 'Six spoonfuls a flour. Half a pound a beef suet. Half a pound a currants. The sugar. One large carrot.'

'The secret,' Alice told her, 'is in the boiling. The longer a Christmas pudding is permitted to boil, the richer it will become.'

'One large carrot,' Cook repeated.

'Precisely,' Alice said. 'One assumes that is what will give it sweetness, and moisture. And there is no shortage of carrots, you see.'

Cook frowned. She shook her head. 'I don't know, your ladyship,' she said. 'I never heard a that before.'

Lottie said quietly that she had better get washed and changed into more appropriate attire, though she was not sure whether either of them heard her, for they remained engrossed in their discussion of ingredients.

Lottie climbed the stairs to the nursery. As she approached she smelled paint. Linseed, turpentine. She opened the door and walked in and for a moment thought that she had entered the wrong room or the wrong floor. As if the configuration of the house had been altered in her absence. She had only been lodging in Bampton for a few months but it was the longest she had ever been away and perhaps that was all it took to forget what you thought you knew so well. Then she understood.

The long attic room was empty, save for dust sheets on the floor and one paint-spattered stepladder, and tins, brushes and other decorating paraphernalia. All the old furniture was gone. In the middle of the room was a single object, covered in a white sheet. Then she saw that a number of crates stood at the far end. Lottie walked down the long room, her footsteps muffled by the sheets on the wooden boards. The heavy rain of 20 December had been followed by these cold bright days, and sunlight glared into the bare attic through the dormer windows and skylights.

Lottie raised the lid of the first crate, disclosing items covered in layers of newspaper. She lifted one out and carefully unwrapped it. A fragile skeleton, that of a hare, one of those Leo Sercombe had given her. She had brought him up here after one such skeleton was crushed when she attacked him. Had sneaked him up here, in fact, surreptitiously.

Lottie rewrapped the hare's skeleton and put it carefully back in the crate and replaced the lid. She turned and walked to the centre of the room. Lottie took hold of the white sheet and dragged it off the object beneath. She had assumed it was a piece of furniture or some such solid mass, but as she pulled the sheet over it the object moved. Lottie let go of the sheet and took a step back. Whatever it was remained in the same place yet in motion. Perhaps it was a clockwork mechanism of some kind. The girl took courage and slid the sheet off entirely. There before her was a rocking horse, brand new, brightly painted. It shifted on its rockers then came to rest. Lottie stepped around in front of the wooden horse. It looked past her with oddly lifelike painted eyes.

Lottie wished to protest but how could she? To complain, at the age of seventeen, that her nursery was being taken over?

She fetched the stepladder and carried it across the room. One of the skylights possessed a concealed pair of hinges that opened it wide and allowed access to the roof. She pushed open the skylight, and rose up through the opening until she was standing on the top step of the ladder. She put her hands on the window ledge and sprang up, lifting one hand and at the same time twisting so that she came to rest sitting on the ledge. She swung her legs up and walked across the roof.

A walkway ran along the centre between a chimney stack at each end, and in the middle was a raised wooden platform. Lottie did not know its function or provenance. She had never seen anyone else use it. Her father said he had been told that his great-grandfather liked to shoot birds from an armchair brought up here, but this sounded like a family fable. His grandfather was a keen astronomer, so perhaps there had once been a telescope mounted there through which to view the cosmos overhead.

The platform was rickety. It always had been. Lottie was not confident it would bear her weight, but she climbed it tentatively and stood upon it. The air was still as it had been for days and she was grateful. The platform tottered, swaying as she moved. A sudden breeze could have carried it off.

Lottie looked around. The height afforded her a panoramic view of the estate and the land surrounding it. The horse-ploughed furrows, the grazing pastures, the woods. Moor rising away on one side, hills on the other. She did not believe her ancestor was either a hunter or a stargazer, but rather like her he had loved his home and simply wished to contemplate it. Its beauty and its bounty.

For dinner they had ox-tail soup followed by a soufflé with oysters, which Alice's mother Lady Grenvil had brought down from London. The servants cleared the plates. The Christmas crackers were decorated with pictures of the dreadnoughts of the Royal Navy. Duncan Grenvil had bought them in Hamleys. They pulled the crackers. Lottie's father Arthur and his wife Alice. Alice's parents Lord and Lady Grenvil. Lottie. And Doctor Pollard, a widower from Taunton. Each tiny explosion left an odour of saltpetre in the air.

Lottie looked at the smaller end of a cracker with which she had been left. 'You'd better make a wish then,' she told the doctor.

'I imagine we all have the same one,' Doctor Pollard said. 'That the war will be over soon.'

'Over by Christmas,' said Duncan Grenvil. 'Yet again.'

Alice asked her father not to be morose. He apologised, and said that he had spotted a rather wonderful board game, called *Kill Kiel*, based on sinking German submarines. His wife exclaimed that Duncan was as brilliant as ever. Had he already forgotten that the game was under the tree, all wrapped up, and ready to be Arthur's present? Her husband had just spoiled the surprise.

'Not at all,' Arthur said. 'Now I shall look forward to opening it all the more. And playing the game this afternoon.'

'Observe what is going on, Alice,' Maud Grenvil told her daughter. 'I trust you are taking note. This is a reflex action for them, they stick together.'

The men made sighs and gestures of demurral. Lottie watched them. Duncan Grenvil was her father's best friend. Was it odd that Arthur had married his daughter? Was it odd for Maud?

Alice nodded to the butler, Mister Daw, and the main course was served. Roast turkey with chestnut stuffing. Boiled ham. Lottie concentrated hard on keeping gravy stains from the frills of her white blouse.

'No goose, Papa?' she asked.

'Apparently not,' he said.

Alice looked from Arthur to Lottie, her brow furrowed in perplexity, or suspicion.

'Papa loves goose,' Lottie explained to the guests. 'We've always had it at Christmas.'

'You never said,' Alice told her husband.

Maud Grenvil commented that it was quite a spread. She had not seen so many vegetables in London all year.

Duncan asked, ‘What word from young Carew?’

‘He writes far more to Lottie than to me,’ Arthur said. ‘You’d better ask her.’

Lottie told them that their former estate manager was now in the cavalry. William’s most recent letter assured her all was well. They’d delivered the Germans a crushing blow at the Ancre river, taking so many prisoners it was a challenge to feed them.

‘I hope you write back to him,’ Alice said.

‘Of course,’ Lottie assured her.

The Grenvils had not been down to the West Country since the summer. Now Alice asked Arthur to try to persuade them not to go back to the capital. ‘They can evacuate to their own home down here,’ she said. ‘Out of reach of those dreadful Zeppelins.’

‘You mustn’t worry, Alice,’ her father said. ‘Our plucky little aircraft mob those ugly balloons and are bringing them down now. We barely see them any more.’

‘No,’ Alice agreed. ‘But only because the Germans are sending bomber planes now.’

‘But one feels one’s needed there,’ Duncan Grenvil said. ‘And your mother’s doing wonderful work at the hospital.’

Doctor Pollard asked what work this was.

‘I simply organise some volunteer nurses,’ Maud Grenvil said. ‘One’s friends’ daughters. Their friends.’ She turned to Lottie. ‘You could come and join us, my dear, if you’re looking for something to do.’

Alice remonstrated with her mother. ‘I want you to stay here, Mama, and instead you’re trying to take people in the opposite direction. You can’t! Anyhow, Lottie is doing her bit already, acting as an assistant to one of our local veterinary surgeons whose assistants are at the Front.’

Lottie told them a little of what she had been doing with Patrick Jago, how much she was learning. Doctor Pollard said that increasing numbers of women were becoming general practitioners, and with the casualties in France he suspected that unfortunately this may need to continue after the war was over. Presumably it would be the same for veterinary medicine. Duncan Grenvil said that with small animals perhaps that would be so, but

surely there was a difference between treating humans and manhandling shire horses and bulls, with which all agreed.

After the main course they were served plum pudding and mince pies, and orange jelly. Lady Grenvil said that girls in the Voluntary Aid Detachment kept watch on the tons of hay stacked on the docksides, waiting for shipment to the horses of the Expeditionary Force. She asked Arthur Prideaux how the farms on the estate managed to bring in the harvest with so many men and lads gone.

‘A number were permitted to return from the front line to help, actually,’ he said. ‘Many thousands came back for the harvest.’

‘What if the enemy had found out?’ Lottie wondered. ‘They could have overrun us.’

‘I imagine,’ her father said, ‘German farm workers went home for the same purpose, at much the same time.’

‘Poor Arthur’s wearing his fingers to the bone managing the estate,’ Alice told her guests. ‘I hardly see him.’

‘The problem is one that’s been forty years in the making,’ Lottie’s father said. ‘We allowed ourselves to rely on other countries for wheat, meat, sugar. Staples. The war’s simply brought the situation into stark relief. We nearly ran out of wheat this year.’

‘And hasn’t the price risen by an extraordinary margin?’ Duncan said. ‘You farmers must be raking it in.’

Doctor Pollard said it was going to get worse if, as was feared, the Germans moved to unrestricted warfare and attacked merchant convoys bringing food from across the Atlantic. Arthur Prideaux disagreed. He said that he did not believe a civilised nation would abandon the rules of war.

‘The ministry wants us to plough up our grazing land,’ he said.

‘They want everyone to,’ Maud Grenvil said. ‘You should see the allotments in front of Kensington Palace. And I hear His Majesty’s offered up the gardens at Buckingham Palace for vegetable production.’

‘I can just picture Queen Mary out there with her fork and spade,’ said Alice. ‘She’s game for anything, you know.’

‘It’s all very well for those flat counties in the east,’ said Arthur. ‘I mean, they’re virtually prairies. The West Country here’s higgledy-piggledy. It’s no good for corn in any quantity. Best kept for dairy.’

‘I’m sure we’ll always want milk, Papa,’ Lottie said.

‘We can all see you’re in your element, Arthur,’ said Duncan Grenvil.
‘You’ve always been a farmer at heart.’

After the food had been taken away they drank coffee and liqueurs, and nibbled at desserts, and spoke of how the wounded were brought home on night trains. How medicines were scarce in Taunton, but that people seemed to visit their GP less often with trivial aches and sprains. Lottie said little. She wondered how soon she could return to Bampton, and the veterinary practice.

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5

People brought their dogs and cats to the surgery. Patrick Jago was indifferent to them. ‘I know it’s the way things are going,’ he said. ‘But at the College we saw ourselves as horse specialists, and I’m afraid I still do. I can’t help it.’

After Christmas the vet left the small animals to Lottie, while remaining on hand if she needed to consult him. In the middle of January a woman brought in her spaniel. ‘It has become melancholy,’ she said. ‘I have no idea why.’

Lottie examined the dog. It did not object but stood upon the table gazing glumly at the wall. She felt its stomach. Dogs swallowed all sorts of things. Nails, meat skewers, hat-pins. Safety pins and needles. Golf balls, tin-tacks. She wondered what this one had snapped up.

Lottie took the spaniel out to the yard, followed by the owner. She squatted and gripped the dog’s mouth with her left hand, pressing down the hanging lip on either side with finger and thumb so that it covered the molar teeth of the upper jaw. It could not bite her fingers now without first biting its own lips.

It was surprising how few people knew that a dog could be made to vomit by giving it a crystal of washing soda, no bigger than a garden pea. Whippers-in of hounds knew, and always carried a lump or two with them, for hounds sometimes picked up poison that had been laid for vermin. Lottie flicked her soda grain to the back of the spaniel’s tongue, and its

reflex movement gulped it down. The dog looked at Lottie with a blank expression. Then it opened its mouth, retched a couple of times, then vomited easily and copiously – and there on the ground, mixed in with the animal's breakfast, was a medium-sized brooch. Lottie picked it up and held it out to the owner, whose relief was equalled by her distaste. Lottie handed her the dog's lead instead, and took the brooch to the tap.

A week later another dog, a Labrador this time, was brought to the surgery by its owner, a retired sea captain. This dog was well known in the town. The owner gave him a penny each day to take between his teeth to the bakery, where he was given a currant bun, for which he had a predilection. One day the baker met the dog's owner in the street.

'I don't mind your dog havin his bun,' he said. 'But he don't always bring his tin.'

Now the captain said his dear Lab had been taken ill with symptoms of stomach derangement. Lottie could hear a faint rattling as the Labrador walked into the room. Patrick Jago took a skiagraphy, which revealed a cluster of coins. Too many for a simple emetic. They told the captain to leave the dog at the surgery overnight. Lottie watched Jago carry out a gastrotomy, and together they extracted from the dog's stomach a total of one shilling and tuppence.

Lottie washed the money and when it was dry she gave it to Jago. He told her to keep it, she was earning every penny.

'I should be paying you,' Lottie said. 'For everything you're teaching me.'

Unless Patrick Jago knew that he would require a great deal of tackle, of instruments and stocks of medicine, he rode on horseback to his country clients, a length of cord slung around the horse's neck, saddlebags over its rump. Lottie rode his old assistant's cob beside him, over hills, through wooded valleys, up onto the moor. They rode in sunshine and darkness, in rain and hail and snow. When the roads were icy they tied sacks around the feet of their horses. Some nights Lottie fell asleep in the saddle and her pony carried her back to Bampton unprompted.

She trusted that no one knew the smooth-cheeked lad accompanying the vet was in reality a girl, still less that she was Lord Prideaux's daughter. But Bampton was more than ten miles from the estate, and few people in the

town knew aught of it, while those on the farms they visited rarely ventured beyond their own valley.

They were called to a farm outside the village of Skilgate. A mare had become vicious. She would not let anyone near to groom or ride her. The farmer thought she was incurable and must be destroyed, but Patrick told him it was likely due to a cystic condition that could be cured. They needed a variety of instruments for use in this case and took the buggy. They laid straw in the yard and cast the mare, and the vet carried out the operation.

Afterwards, Lottie returned the instruments to the buggy. While Patrick talked with the farmer and his carter, giving instructions for the mare's convalescence, Lottie looked around. She heard voices coming from a cowshed and peered in. There was a cow, in poor condition, being examined by two men. One told the other that the beast had worm in the tail for sure. Lottie watched in horror as he lifted the tail and drew a razor across its end and squeezed out a thin white tendon. 'Got it,' he said. 'That'll cure it. Rub a load a salt on the cut now.'

Lottie returned to where the vet and the farmer were still in conversation. 'Do you know what your man is doing?' she interrupted. 'While the surgeon here applies his learning, acquired through the painstaking accumulation of scientific knowledge, a quack back there attacks a poor cow with his knife. It's barbaric.'

The farmer flushed, whether from anger or embarrassment it was hard to tell. And if the latter, was it that he'd allowed such quackery or did not know it took place upon his premises? Or perhaps he did not take kindly to being spoken to in such a way by a fresh-faced boy. Before the farmer could say anything, Patrick Jago said he believed the mare was in good hands and with luck would give no more trouble, and they must be on their way.

As he drove the buggy, Lottie recounted to the vet what she had seen. He shook his head and told her she must not talk to people in that manner.

'But they need to be cured of their stupidity,' she said.

'They are our clients,' he said. 'My customers. I shall lose them if you annoy them. Besides, superstitions do not die out overnight. We must be patient.' He smiled. 'Many of the older farm workers round here still carry a potato in their pocket to ward off rheumatism.'

'A lack of education is no excuse for idiocy,' Lottie said.

'But if you ask them they will show you how hard the potato has become, proof that the rheumatic poison has gone from their body to the vegetable.'

Hard as a stone.'

Lottie did not know what to say to that.

'If you wish one day to be a practitioner yourself,' Patrick told her, 'and not to lose all your clients, you will need to learn a little humility, Lottie.'

A vet was required to be equally expert in foaling, calving, lambing, farrowing and whelping. Patrick Jago taught his assistant that the simplest way to tell a good from a bad large-animal obstetrician was that a bad one starts by pulling, a good one by pushing. For the secret of rectifying a miscued presentation was to encourage the foetus back into the womb, in whose relative spaciousness one might manipulate disordered limbs. That spring of 1917 he bought them both rubber overalls. Lottie alternately sweated and shivered with cold. Her arms were chapped from continual rinsing. Under his guidance she found herself lying on a wet and filthy cowshed floor, up to her armpits while exploring the position of a calf. Sometimes the cow's labour pangs came when Lottie's arm was trapped between the calf's head and the cow's pelvic bone, and the girl cried out in pain. She returned to Bampton with fingers stiff and cramped, arm bruised blue from wrist to armpit.

Lottie was fed by Patrick Jago's mother's cook. The housemaid washed her clothes. The vet himself lived across town and did not speak of his wife, whether out of discretion or shame Lottie did not know. She understood that Mrs Jago was an invalid, with some illness of the mind and perhaps the body too. She was looked after by a nursemaid, overseen by her husband's sister, who acted as their housekeeper. Knowing this much, Lottie did not feel able to ask more. She did not know whether or not the Jagos had children and so one day while they were out in the buggy she emboldened herself to enquire.

'No,' he said. 'It is something one assumed would happen.' He relaxed his grip on the reins. 'And although it has been clear for many years that it will not, I must admit I am still not reconciled. To the absence, I suppose. The loss of what should have been. Of what should be.'

The cob had slowed down and the vet had not urged him on. The horse's hooves and the iron rims of the wheels on the road made little sound. Gazing ahead along the lane, it was easy to speak to the person beside you.

‘You might have heard of the theory of alternative worlds,’ Patrick said. ‘That this life we live is but one of infinite possible lives. If we had taken that road, not this. Had met this person, not that one.’

Lottie shook her head. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I could not believe in that theory. Of course we can imagine other lives, but they are not real. Only this one is real. This horse, pulling this buggy, along this lane, on this cool morning.’

‘Yes, of course, Lottie, you’re right.’

They rolled on in silence for a while. ‘And yet,’ the vet said, ‘we know how random the process of reproduction is. How many spermatozoa fulfil no purpose. I wonder whether somehow those souls I should have fathered exist somewhere. If only in a realm you might call potential.’

Lottie turned and looked at him. Grey hair clipped close beneath his hat. The dark moustache. His weathered skin. He was not yet old. ‘You would have made a good father,’ she told him. ‘I’m sorry. I mean, you would make a good father.’

Patrick smiled at her. His eyes crinkled. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘May I ask what makes you say that? Apart from generously offering consolation to a maudlin old fool?’

‘You are kind,’ she said. ‘And your children would surely be curious. And, as proof that you are a good man, horses trust you.’

The vet nodded his thanks. ‘Never take a horse’s trust for granted,’ he said. ‘One kick, and ...’ He raised his left hand from the reins, lifted it into the air as if it held something which he tossed away like some lost redundant soul, or spermatozoa, into the air.

6

From 20 March the vet and his assistant were to spend two days a week on a round of farms and stables. On the first day they took the buggy, for they needed to carry a great weight of rope as well as instruments. The season had arrived for the gelding of horses.

Patrick Jago told his assistant that, in his opinion, in the years before the war horse breeding had been at its zenith – both in terms of the number of foals produced and in their quality. Thoroughbreds, hunters, hackneys, hacks and cobs, shire horses, Clydesdale and Suffolk Punches. The war, of course, had only concentrated demand. In addition, there were droves of wild ponies across the moors, the Highlands of Scotland, the Welsh hills and mountains, and the New Forest.

All the wild and semi-wild unbroken colts had to be rounded up, surplus males castrated and sold. Many farmers kept one or two mares from which to breed. Even in peacetime there was a demand for geldings to act as remounts for the army. If a horse didn't look like maturing into a valuable hunter or an officer's charger, so long as he was sound he could be sold as a troop horse.

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They came to a farm the vet knew well. He had been visiting regularly all his life, at first as a boy with his father. Lottie noticed a mound of carrots in

the stable yard. Patrick said these were for pregnant mares. Foals here were sometimes born with yellowy-orange skin.

A rag of colts jostled together in a pen. Patrick had requested that they be rounded up and starved for at least twelve hours, to lessen the risk of a ruptured stomach.

While the vet spoke to the farmer, Lottie lit the coals to heat up the iron, and sharpened the vet's knives. He had explained the procedure, and warned her that it had to be performed swiftly. She understood what she had to do and hoped to remember it. He would have no time to instruct her on what he was doing. She would have to make sense of what she saw as he carried it out. There were six colts, of various size and conformation. 'They's risin one year old,' the farmer said. 'Except for that one there.' He nodded towards a chestnut with a white diamond emblazoned upon his forehead. 'He's risin two, I reckon.'

The vet asked for four men to help him. He put on his surgical coat, and a dirty old cloth cap Lottie had not seen before. He wore it back to front, the peak over the back of his neck. Lottie asked him why he donned so filthy an article when about to perform surgery.

'A lot of the colts will be infested with lice,' he said. 'It's to stop them getting into my hair.'

'You did not warn me of that danger,' she told him.

'Since you never remove your own cap I did not think it worth mentioning,' he said.

'I don't see what is humorous about that,' Lottie said.

Patrick stopped smiling. He furrowed his brow. 'Just remember,' he said, 'that these colts have not been handled or haltered. They are liable to strike out using both their fore and their hind feet. Not to mention their teeth.'

The vet made a loop at the end of a length of hemp. He spliced a wooden peg into the rope so that the knot would not slip so tight around the horse's neck as to throttle it. He walked up to the nearest colt, the two-year-old chestnut, and swung the lasso up into the air. Lottie watched it fall over the animal's head as easily as if the colt had been waiting patiently for precisely such an occurrence. It was only when it felt the rope tauten upon its skin that it struggled.

Lottie wondered why the vet had chosen this horse first. Or perhaps it was simply the first colt he came to, and when you had done this a hundred

times you did not bother to make such choices. She would not have chosen the two year old herself.

Three of the four men, including the farmer, took up the hemp rope. The fourth, a lad, opened the gate and they drove the colt into the open field beyond, the men running behind. When the lad had closed the gate he ran to catch up with the others and grabbed a section of rope himself. In the middle of the field the men hung on to the rope with all their weight, and held it low to the ground. The colt planted his feet and tried to pull himself away.

While the animal raged, Lottie laid out the vet's instruments upon a board. Patrick Jago prepared another, thin rope. It was some forty feet long.

The farmer called out, 'What the hell is that made of?'

'Cotton,' Jago told him. 'It's softer than hemp, less likely to injure their limbs. Supposedly.'

'I hope for you and your lad's sake it's strong enough.'

'I'm assured it is,' Jago said. 'And I hope so too.'

The vet made a loop in the middle of the cotton rope. This loop he passed over the end of the rope held by the men, each man releasing his grip to allow the vet to slip his loop along, towards the horse. Lottie picked up a long-forked stick from where she'd laid it on the ground and took up the far end of the cotton rope, walking out to one side. Patrick walked out to the other. At a nod from him they walked up either side of the colt, Patrick on his right, Lottie on his left, sliding the loop up the hemp rope to his neck. He became aware of this further intrusion and, eyes wild with panic and anger, threw his head around. Lottie used the long stick to manipulate the loop over the colt's head.

'Watch those feet,' Patrick called out when he feared the girl was getting too close to the horse.

When she had got the cotton rope around the colt's neck, Lottie walked away backwards.

'Is your young lad up to this?' the farmer called out. 'You want one a my men to help you?'

'No, thank you,' Patrick Jago said. 'He'll do.'

The vet had explained to Lottie the procedure for casting the colts, using the simplest method he knew of, known as 'the side-lines'. They would work in tandem. Still, she scrutinised exactly what he did on his side of the horse and followed suit closely.

The vet walked up to the horse and threw his end of the cotton rope between the hind feet and walked around the back of the colt and picked it up. Lottie did likewise. The colt kicked and plunged though he was still held by the four men on the hemp rope and so constrained.

Once the animal's protests subsided, Patrick slowly approached the colt's front and passed the end of his rope between the neck-rope and the colt's shoulder. Then Lottie did the same. The four men watched in silence, their grip on the hemp rope firm. Then, at Jago's request, leaving the farmer and the lad on the hemp rope, one of the farm workers came and joined the vet, the other joining Lottie.

'We'll cast him on your side,' Patrick Jago called out. 'You two over there, pull sideways and backwards.' He turned to the man behind him and said, 'We pull forwards. Ready?'

Now the farmer and the lad let go of the hemp rope. As the other two pairs slowly pulled on the cotton rope, both of the colt's hind feet were drawn inexorably up to his elbows. His eyes were wild and he looked as if he wanted to struggle but was too surprised by what they had sprung on him to do so. He slowly toppled over and lay on the ground on his left side.

Patrick Jago used shorter ropes to secure the hind legs together at the pasterns with a double hitch, then the forelegs likewise. Lottie wondered whether he would ever trust her or anyone else to tie these particular knots. Finally he fixed the back rope to the upper hind shank and passed it under the loins to the other side, to keep the legs in the right position and give himself more room to operate.

'Keep his head well back,' Jago told the farmer. 'He'll struggle less and be less liable to injure his spine or his lumbar muscles.'

The vet washed the penis of the colt with cold water and carbolic soap, and dried it with a rough towel. He poured into the sheath a little carbolic oil and smeared some of it over the bag or scrotum. With his left hand, he pressed the closest testicle tight into the scrotum and with one quick sweep of his knife made a bold opening. The gland thus exposed, he pulled up. One or two inches up the cord he attached the clam.

Lottie passed Patrick the hot iron. He looked at it and murmured approvingly, 'Dead red-heat,' and took it and quickly cut through the vascular or hinder portion. Then he carefully seared through the spermatic cord or string. The vet handed the iron back to Lottie. By gently opening

and closing the clam he checked to see that the bleeding had stopped. When satisfied it had done so he released the clam, and then applied the same procedure to the second testicle. The colt lay trussed up, on his side. Lottie saw him trembling, eyes wild with pain and anger and fear. He lay utterly still. She could feel him quivering, discerned his potential energy, waiting to be unleashed. It was apparent to her. Perhaps not to everyone.

The vet asked the men to free the ropes from around the colt's neck. He unhitched the shackles around the horse's feet in the same order in which he had tied them but in reverse. When the last hitch was undone they all stepped away. For a moment the animal lay there, unfettered but motionless, as if he did not believe he was free, and this was a trick. If he tried to move, the human beings would laugh and truss him up again. Or as if he desired a moment of repose in which to contemplate his new, emasculated state. Perhaps trying to find some good in it before entering this next, denuded stage of his life. Then he appeared to come to a decision. With an awkward kind of shrugging, stumbling movement, the gelding staggered to his feet and in a moment had cantered away to a far corner of the field.

Patrick Jago undid a button of his coat. He reached in and withdrew his pocket watch, and studied it.

'Twenty minutes,' he said. Lottie had not noticed him checking when they began. He put the watch back in his waistcoat pocket and rebuttoned his surgical coat. 'Let's try and speed it up,' he said, to no one in particular. Perhaps to all.

The farmer shook his head. 'Your old man I seen cut the horses standing up,' he said. 'Applied the twitch to their lip and that give him no more than two or three minutes.' He shook his head. 'Madness. But that's the kind a thing they could do in the old days.'

Lottie wondered if the farmer knew that Patrick Jago's father had died from an equine contagion. She put the iron back in the coals and followed the men to the yard to start in on the next colt.

The castrations proceeded. The fifth horse bled after the operation, but one of the farm workers secured him and walked him about, while another dashed a few pails of cold water under the tail and the bleeding ceased. If it resumed, the vet told the farmer, or if another of the horses were to

haemorrhage, they should plug the opening with tow, well saturated with a tincture of iron and water.

When they had finished, the farmer was in a fine mood. He invited the vet to lunch but Patrick Jago said they had to get on. The farmer told his lad to run to the house and ask his dear wife to bring beer and cake. While Lottie coiled the ropes and gathered the instruments and stowed them in the buggy, the farmer told Patrick that his father had once come to castrate a large old boar pig. ‘His tusks were six inches long, near as dammit,’ he claimed. The pig was tied by a rope, applied around its upper jaw, to an iron rail in the cowshed. But it struggled and the rope broke. ‘I never saw my pig man move so fast,’ the farmer said. ‘Nor your father. Nor myself, for that matter. We spent much a the day sitting up among the beams under the roof. The boar sat below us, champing his jaws, waiting for the first of us to fall off.’

The vet did not say anything but Lottie could not help herself. She came up to the men and asked the farmer what happened then.

‘My dear wife come looking for us eventually,’ he said. ‘She saw what was going on, fetched my gun and shot the pig.’

The farmer’s wife came out with a tray of provisions, which they ate and drank standing up. The fruit cake was thick and moist and buttery. The woman asked after the vet’s wife. He said she was as well as could be expected, and thanked the woman for her concern.

The farmer told his wife that he had related the story of when she had shot that boar. The woman looked at Lottie and rolled her eyes. ‘If I could have been sure this old goat would be the first to fall, I’d have left the pig to it,’ she said. ‘But I couldn’t risk poor Mister Jago being gored.’ She nodded at the memory. ‘That pig was a mean old bastard.’ Then she turned to Patrick Jago and said, ‘What a pretty lad you have. Better keep him away from our maids until he grows whiskers and turns ugly.’

The vet reminded the farmer to keep an eye on the colts. ‘Check the swelling. It will drop down into the sheath, and should disappear inside a week. If the sheath is very big and pendulous you may stab or prick it with the point of a clean, a very clean, penknife, to allow the escape of the collected serum.’ He said that even when the operation had been performed with skill and dexterity, complications could arise. ‘Protrusion of the omentum, or net. Septicaemia or blood poisoning ...’

It seemed to Lottie that the vet was precisely enumerating these dangers less for the farmer's benefit than for her own.

'... an abscess in the scrotum. If any of these occur, you should send for me at once.'

They visited two more farms. They ate lunch at the first. By the end of the afternoon a score of colts of all manner of horse had been castrated. As they rode back on the buggy, the cob ambling along the rough lanes, Lottie realised that though her eyes were open they saw nothing. She could not summon the effort to hold up the weight of her head, and let it lean against Patrick's shoulder. Then her eyes closed.

Back at the surgery, Lottie took the instruments inside and cleaned them while Patrick reversed the cart into its shed and stabled the cob. When he came inside, Lottie pointed out a note Edgar Riddell had left, saying that he had come down with a bilious attack and gone home.

'We are short of certain medicines,' she said. 'I shall make them up.' She had removed her cap and unpinned her hair, which though much shorter than it had once been still fell upon her shoulders.

'My dear Lottie,' Patrick said, 'you are admirably punctilious. By some miracle there is no one waiting in the surgery with their cat or mutt. I shall help you. Two apothecaries together.'

First they replenished the stock of tonics for horses. Patrick prepared a mixture of nitrate of potash, powdered resin, powdered digitalis, sulphate of iron and oil of juniper, while Lottie wrote labels that stated: GIVE ONE DAILY FOR FOUR TO SIX DAYS. Then she made the mixture into a ball with soft soap, while the vet prepared the next.

When they had a dozen balls, divided into two small boxes, Patrick fetched a bottle of sherry and two glasses from his office. He filled the glasses and gave one to Lottie, saying, 'You did very well today. You did as well as any assistant I have taken gelding. You have the makings of a fine surgeon, I am convinced of it.'

Lottie thanked him. She told him that she was confident when he was there, but if he went away she forgot everything he had explained or she had read.

'There is much to take in,' he said. 'But it will stick eventually, do not worry.'

Lottie drank the sherry. It was pleasantly dry. Patrick Jago was in his forties, but he was not old. It was only the fact of his invalid wife that made him sometimes appear so. He was still vigorous, though he'd dealt with the colts today as he did with all animals – with calm deliberation, using force seldom, as a last resort. It occurred to Lottie that perhaps he saw her as the child he and his wife could not have. Of course. It was so obvious. How could she not have considered that before?

It was warm in the dispensary. Lottie removed her jacket. They made embrocation. The vet dissolved two drachms of gum camphor in two ounces of turpentine, to which Lottie added five ounces of colza oil, three drachms of strong liquid ammonia and three of liquor potassae. This mixture she shook well together then sealed the bottle and wrote upon labels, EMBROCATION: APPLY EXTERNALLY.

They made up thirty bottles. Each time, the foul smell of the ammonia was subsumed by the other ingredients, leaving behind only its effect, upon inhalation, of a headiness, an aeration of the nostrils and sinuses.

'Does your right arm pain you?' Patrick asked after a while. 'I fancy you are favouring your left.'

Lottie raised her right arm in the air and rotated it. 'My shoulder,' she said.

'Let me take a look,' the vet suggested.

Lottie unbuttoned her shirt far enough to slide it off her right shoulder. Patrick Jago moved his fingers across her skin, tapping here, prodding there. 'I can see no bruising,' he said. 'But your muscles are extremely tight. Allow me to apply some of the embrocation we have freshly concocted.' He chuckled, pleased with this coincidence.

Lottie sat down and Patrick Jago stood behind her. He poured liniment into the palm of his left hand then rubbed his hands together and applied them to the girl's right shoulder. His hands were warm. He rolled the palm of his right hand over her shoulder and rubbed her skin with his fingers. Lottie closed her eyes. The vet rested his left hand on her neck, either to keep her torso in position or to assist his own balance, she wasn't sure. She understood that, though he was an animal doctor, human beings were mammals, after all, and he could surely picture her musculature and the underlying bones. She tried to do likewise, but the more relaxed she became the harder this was, and a drowsy image of upper parts of her own skeleton mingled with colours on the inside of her eyelids.

She did not notice Patrick further unbutton her shirt, but she realised he was kneading her left shoulder now as well as her right, and her neck also. He invited her to lie face down upon the carpet so that he could massage further down her back. When she stood up from the chair, she found her shirt was loose. It was pulled gently off her from behind and she let go. Then she felt his fingers take hold of the bottom of her vest. She raised her arms and let him lift it up over her head. She lay down.

The light was fading from the room. Patrick lit a single hurricane lamp. He knelt down beside the girl and poured more embrocation, rubbing it gently and deeply into her knotty back. Up and down the vertebrae of her spine. Across her shoulder blades. Down her sides, the skin rippling beneath his strong fingers.

Although the massage was deeply relaxing, it was also uncomfortable lying on the carpet. Lottie could feel its pattern pressing into her left cheek. Fortunately just then Patrick asked her to turn over and Lottie was relieved to do so, and lie on her back. He applied embrocation to her arms, down to her hands and fingers, then up and across her shoulders. His ministrations were so pleasant, she could barely tell which precise part of her skin Patrick's hands massaged. Waves of warmth pulsated and flowed through her body such as she had never felt before. Lottie sensed herself sinking into a delicious sleep. She did not want to, for insensibility would rob her of this pleasure. But it would be such a voluptuous slumber.

Patrick paused, perhaps to rest. Then Lottie realised he had unlaced her boots, and was pulling them off. When he unbuttoned her trousers and slid them down her legs she raised her hips from the floor to make it easier. He massaged her feet, her ankles. She drifted back towards sleep. The muscles of her calves softened. Patrick kneaded her knees, then moved his hands up her thighs. She heard him murmur, 'Oh, Lottie.' His voice seemed to come from far away, and for a moment she wondered whether she had imagined it. But then all of a sudden Lottie was wide awake.

She was no longer floating in a sensuous cocoon but lying almost naked on the carpet of the surgery. Patrick Jago's fingers were now clumsier than they had been. Lottie felt a surge of embarrassment. She must not be here, but she could not move. The vet had lost his air of calm deliberation. He was undoing his own attire. He lay beside her, then on top, his weight upon her, and she struggled. She pushed his face away from hers so that he could

not kiss her and she grabbed his wrists and punched his face and tried to bite him.

Lottie Prideaux thought that she was strong. She thought she was equal to a man but she was not. She fought Patrick Jago but he overcame her. He twisted and throttled her in the throes of his ardour. She thought he might wring her neck like a goose or a swan, and so she yielded.

Afterwards, Patrick was overcome. With remorse. With shame. With love. He said he was so sorry, he said that he had taken advantage of her, it was unforgivable, she would never forgive him, he could not forgive himself ... but he could not help himself, did she not see that? Perhaps she had enjoyed it a little? After all, they were not beasts of the field. They were homo sapiens. He rambled, and raved. He would kill himself. He would leave his wife, he would kill his wife, would Lottie marry him? He was not so old, forty-four. He would send his sister away. Could Lottie see herself as the young wife of a country vet?

She sat up and pulled on her clothes as the vet spoke. Then she rose and, carrying her boots, walked out of the dispensary and through to her lodgings in his mother's house.

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Part Three

THE SCUTTLE 1916–1919

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1

The naval eye surgeon said it was a miracle that the boy's sight had recovered entirely.

'I've already been told 'tis a miracle I'm alive at all,' Leo said.

'Do not be despondent.'

'Two miracles do seem greedy.'

'Cheer up, lad,' the oculist told him, and sent him on his way.

After the Battle of Jutland in 1916, Boy Seaman First Class Leopold Jonas Sercombe, once his miraculous recuperation had been completed, was assigned to the battleship HMS *Benbow*. This ship had led the 4th Division of the Grand Fleet at Jutland, and afterwards was based in Scapa Flow. Even after much of the Fleet removed south to the Firth of Forth, still it was like a city of ships anchored in the Flow, and each battleship was like a floating district or suburb of that aquatic settlement.

Benbow had a crew of a thousand men. They were strangers to Leo Sercombe. Only a few became less so. She had her communities, of stokers, signalmen, engineers. A dozen football teams were put up from the wardroom and the gun room. Two teams would take a pinnace ashore to the Isle of Flotta for a game, the result of which was recorded for the ship's league. Leo did not play but was coerced into accompanying them to run the line. He watched the Orkney gales suck and blow the ball with malevolent humour, making a mockery of players' intentions, but men who

had been cooped up in an ironclad with little distraction beyond cards and bingo for weeks at a time were glad of an escape.

Officers played hockey on the decks, using a piece of wood provided by one of the carpenters. A bucket of these chuckers remained on hand, for many were lost over the side.

Leo and the other boys knew themselves to be the hand-rags. Much of their time at anchor was spent on their knees, on decks that had been hosed with seawater and sprinkled with sand and coarse grit. From six in the morning the boys knelt, barefoot, trousers rolled up over the knees, with their holystone or bible, a block of sandstone, endlessly scrubbing and whitening the wooden boards.

Compared with what civilians at home were getting, according to the men with families, the food they ate was good. Each man and boy received half a pound of meat and a pound of potatoes a day. They had cheese, butter, eggs, salt fish. Haricot and butter beans. There was pea soup at supper, after which the men in their hammocks on the mess-decks would break wind in untuneful concert. Bread, though often dry, was plentiful. There were occasional vegetables, rare deliveries of fruit.

When a petty officer had the idea of seeing what might be done with seagulls, the commander told him that he couldn't have men wandering around his ship firing rifles willy-nilly, but catapults might be used. These were made by the ship's carpenters, and boys were tried out for their aptitude with them. Leo did well and became one of those sent up the mastheads. It was an envied job, preferable to holystoning the decks. It reminded him of being cartridge boy on shoots back home. He carved a monogram of his initials, LJS, on the handle of his catapult. The gulls he hit fell to the decks and were collected by a bag-boy. The cooks skinned and jointed the birds, and made a dish they called oosh, a stew that tasted like fishy chicken, firm-fleshed and not unpleasant.

The boy did not make friends as he had on HMS *Queen Mary*. His mates Willy Burd and Jimmy White had perished in the North Sea, along with all the rest. Leo was one of fewer than twenty survivors. Other hands kept their distance from him. Or perhaps Leo was aloof, though it was not his intention. He knew how fortunate he was to have survived, and so did they. Lucky too that his eyesight seemed unaffected. Others who had been rescued from hours in the oily water were half-blinded for life. He'd reached his full height, too, over six feet, as tall as his father had been. This

was no advantage on board ship, where he was forever bending and stooping through low doorways.

Boys were not allowed alcohol. The daily ration of rum was not issued until a sailor was twenty-one. On his eighteenth birthday, in June 1917, Leo was rated, and was cajoled by other members of his mess to pay a visit to the wet canteen. The drifter picked them up, calling at ships on its way to Flotta. On that bare island stood a single one-roomed shack that sold beer and port wine. The men from *Benbow* drank until the canteen closed at 8.30. Then they stumbled back to the pier, half-carrying their young ordinary seaman, and with much cussing and laughter found their own drifter among the many tied up there. On the long trip back to *Benbow* they had to piss the beer they'd drunk over the side into the waters of the Flow, while leaning against a rail or getting a pal to keep hold of them. Some puked too, Leo among them.

Clambering noisily back aboard, they had to pass the officer of the watch, who on learning the initiatory nature of the excursion let them go, and they lifted the quiet Devon lad into his hammock. In the morning he said nothing, and thereafter declined to repeat the experience.

Leo did not resume his gunnery ambitions. When he entered a turret now his hands began to tremble and his teeth to chatter, and he could not control them. Yet despite his experience in the battle, he did not mind being back in the water. The first time he swam again it was with much trepidation, but as soon as he ducked his head beneath the surface he left the world behind, and any anxiety was washed away by a sense of calm.

He pursued his application to be a ship's diver and took the aptitude test. He was a strong swimmer, and was sent, on a ship bound for the south coast of England, to Portsmouth on a four-week course. The training consisted of physical fitness routines and compressed-air or open-circuit diving, going underwater in a diving suit with a tube delivering oxygen into the sealed helmet. He received instruction on searching ships' bottoms for explosives, as well as practice in the more usual labour of inspecting and repairing of ships' hulls.

Leo returned to the Orkneys by rail, on one of the so-called Jellicoes out of Euston Station. The long double-engined train was packed with soldiers and sailors. It rumbled north for seven hundred miles. Leo found a seat in the corner of a carriage. After an hour he rose to stretch his legs, but the

corridors were full of men and their packs, kitbags, rifles. Sailors carried their hammocks. Men who had made the trip before did not bother to attempt a trek to the toilet but went to the window of their carriage and opened it to relieve themselves.

‘Never stick your head out a Jellicoe train,’ someone said.

The air in the carriage was dense with cigarette smoke. When night fell, men removed their boots and added to the fetid atmosphere the stink of their feet and socks.

The train steamed slowly north, straight through some stations, halting without warning at others. In Crewe, Leo alighted to get a cup of tea, but the queue was long and before he could reach the serving hatch the train began to pull out again and he ran to reboard. In Carlisle, he managed to buy two meat pies from a stall on the platform. Those in the know said the stop in Perth would be longer, for they would wait there for carriages from King’s Cross to join the train. Sure enough, though they reached Perth in the early hours of the morning, there in a temporary wooden building was a Forces canteen run by a Church organisation. Volunteer ladies stood behind a long counter and offered the men tea, coffee or cocoa, sandwiches and cakes, sweets, cigarettes.

Leo returned to the darkness of his carriage and slept. Dawn broke and he watched out of the window as the train rolled across a landscape of bare, undulating hills and moorland that hardly changed for hours.

Eventually they arrived at Thurso, the end of the line. Outside the station was a line of horse-driven waggons. Shouldering his pack, Leo climbed into one. Others hauled their equipment aboard. The waggons took them to Scrabster Harbour, where they boarded a steamer. One of the men who’d been in the same carriage on the train as Leo told him that the Pentland Firth, the narrow body of water which lay between them and the Orkneys, was a confined channel where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean met.

‘It’s like two hosepipes aimed at each other,’ he said. ‘Where they meet’s is where we’s crossin. Permanent turbulence. And the wind don’t help.’

Leo thanked him for the warning. He said nothing more but did not believe that he would have a problem, for though so young he still had as sturdy a pair of sea legs as any old salt on *Benbow*. He noticed many of the soldiers and airmen crowded in the saloon to the fore of the main deck.

No sooner had they left the harbour than the sea rose in huge billows that came broadside on. The ship rolled like a barrel, and the soldiers came

staggering out of the saloon to vomit in the scuppers, and to wallow there. Leo, along with other sailors, had remained on deck, swaying with the movement of the little steamer. But the water roiled and churned and made the boat lurch and twist, buck and bounce. He thought it similar to riding a wild unbroken colt. And that was the last thought he had, before he stumbled to the rails and pushed his way between two men already there and emptied his stomach of what remained of those welcome refreshments they'd been given in Perth. He spent the rest of the brief voyage to Stromness at a boat davit, wedged between a post and the rails.

To maintain his qualifications and his extra diver's pay, Ordinary Seaman Leo Sercombe was required to take a dip each month for a minimum of half an hour. In Scapa Flow the ocean floor was sandy, which meant that visibility was good.

Hermit crabs scuttled along the seabed. On the rocks were sea anemones of different colours, and kelp beds in which fish sheltered. Leo had never really looked at fish before, in their own habitat. Little lump suckers and flat flounders, fish considered to possess a wonderful ugliness, had their own alien beauty, he discovered. When the sun was out, it was amazing what could be seen down there. Langoustines, like small lobsters. Feather duster worms fluttering in the current. Leo caught occasional glimpses of shoals of pollock and saithe, of cod and ling, that turned shyly away when they saw him and darted off, silver bellies shimmering.

Often he forgot the time, and was interrupted in his absorption when he felt a tug on the line above him, and rose slowly, regretfully, back to the surface.

In spring the water warmed and an algal bloom spread across the Flow. If he dived then, Leo found his visibility reduced, but soon jellyfish appeared, comb jellies and moon jellies, neither of which stung humans but both of which fed avidly on the algae. The bloom dissipated. The comb jellies pulsated through the water, refracting light from their miniature swimming hairs or cilia.

Leo took with him a net potato bag from the mess, and searched for periwinkles and scallops. The scallops propelled themselves along the bottom by opening and closing their shells, always moving backwards, so Leo positioned himself behind them, and collected them in the bag, which he afterwards presented to the ship's cook.

The *Benbow* joined the rest of the fleet in regular gunnery exercises and sweeps of the North Sea. Some ships were painted with dazzle camouflage, in the hope of making them more difficult to hit with torpedoes by the German U-boats. They looked like zebra ships. Otherwise the fleet stayed in Scapa Flow.

Beyond organised betting at fleet regattas, gambling on board ship was strictly forbidden in the Royal Navy, yet it flourished. All ships' crews shared certain surreptitious habits, but many also had their own particular vices. HMS *Ajax*, anchored nearby in the Flow in the spring of 1918, was known as a pugilists' ship. Troublemakers were posted to her. Discipline was harsh. Breaches were dealt with by volunteering the wrongdoers in the boxing ring, and large wagers were laid on the outcomes by both officers and men.

On *Benbow*, it was mostly cards and other games. Able Seaman Victor Harris was another diver, whose first words to Leo were, 'Why aren't you sporting a gold ring in your ear, Lofty, like most of you West Country boys?'

Victor Harris gave Leo this nickname and was the only one to use it. Victor told the boy that he had no interest in diving, and like any sensible sailor did not enjoy being in the water, but took the extra pay, for his ambition was to save enough money to buy his own public house back home in Cardiff once his stint in the Navy was over. He'd been robbed blind in this war, he said, for sailors' pay had been fixed, yet prices had gone up and his family was in penury.

'Penury,' Leo repeated. 'Is that a village between Cardiff and Swansea?'

Victor Harris laughed and said that they would get along, and so Leo made his one friend on *Benbow*, a friendship that consisted mostly of ragging each other.

'Our neighbours,' Victor complained, 'who avoided conscription, have jobs in munitions and get massive wages from overtime.'

'What are you moanin about?' Leo asked him. 'You married blokes get your separation allowance, don't you?'

Victor admitted this was true.

'And don't the government give you a load more money just for havin begot children?'

'I get six bob a week for the wife, two bob a week for the first nipper, two bob a week for the second. But the rest?' He scowled. 'I only get a bob

each for them, Lofty.'

Victor Harris had various rackets for making money. One was a small unofficial dhobi or laundry firm. He paid boys to wash men's clothes. A stoker hung the laundry in the engine room when he went on watch, and took them down again, all dry, when he came off.

Victor's chief money-making venture was the game of Crown and Anchor, played on a canvas board he could roll up in a moment. On it were painted six squares, in two rows of three. The top middle square had the symbol of a crown, the one below it an anchor. The outer four squares featured an ace of each suit of cards: clubs, diamonds, hearts, spades. Victor ran the board. He had three dice, each with the six symbols upon its six sides. Players put as much money as they wished on any square. If any of the dice landed with the corresponding symbol uppermost, the player would get their money back, and the same again for any or every die.

Leo acted as Victor Harris's scout or lookout. His friend was a genial huckster who jabbered the entire time the game was played. 'Come along now, lads, here we are again, the Old Firm. Put your money where you like, the choice isn't mine, is it? It's yours. The more you put down, the more you'll pick up, think about it. If you don't speculate you can't accumulate, can you?'

It was incredible that Victor wasn't hoarse after a game. The Welshman reminded Leo of Henery the gypsy hawker, when he'd lived with the Orchard tribe, who'd turned the act of selling into a kind of seductive song.

'Come on over, lads. Come yere in a rowboat and go away in a flagship. That's it, smack it down, lad, on the spade there, the stoker's friend. There's a lot resting on the sausage, now, let's roll the dice and see what we get, shall we?'

Victor paid Leo two bob to keep watch, though to be on the safe side he also paid off ship's corporals. Leo asked Victor how he knew he'd make money when it was all a matter of luck which way the dice fell, unless he had some knack or trick in throwing them.

Victor said it was a simple matter of odds, of course. Of probability. He was astonished to find that Leo did not know what he was talking about.

'One roll of a die, Lofty, you've got a one in six chance of any particular side ending face up, haven't you?' he said. 'I roll three dice, each with six sides. You've got six squares on the board. You can calculate the probability. It's mathematics, see, Lofty? If you only roll the dice a few

times pretty much anything can happen, can't it? But the more games you play, the closer the actual result will be to the probability.'

'Do you know what that is?' Leo asked.

'I do.' The Welshman had an intense look in his dark blue eyes.

'Are you going to tell me?'

Victor Harris took a deep breath and puffed up his chest, in the self-important manner of one about to deliver words of wisdom.

'All I'm saying, Lofty, is this. That couple a shillings I give you – don't play the game with it. You may win a little, but you'll more likely lose a lot.'

'And you say you know how much but won't tell me ... and you expect me to believe you?'

Victor frowned. 'Players take away ninety-two point one per cent of what they put down,' he said. 'So what does that leave me?'

Leo lowered his head, shifting his gaze from Victor's, the better to do the sum. Then he raised it. 'Seven point nine per cent,' he said.

Victor nodded. 'You add up all the little stakes the lads put on. I take seven point nine per cent of them. Or thereabouts.'

'I suppose it adds up,' Leo said.

'Well, Lofty, there's a nice pub in Tiger Bay the wife's got her eye on.'

The hands on board the ships in Scapa Flow shared the morose observation that the Orkneys liked to give a man four seasons in a single day. Most days of the year. The morning could begin wet, clear to a blustery noon, turn warm in an afternoon sun and freeze by nightfall, with hailstones thrown at those on watch. The seemingly ubiquitous wind kept blowing away the prevailing conditions and replacing them with something else. The Gulf Stream, a warm ocean current that travelled from the Gulf of Mexico, brought humid air that kept the winter climate milder than for other regions of the same latitude, yet summers were little warmer.

The Flow was a bleak immensity of water, surrounded by low, barren hills. The spanking wind gave an edge to a long summer's day, and turned into gales in winter. They blew in carrying salt from the sea, and men on deck had to yell to each other to be heard. Though snow was rare, when it did fall the wind blew it into drifts against the gun turrets. The winter days were short and mostly wet. But Leo did not mind the changing weather. With few companions on the ship, he looked outward and felt less

imprisoned by their confinement than most. There were frequent, vivid rainbows, and clear nights when the aurora borealis flooded the sky. The first time Leo saw it he thought that the powers of the heavens had been made manifest. That he would see the Son of Man, coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. But other men on watch told him that the Northern Lights were caused by electrically charged particles from the sun reacting with gases in the atmosphere. A natural phenomenon, no more, no less.

The only weather that irked him was the damp sea fog, or haar, that settled on the Flow, erasing the distinction between ships and sea, enveloping all in a grey cloud. For then he could not watch gannets diving after fish, or shags bobbing on the water.

On one such day, a Sunday afternoon, he sat on the upper deck and Victor Harris sat beside him. Without particularly meaning to, Leo took up smoking while with his friend. He gazed into the fog and wondered if they could be sure they were still in the Flow, since they could not see another ship nor any landmark. Victor said perhaps they had been marooned, and were drifting, and would do so for eternity. He rolled a cigarette and lit it.

‘You do not take Communion,’ Leo said.

Victor glanced at him and said, ‘I do not.’

‘You do not believe in God?’

Victor looked at the boy and smiled. ‘Does it bother God if I do or I don’t? Is He not indifferent? Anyway, He done His work here so long ago, He probably couldn’t find His way back to this earth if He tried.’

Victor blew out smoke and looked skyward and cast about the clouds or beyond them.

‘He’s forgot us, see, Lofty, and when He comes back He’ll find what we made of His garden, won’t He?’

‘You think He’ll come back?’ Leo asked. ‘On the Day of Judgement?’

‘A course He’ll come back. Why else would He create this world if not for the ghoulish pleasure of seeing what a mess man’s made of it? That’s His scheme, is the way I see it. He travels through the heavens making worlds, making men, or beings like ’em.’

Leo pondered this idea. ‘How will we know when He’s come back?’

Victor did not answer for a while. He closed his eyes and smoked. Perhaps he was trying to work out how to make the sublime explicable to this boy. When he opened his eyes, he grinned. ‘That’s exactly what I was

wondering, Lofty,' he said. 'How will we know? In what form might God appear?'

Leo said, 'When Christ was risen, his own disciples did not recognise him. Two of them met him on the road to Emmaus. They told him all about Jesus of Nazareth, a great prophet, who had been condemned to death and crucified. They thought he must be the only visitor to Jerusalem who did not know of all the things that had happened in these days. They presumed he were just some stranger. He spoke to them then of the prophecies concerning himself, he interpreted the scriptures to them, but still they did not know him. Only after they reached Emmaus and invited him to stay with them, when they sat at table, he took the bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them, only then was their eyes opened and they recognised him.'

Victor nodded. He had not known his young friend to be so talkative before, nor their conversation so solemn.

'They knew this was their Christ, the son of God, and at that very moment of their understanding what did He do? He vanished out of their sight.'

Victor smiled. 'You was listening pretty closely to them Bible readings, Lofty, weren't you now?'

'I always wondered about that story,' Leo told him. 'How could two of his own disciples not recognise the risen Jesus? They'd seen him not three days before.'

'Perhaps,' said Victor, 'even though there he was, right in front of them, because their brains could not believe in a dead man being resurrected, so their eyes could not see it.'

'Yes,' Leo said. 'That is possible. But I do not think so, for Mary Magdalene and the other women had already informed them of the empty tomb. And Jesus himself had foretold, in Galilee, that he would be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. No.' Leo shook his head. 'They was prepared for his appearance before them. I believe they did not recognise him because he had changed his form.'

'He was in a different body?'

'Yes.'

'That is possible, I suppose,' Victor said. 'That is possible.'

‘But if they could not recognise him, their companion, how can we hope to recognise God Himself, whom we have never seen after he abandoned us for a thousand years?’

‘A hundred thousand, more like,’ Victor said.

They watched the sea mist drifting before them. Other men strolled across the deck. Victor stubbed out his cigarette.

‘Back in nineteen hundred and four,’ he said, ‘on my first long voyage, we rounded Cape Horn and came up into the Pacific. Lofty, you think the North Sea’s big, lad, the Pacific is vast beyond imagining.’ He spread his arms out wide to help the boy understand how immense was this vacuity. ‘You look and see nothing in any direction, nothing, for hour after empty hour. Back then I didn’t just think, “God has left the world,” I thought, “He’s never been here in the first place.”’

‘How then,’ Leo asked, ‘did the world come into being?’

Victor shrugged. ‘They say God was the word and the word was God but who spoke it if not man? I do not know, Leo, but the ocean was vast and empty and I thought the world was too. I mean that there were men and trees and mountains, and trains and chimneys, and chairs and spoons, I could go on, but empty of meaning. You catch my drift? Devoid of intent. Of reason. I was on lookout one day and there I was, gazing out at this empty ocean, dwelling on such matters ... it’s what you do, isn’t it? Wondering, trying to figure out this world ... when suddenly I saw something.’

Victor fanned his fingers and pressed his hand against his forehead, to shield his eyes from the sun while concentrating on what he had seen.

‘It was in the water, beneath the surface but not far down. It come up to the ship and then past, right close.’ Victor ceased speaking, engrossed in the memory for a moment beyond the recounting of it. ‘A whale,’ he said. ‘A huge one, the first I’d ever seen. It glided past us like ... I don’t know, a fleeting vision, almost beyond our comprehension but available to us if only we kept our eyes open. And just because I was on lookout I saw it, alone out of six hundred men on board.’ He chuckled. ‘I don’t know if the whale saw me. We passed each other and then it was gone but I saw it, and I thought perhaps there were more. If we are alert, and lucky, we might see them, we might not.’

‘You took the whale to be a sign from God?’ Leo asked.

Victor frowned. ‘That’s the problem with you boys weaned on the readings a scripture. You think there’s answers, and they will provide clarity.’

‘So it was not a sign from God?’

‘It was something that happened,’ Victor said. ‘And it made me consider wider possibilities than I had before. It was a spur to my mind. Perhaps it come from my mind.’ He laughed again. ‘Who knows what we are capable of, eh, Lofty?’

‘Who knows indeed?’ Leo agreed. ‘We may be an old species nearin the end a days, or we may be a young species with heaven on earth ahead of us.’

Victor nodded. He began to roll himself another cigarette. ‘Who can say?’

They sat and gazed out into the Flow. The sky was brightening, the mist lifting. A cormorant flew out of the mist and was just as quickly swallowed up by it again. Victor lit his cigarette.

Twice a week, dances were held on the upper deck of *Benbow*. The band played for an hour, from 6 p.m. The men danced in pairs, one taking the woman’s part. They did the valeta, the two-step, lancers. Many men did not dance but stood and watched. On occasion Leo was one such. He listened silently as the other spectators made ribald observations, to cover their confusion.

*

As a rest and a change from the fleet routine, ships were sent in turn to anchor for a few days off the north shore of the Flow. Normal duties were performed in the morning, but at noon a make and mend was granted. Then men could sail or fish or visit the shops in Kirkwall or otherwise do as they pleased.

Boats ferried them to the shore. Leo did not join his fellows but walked off alone. He headed inland along lanes that wound round bleak farms in the open, rolling landscape. There were few trees except for odd specimens around some of the settlements. Coarse-haired little sheep and squat cattle and small, round-bellied ponies inhabited the wind-ridden pastures. There was little cereal grown that he could see.

When he spotted, in a field to his right-hand side, a boy on a white pony coming towards him, it seemed for a moment like some uncanny vision, that Leo was seeing himself as he once was, cantering across the grass out of the past. The sun shone but the breeze was cool, yet the boy wore no shirt. He rode bareback, jouncing off the horse's spine. As he neared the wall between the field and the lane, the boy turned the young horse and rode along in a wide curve around the field, jumping the horse over fences each made from two long rough poles crossed over, like a flattened letter X.

The horse was a white filly. She had long legs, unlike the other, sturdy ponies Leo had noticed on the island. She did not look strong enough to pull a cart. The slight boy was about as much weight as she looked able to carry. Maybe a saddle as well would have been too much. She was spindly, but fast. The boy hung on as he disappeared over the rising ground.

When they reappeared, Leo had climbed the wall and jumped down into the field and was waiting for them. He waved the boy over. The rider slowed the filly and walked her warily over to the tall young sailor.

'What are ye doin in our field?' he asked.

'That there's a fine animal,' Leo said.

The boy halted the pony a yard or two away. 'Aye,' he said, in a voice as yet unbroken. He had red hair and pale skin. He turned the horse. Should this stranger make an untoward move, he could gallop away.

'You ride her well,' Leo said. He judged the boy to be eleven or twelve years old. He did not speak or otherwise respond to the compliment but sat upon the white filly, waiting to be released.

'The race is on next week,' the boy said, 'and I plan to win.'

Leo asked what race this was. The boy could not believe the seaman had not heard of it and told him it was the highlight of the annual county show. Leo asked if only lads rode. The red-headed boy said men of any age could but the smaller they were, the faster, so riders were mostly young. There was one dwarfish old man who raced every year. He'd won two or three times long ago, but he must be in his thirties now and in the boy's opinion would never win again. 'It's my turn now,' he said.

Leo could not tell how deep the boy's bravado went. Was it sincere or merely superficial?

'Do you wish to ride faster?' he asked.

The boy gazed blankly back at him. Perhaps the question was too difficult. Then he nodded.

Leo stepped forward slowly. He spoke to the horse, and stroked her neck. Then he looked up at the Orcadian boy and said, ‘You’re holdin her back. You wants to sit higher up, on her withers. She’ll fly as swift as a winged beast, if you can bear it. Do you reckon you can?’

The boy had been gazing at Leo with his blank expression. Now he smiled. ‘Aye.’

‘My name’s Leo Sercombe,’ he said, raising his hand to shake the boy’s, who said that he was called Jamie Watt.

And so Leo had the boy sprint the filly, and each time encouraged him to ride a little forward, as he himself had once done. He showed him how to use his knees, and to loosen the reins. He explained that these were not principles of equitation but skills he himself had discovered by chance.

The Orcadian boy galloped the horse across the field and came back beaming. ‘It’s brilliant,’ Jamie said. ‘She’s so speedy, I can hardly hold on to her.’

When it came to the jumps, however, Jamie Watt leaned right back, his spine almost touching that of the horse. The boy hung on to the filly’s mouth.

‘All your weight’s over the pony’s loins,’ Leo told him. ‘You’re interferin with her liftin and with her spread, and makin it more difficult for her to get her quarters over. And then when she lands she wants to use the muscles of her loins to push off again. You needs to lean forward.’

Once Jamie put this novel instruction into practice, Leo could see that the horse was appreciative and the boy could feel it too. He began to lean forward before he made his mount accelerate for the last strides of their approach to a fence. Leo told him that he should aim to time his own movements in exact conformity to those of the horse, but until this stage of perfection was reached it would be better to be a little in advance of the horse than to be left behind. After a couple of hours the filly began to tire and Leo brought the lesson to an end, despite the boy’s protests.

‘She won’t learn if her’s weary,’ Leo told him. ‘She’ll revert to old habits.’

‘I thought it was me who was doing things different,’ Jamie said.

Leo smiled and said the horse was as much a pupil as the boy was, if a little smarter. Jamie asked the seaman to hold the reins while he pulled on a single upper garment over his bare torso, a thick blue woollen pullover.

Leo said that to understand a horse you had to appreciate how its senses differed from those of man. The boy said surely a horse had five senses just like us.

Leo nodded. ‘They do. Your filly sees but she is colour blind.’ He turned and with a sweep of his arm indicated the wide vista before them. ‘She does not see this landscape as we do. Green fields, blue sky, grey water. All is grey to her, a patchwork, a mosaic of grey. Some parts darker, others lighter. If I stood in the field and my clothes were of the same shade as the grass, she would not see me unless I moved.’

The boy listened intently. ‘Can they all see the same, then?’ he asked. Were horses not like men, unique?

Leo said that naturally each horse was different. Yet it was useful to know the strong and weak points common to all or most members of a species. Many horses suffered from astigmatism to a greater or lesser extent, for neither the corneas nor the lenses of their eyes were shaped with a true curvature. ‘She can hear much better than we can, though. Like a dog, there are many sounds she can hear that we cannot. The officer on my last ship told me that his hunters would sometimes get all excited in their stables for no reason anyone could see. They neighed, broke out in a lather of sweat, and refused to settle until night fell. Why? Because they’d heard the sound of a horn and the calls of the hounds, from miles away.’

The boy nodded, to show he was listening but also to encourage Leo to speak more.

‘And, of course, a horse can detect vibrations in the ground in a way we no longer can, if us ever could.’ He gestured in the direction of the road down which he had come. ‘Another horse walks along that road. Your filly is standing still on her four feet. Her front limb bones, the radius and ulna, the knee bones, canons and pasterns, are locked. So vibrations rise through them, are carried to the skull, and register in the ear.’

‘Will you come again?’ Jamie Watt asked.

Leo said that he would like to but could not. He had to rejoin his ship and would not get another shore leave for some time. He wished the boy good fortune in the forthcoming race. Leo turned and walked away towards the road, but the boy called after him, ‘Sir.’

Leo turned back and Jamie Watt said, ‘What’s a horseman doing in the Royal Navy?’

‘That’s a good question,’ Leo said. ‘A very good question.’ He turned away again and waved goodbye to the boy behind him.

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2

The Battle of Jutland was seen as a failure by the civilian population, who had been hoping for another Trafalgar. The Royal Navy lost more ships and many more men than the Germans did. But after the battle, the German High Seas Fleet did not emerge from their base at Wilhelmshaven, to brave engaging again with the British Grand Fleet on open water. As the war drew to a close, Jutland was viewed in a new, more positive light.

Under the terms of the Armistice of 11 November 1918, the German High Seas Fleet was disarmed. At 8 a.m. on 21 November, this convoy of six mighty battlecruisers, ten battleships, eight light cruisers and fifty destroyers, or torpedo boats, seventy-four ships in total, was met at a rendezvous point off the Isle of May. The British Grand Fleet, comprising over two hundred and fifty Royal Navy ships, went out in two lines. When they met the German Fleet, the British ships turned about one hundred and eighty degrees and escorted their surrendered enemy into the Firth of Forth.

On HMS *Benbow*, the crew were allowed up on deck one at a time from their action stations. Leo watched the ships cover the Forth, before and aft, as far as the eye could see, miles of them upon the grey waters. This was the fleet they had met two and a half years earlier, whose guns had killed his friends and comrades. Now they were brought into captivity.

That night the German flags were hauled down. Over the following days the ships were taken north, in units, and passed through the Pentland Skerries and the triple boom defences, into Scapa Flow. There they were

moored in pairs to large buoys, the big ships in the west of the Flow, around Cava Island, destroyers south, in Gutter Sound. British boats were moored at strategic points. A battle squadron that included HMS *Benbow* was moored on the east side of the Flow.

The Germans were not permitted to go ashore, nor to visit each other's ships. All their food and other supplies were sent from Germany. These were unloaded to the *Seydlitz*, largest of their battlecruisers. A single rating was taken from each German ship by a British drifter to the *Seydlitz* to draw rations.

The twenty thousand men who had brought the fleet from Wilhelmshaven were gradually reduced to fewer than five thousand, the remainder sent back to Germany on the empty supply ships. The battleships and their skeleton crews remained interned, while the terms of a peace treaty were being negotiated at Versailles.

Fraternisation was forbidden. But when Leo's turn for guard duty came, on one of the armed trawlers, he discovered that there was much contact between the internees and the crews of the Royal Navy drifters that ferried the German doctors, pursers and chaplains to and fro. A black market arose supplying the German sailors with tobacco, soap and meat, in return for medals and items of uniform and small fittings off the ships themselves.

He discovered how monotonous the Germans' diet was. Their home country, from where it was sent, was under blockade. Their food consisted mainly of turnips. So the German sailors fished. Unlike their British counterparts they did so mainly at night, using lamps to lure swarms of small fish which they scooped out in makeshift nets. Many of the men had bad teeth but there was no dentist. The worst sufferers were put on the steam ship home. Scurvy became widespread, as in a navy from an earlier age.

In the mornings, the German sailors maintained and cleaned their ships, with generally poor discipline. Leo learned that engine maintenance was rarely carried out properly. The water for the boilers turned salty. In the afternoons, Sailors' Councils on some ships arranged lessons, in languages, geography and history, mathematics. As the weather improved, they whiled away the hours on deck. They could be heard playing music or singing. Alcohol somehow remained in plentiful supply. Leo sometimes saw men chasing each other round the funnels and masts. It was hard to tell from a

distance whether they were involved in violence, or passion, or simply playing a game of tag.

'I don't know who to feel more sorry for,' Victor Harris said. 'Them Huns, or us here keeping an eye on them.'

Leo had been diving from a small pinnace, Victor held his breathing tube and rope line. Leo pulled off his diving suit. 'What are you complaining about?' he demanded. 'You've less than a month left.'

His friend grinned. 'You can picture me, can you, pulling pints behind the bar?'

Leo gestured towards the great ships across the Flow. 'I feel sorry for their commander,' he said.

'They'll be gone within the month too, one way or another.'

'I've heard Sir Sydney don't afford him the courtesy of official visits. His mail is censored. The Admiralty's decent enough to give him a copy of *The Times* only four days out a date.'

Victor shrugged. 'I shouldn't reckon anyone up here gets a newspaper quicker than that.'

Leo ignored the Welshman. 'He must know the peace terms have been delivered,' he said. 'If his government accepts them, we'll take his ships.'

'I don't know, I reckon the Frogs'll bag a few.'

'And if they don't accept, we'll take the ships anyway, and if the unarmed sailors resist, we'll shoot them. Either way, he's going to be handin over his fleet in the next day or two.'

Victor Harris coiled the rope and placed it in a canvas bag. 'That's war, Lofty. We won, they lost.'

Leo shook his head. 'With the sense of honour they Germans have, I wouldn't be surprised if he kills himself before he ever hands over his fleet.'

3

Midsummer's Day, Saturday 21 June 1919. Leo and Victor Harris were on guard duty aboard *Flying Kestrel*, a big tender. The boat had been brought up to the Orkneys from Liverpool under contract to the Admiralty as a water supply and general duties vessel for the internment. The surrendered German Fleet had been anchored in Scapa Flow for seven months. Captain Davies explained to the two seamen that today as on most days his boat's task was to carry water to the Germans from the Pump Well in Stromness. It took him eight days to make a complete circuit of the seventy-four vessels in the German Fleet.

'Unlike Royal Navy vessels, they're not equipped with desalination plants,' he said. 'To distil drinking water from seawater. Do you know why?'

Leo suggested Germans did not drink water but only beer. Victor Harris laughed and declared Leo's answer a good one, but he knew full well that British sailors liked their beer just as much as Germans. Captain Davies said that whereas a Royal Navy ship was built for her men to live in, serving as their home on long voyages around the Empire, German sailors had no Empire and only sailed on short forays. They did not sleep on board and ate only snacks, sleeping and dining in barracks on shore.

Flying Kestrel crossed the channel between Stromness and Hoy and headed down through the boom gates at Houton, and on south across the Flow. The sun was shining and there was only a light breeze. The British

Fleet was almost entirely absent today, out on exercise somewhere in the North Sea.

Captain Davies steered the tender at a leisurely pace, to the east of the small Island of Cava. Soon they began to pass between the lines of the great battleships and battlecruisers. One ship was taking on supplies from a British drifter moored alongside. They saw German sailors on the decks of the warships towering above them. Some of the sailors thumbed their noses at the crew of the tender. Victor said he wished Leo had brought his catapult, but Captain Davies said that perhaps they would do the same if they were prisoners-of-war, being gawped at by the enemy.

‘We should feel sorry for those poor fellows,’ he said, ‘who can no more help the misfortune of having been born German than we can claim credit for the privilege of being British.’

The *Flying Kestrel* continued on its course through the German Fleet, towards the destroyers to be supplied that day. Captain Davies told the two seamen that he liked to observe goings-on in the Flow. He knew most of the German ships and called out the names, the tonnage and the gun power of each of them as they passed. ‘SMS *Bayern* there, with her sister ship SMS *Baden* – the largest in the German Imperial Navy. Thirty-two thousand tons. Eight fifteen-inch guns in those four turrets.’ Victor Harris rolled his eyes, but Leo listened to the skipper. SMS ‘*Markgraf*. Twenty-five thousand tons. Ten twelve-inch guns in five turrets.’

They carried on south between the Islands of Rysa and Fara, to the destroyers, or torpedo boats, as the captain said they were called by the enemy. Some of the German sailors were fishing from the decks, improvising wooden sticks or staves for rods and string for lines such as children use. The destroyers were low enough in the water for the men to do this. The clothes they wore were filthy, and hardly looked like uniforms any more. Many sported impressive moustaches. One man sat atop a gun turret playing a mouth organ. They passed close enough to hear it, faintly, above the noise of the *Kestrel* ’s engines. Captain Davies said he was like a siren, perhaps luring them.

When they reached Lyness, Captain Davies said that the destroyers ahead of them constituted the final flotilla, and he ordered his crew to make ready the water tanks. Victor leaned his Lee Enfield .303 rifle against the wall of

the bridge and unwrapped the sandwiches, oatcakes, cheese and dried fish they'd been given.

'Sun shining, decent grub,' he said to Leo. 'The rest of our lot's out there on another exercise. We done all right today, Lofty.'

The *Flying Kestrel* chugged along between the destroyers.

'They've all stopped fishing,' Leo noted. 'Must a got a catch and gone to fry it.'

'They'll have caught nothing with that tackle,' Victor told him.

The captain said he'd often seen them fishing, and they caught all sorts.

They approached the last destroyers, anchored off the tiny Island of Rysa, and Captain Davies steered to the west of Cava, into the channel between that island and Hoy. Victor Harris pointed at the final destroyer. 'Look!' he exclaimed. 'What a bloody cheek. The Germans are flying their ensigns!'

Leo looked up. Ships were hoisting a white flag with a black cross. In its upper-left quarter was the marine jack, Captain Davies said, and he had not seen it before. In the middle of the cross was another shape but as the flag was billowing in the breeze they could not make out what it was.

'That's the eagle,' Victor said. 'The German bloody eagle!'

Victor said they should go up close and find out what the hell was going on, but Captain Davies said that he wasn't going to risk his old boat in any ruckus, with just two armed sailors carrying a single rifle each. He ordered the boat to continue past the destroyer and head out into the Flow.

They came towards a huge ship. 'The *Seydlitz*,' the captain said. 'Look at her armour. Cemented and nickel steel. We hit her twenty-one times at Jutland and she never went down.'

As they watched, a lifeboat was lowered to the water. Men embarked and pushed off. Further along sailors threw a raft down. Some jumped over the side and plummeted into the water, then scrambled to the raft.

'What do the krauts think they are doing?' Victor asked.

Captain Davies was mute. Leo said, 'They look like they're escaping.' As they passed the battlecruiser she seemed to shudder. Then she shuddered again. It was as if this huge ship was feeling the cold and shivering. Then one of *Flying Kestrel*'s crew yelled, 'Jesus Christ! She's turning turtle,' and the men watched open-mouthed as the *Seydlitz* toppled over onto her side. Water came streaming out of the seacocks.

The next ship's stern rose slowly into the air, so that the bows sank first and the rest of the hull slid smoothly into the water, as if the ship were

performing an exemplary dive.

Captain Davies ordered *Flying Kestrel* to slacken speed. They passed a battleship whose quarterdeck was awash. They watched her gradually lift her bows out of the water, roll over, and disappear beneath the surface, leaving nothing but a vast patch of bubbling foam.

‘What the bloody hell’s going on?’ Victor Harris asked.

‘They’re sinking,’ Captain Davies said. ‘They’re scuttling their own damned ships.’

German sailors were abandoning their crafts, dragging kit and throwing it into lifeboats. The sea became littered with boats and hammocks, lifebelts and chests, spars and items of clothing. Debris from the scuttled ships. And in amongst it, hundreds of men. Some floated, others made for the nearest shore. Those who could, hauled themselves onto rafts.

A couple of crew members of *Flying Kestrel* who were not currently needed stood spellbound on the deck. A lifeboat drifted by full of Germans cheerfully singing.

They passed a ship and heard issue from it loud single strokes of her bell. Leo knew this to mean ‘Abandon Ship’. What was happening in front of him was awesome. It was impossible to believe that the Germans were doing it themselves, to their own fleet. It made no sense. The ship wobbled, then it upended and plunged down quickly, enveloped in clouds of steam.

The great ships were leviathans. They seemed to have altered their constitution, steel made flesh, to have come alive, like whales, vast grey creatures saying farewell to the upper air and leaving the world of men to sink into the deeps of the ocean.

The bulk of the British Fleet was out on its exercise, but the Flow came alive now with drifters and trawlers, picket boats, pinnaces and ships’ tenders. Some began picking German sailors out of the water. Others tried to reach a ship before its sailors had left it and force them to curtail the scuttle. Shots could be heard.

From a ship they passed came sullen rumblings, and the crashing of chains, then its great hull lurched giddily over and slid with a horrible sucking and gurgling sound under the water. Weird and terrible noises the ship made in its death throes. The proud vessel slowly disappeared with a long-drawn-out sigh. On the surface all that remained was a whirlpool dotted with dark objects swirling round and round. These were drawn inwards until they too sank from sight. Captain Davies yelled orders to his

crew, afraid perhaps that the *Kestrel* would be caught in the churning turbulence. The whirlpool subsided, then oil rose to the surface, a black stain hugely spreading, as if the lifeblood of some ocean monster were oozing up from the seabed.

Leo watched a British drifter towing a German lifeboat full of sailors. Suddenly one of them stood up in the bow of the boat. He had a knife in his hand. He leaned forward and tried to cut the tow rope. A Royal Marine in the drifter raised his rifle. They saw a puff of smoke and the German drop his knife. Then they heard the crack of the rifle, and watched the sailor fall back into the boat. The other men stood up unsteadily with their arms in the air.

There were shots from on shore as soldiers and Marines repelled boats seeking to land on Hoy, but on the Island of Cava many sailors succeeded in landing. Victor took up a pair of binoculars and reported what he saw. At one cove they could see a boat floating in the shallows, full of German sailors, and people standing guard on the beach. Victor said they were women armed with pitchforks and other menacing implements.

A British trawler came close and an officer raised a megaphone to his mouth and yelled that the German Fleet was sinking.

‘You don’t say,’ Captain Davies shouted back.

The officer called out for the *Flying Kestrel* to make for the *Victorios*, a pre-dreadnought battleship that had suffered much damage and was now the dockyard or repair ship for the Royal Navy in Scapa Flow. Captain Davies seemed to know where the *Victorios* was berthed.

As they came slowly around Cava they could see the bulk of the German Fleet. Vessels listed to port or starboard. Some heeled over and plunged headlong, their sterns lifted high out of the water and pointing skywards. One huge ship sank squarely, rapidly settling down in the ocean, while out of the vents rushed steam and oil and air with a terrible roaring hiss, and vast clouds of white vapour rolled up from the sides. Then it settled, with its masts and funnels still showing, a battlecruiser doing an imitation of a U-boat.

The *Flying Kestrel* went alongside the *Victorios*, sheltering close to its hull. After a while a trawler came up bearing captains and officers of the German ships. Marines in the trawler held their rifles pointed at the officers, who climbed aboard, lugging their own bags.

After some while the *Kestrel* was permitted to return to Stromness. As they left, they saw the first British destroyers, doubtless telegraphed with news of what was happening, speeding back into the Flow, throwing up huge bow-waves as they came.

The last German ship the *Flying Kestrel* passed was the first they'd seen on the way out, SMS *Baden*. For some reason her crew did not seem to have begun the scuttling process. They could see no one on board. Perhaps they had abandoned their ship but forgotten to sink her first. Then when Leo looked back at the *Baden*, he saw a solitary German sailor in a dirty white summer uniform, dancing a hornpipe on a gun turret. He watched him dancing alone, to no tune he could hear. To the east in the distance he could just make out HMS *Benbow* in the midst of the British ships.

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Part Four

MOTHER AND CHILD 1919

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1

The tall, rangy young man caught the first train out from Taunton. At Wiveliscombe Station, milk churns and baskets of produce were stacked at the section of the platform where the goods van had come to a halt. The young man climbed down from the carriage onto the platform. A few others alighted likewise. Travellers waited to board. He did not wish to be recognised, and tried to pull his seaman's cap down over his eyes, though it had no peak. He put up the collars of his blue woollen coat. One porter unloaded post and parcels and newspapers. The other stacked boxes of provisions on his trolley. A carter in a railwayman's uniform stood beside his horse.

Leo walked under the arch past the ticket office and out from the station, up the hill northward. He strolled along a familiar lane. There was no hurry. Leaves were turning on the trees. The seasons on the ocean bore little relation to those on land. He had all but forgotten the odours of autumn that entered his nostrils. Wet rotting plants decomposing into rich dark soil, distant bonfires, fungi erupting, sweet fruit decaying. They mixed into a scent that he inhaled deeply. He took a path across a field. Mist rose like smoke from the wet grass.

The war was over but Leo had signed up shortly before hostilities commenced. He was now merely on leave. Other hands with nowhere in particular to go spent their leave in riotous debauch, much of it insensible. The less they could remember, the more acclaim they received upon their

return to ship. It was the British way, almost a patriotic duty. Leo might have joined them if a friend had invited or persuaded him, but since Victor Harris had left the Navy and returned to Cardiff he had none. He had become a loner on board, a ghost among men.

There were those among the survivors of the ships lost at Jutland who believed they must have died there and were ensconced now in some parodic afterlife, for who could have survived that conflagration? There was humour in this world, after all. Might not God have allowed Himself some share of it? Such a thing would surely amuse Him, to have the dead believe they yet lived, a miraculous elect.

A light rain was falling. The few people Leo saw had lowered their gaze, were unlikely to see the tall lean figure ambling northward. He entered a wood and remembered how he had once got lost here when sent on an errand, had ridden round in circles and feared that he was spellbound and would never get out. The drizzle ceased. Leo disturbed a cock pheasant out of undergrowth beside the track. He watched it rise, panicking, and fly noisily away. He could have brought it down with a catapult. A breeze came up through the wood. The sun shone. Wind shook the rain from the trees.

Leo did not wish to enter the estate by the customary route. Instead he skirted the village in a wide arc to the east then cut back and walked into the scrubland of the old quarries. By the time he reached his destination it was almost noon. The great pool, where he had learned and loved to swim as a boy, was as he remembered it. He sat upon the grey slab of rock where he and Lottie Prideaux had once picnicked, and looked upon the black water and across the pool to the granite cliff on the far side. The sun warmed the autumn morning. Leo unbuttoned his coat and laid it out to dry. He lay back some feet away and closed his eyes and soon slept.

When the young man woke he shielded his eyes from the sun and sat up. He looked out and saw, on a ledge of the cliff across the pool, a few feet above the water, a heron. It stood on spindly legs, wings folded. Leo pondered the bird. He could not tell whether it was gazing back at him, or at the water, or merely lost in contemplation of something other. Had it been watching over him while he slept? Perhaps herons completed a holy trinity of sentinels, along with horses and trees, put on the earth for this purpose. The bird bent its wiry knees and took off from the rock ledge, and with a stately flapping of its wings flew off towards the sun.

The young man rose from the slab. He picked up his coat and tossed it over his left shoulder and walked around the edge of the pool to the track leading away. It became a winding metalled lane through the old quarries. Then he entered the wood known to all as the Bluebell Wood. Of course they only flowered in spring. Now the leaves from oak and ash, hazel, beech, were falling, the compost of the wood, beneath which the bulbs lay dormant. In six months' time they would release that blue rhapsody of colour and the faint subtle sweet fragrance.

Leo walked past cows grazing on tired pasture and down into the valley. He followed the stream lined with willows that had been pollarded since he last walked here and now resembled the heads of huge medieval weapons – cudgels, bludgeons – whose handles giants had thrust into the soft earth.

He walked up onto the gallops. This was the spot he feared being spotted, on the open terrain where Herb Shattock's lads exercised the master's hunters. To his relief there was no one riding there now. Leo walked on, past the hillocks called the Burial Mounds, and through empty pasture, then along a track between the burnt stubble of wheat fields on Home Farm. Soon ploughmen would turn the earth over, furrow by endless patient furrow.

Leo entered the small spinney Lottie had called 'the jungle'. This was where he had waited for her, with the skeleton of a hawk his brother Sid had given him. He walked stealthily between the trees. Ahead lay the terraced lawns. Beyond them the big house, which came into partial view as he approached.

What he needed was a plan but he had none. Instead he stood well hidden and looked up across the empty lawns at the quiet house. The garden seemed altered to him. There was a pond he could not remember being there before. Over on one side near the walled kitchen garden stood an elegant wooden bench beneath a bower across which some climbing plant had been trained. On the far side of this was a gap in the hornbeam hedge that he could not explain. Perhaps these things had always been there and he had not noticed. Why would he? He was interested in other things.

Why was he standing here? He had come because he wished Lottie to know that he had not forgotten her, or his pledge to return. But how? Perhaps he should go to Head Keeper Aaron Budgell's cottage, to see if Sid still lodged there or at least to find out where he now lived, and to give his brother a message for her. Or else to the stables, to converse with Herb

Shattock. Leo understood that none of these people might be working here now or even still living. Yet he preferred to imagine nothing had changed.

His attention was drawn to movement up at the house. A glazed door opened and a young woman emerged. She walked across the terrace in his exact direction. Leo stopped breathing. He eased back behind the nearest tree. It was her. She was taller, a little fuller in the figure, but unmistakably Lottie. She wore a black skirt and white shirt; her brown hair was longer and tumbled about her shoulders.

Had she seen him, perhaps, from a window up in the attic? While he was peering in from the wood, was Lottie peering out from the house? She had seen him and was striding towards him. He could feel his heartbeat hammering in his chest.

Then she turned, gestured and perhaps said something to someone still inside. Out of the door came a small child. A boy. He toddled towards Lottie. She did not wait for him but stepped backwards off the terrace and retreated further across the lawn. The boy kept coming towards her. Even from this distance Leo could tell that the child was laughing. He gazed, rapt, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Halfway across the upper lawn, Lottie stopped and bent and waited for the child to reach her. She opened her arms and scooped him up and, holding him close to her, spun round and round. The boy hung on tight, his arms around her neck, spinning. Eventually she stopped, and somewhat clumsily set him back upon the grass. Lottie staggered a little. The boy reeled drunkenly and sat down, perplexed. Immediately he struggled to his feet again and tried to walk, but tottered and collapsed once more.

Lottie had surely regained her balance but now she too lost her bearings. With theatrical exaggeration the young woman lurched one way, froze, tripped awkwardly back the other. Leo could just hear the child's high-pitched laughter. He could not help smiling himself, so fine was the performance. Lottie completed it with a flourish, falling gracefully a few feet from the boy. For a moment she lay prostrate, still, as if dead. The boy watched her. He stopped smiling. He seemed to be speaking to her. When she did not respond, he crawled over to her. Just as he reached her Lottie burst awake and grabbed him, and rolled over with him. When they stopped rolling it was hard to tell whether Lottie was tickling the child or wrestling with him, but he was certainly giggling again.

Leo watched her with the boy, as he had once watched her ride, suppling the doomed blue roan, Embarr. He had understood then, observing her, how fine a rider Lottie was, what understanding of horses she possessed. He understood now or believed he did something of what kind of mother she was. He had adored his own mother Ruth but she had never played with him in this manner. She'd had no time.

Mother and child rose from the grass. Holding his hand, Lottie led the boy to the pond on the lower lawn. Now as they came closer Leo could hear her talking to her son. He could not quite make out the words but he listened to the recognisable cadence of her voice. Imperious, familiar, undissembling. He thought she spoke to the boy as she would to anyone, or to a horse. Or to himself.

There was a low brick wall around the pond. The boy stepped up onto it. Lottie grasped his hand as he walked along the wall. She traversed a wider radius, around the outside, like a horse turning a wheel. Perhaps parenthood demanded such sacrifice. A parent had elected to become, to some extent at least, a beast of burden.

Leo could not understand. He'd believed his destiny lay with her but how could that be? Must he simply become her stable lad? Her groom? He watched the boy stepping carelessly along the wall, secure in the knowledge that if he slipped he would not fall but be saved by his mother. He seemed to Leo for a moment to be not a child but a goblin, mocking him. What had he thought? That he would be more to Lottie than a servant? It was absurd. Yet he was too proud to settle for less.

Leo stepped slowly backwards, deeper into the shadows of the wood. Lottie and the boy circled the pond. Then she looked up and Leo stood stock still. How pretty she was. A lovely woman. Another man was luckier than he. Leo was overtaken by an urge to cry out. His heart was breaking. Then the boy lost his footing momentarily. Lottie steadied him, and they resumed walking. Following the wall, they turned away from Leo. He too turned and ran through the wood, away from the house. He ran across the estate the way he had come, away from it forever.

Part Five

SALVAGE 1919–1927

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1

In the summer of 1919, Ordinary Seaman Leopold Sercombe was transferred to HMS *Ajax*. The ship's role, along with the rest of the Mediterranean Fleet, was to fly the flag on cruises around that sea. Men were issued with white tropical uniforms. Canvas awnings were raised on poles and spread across the aft decks as protection from the sun.

Operational readiness was maintained by exercises, manoeuvres and inspections. There were flotilla regattas and fleet competitions, on board or ashore.

They anchored off cities: Nicosia, Piraeus, Port Said. Civilians were invited aboard for dances, and for general visits. From Barcelona came a party of children, for whom games were set up. For one game, lots were drawn in Leo's mess and he lost. His face was blackened with shoe polish and red paint applied to his lips. Thus adorned he had to hide behind two canvas screens, set up on deck some yards apart. As Leo dashed across the gap between them, children threw tennis balls at him. 'Aim for his face,' his shipmates urged the children.

Leo lived in a broadside mess with fifteen other men. A long wooden table was hinged to the side and hung from the deck above by a swinging bracket. The long benches could be secured in rough weather with deck bolts. At the head of the table was a locker containing cutlery, plates, basins. There were nests of galvanised steel lockers, one for each man, in which

Leo kept his uniform clothes. His daily working rig was a white duck suit worn with a silk lanyard. He wore overalls for dirty jobs out of sight, and his cap at all times. There was also storage for small ditty boxes, containing each man's private possessions. Photographs, letters from home. Leo had none of these. In his ditty box he placed skeletons of small birds and tiny mammals that he found on his rare forays ashore in the Mediterranean.

There was no privacy in a broadside mess. Leo began to read. There was a small library on board, odd readers scattered amongst the ship's company who identified each other reading in their hammocks, and passed books back and forth.

The commander's priority was the appearance of his ship, especially when in harbour, on show. The side party was charged with ensuring the ship's side was always immaculate, without a single blemish. The quarterdeck was made of oak, rather than teak. A twice-weekly holystone scrub with sand gave it a whiteness teak could not match. The turrets and guns and superstructure shone with fresh enamel paint. Wooden hatches and bollard covers were scrubbed smooth. Brass tompions in the turret guns glistened. Leo's division worked the upper deck, painting and keeping the forecastle clean. On Sunday mornings, when the skipper inspected the deck, Leo was placed up in the bridge wings with a rifle and a pocket full of blanks, to scare away from the paintwork any insolent seagulls.

The men washed their clothes at set times and dried them on wire clotheslines riven through blocks under the foretop and shackled to eye bolts. The clothes were pegged and the lines triced up taut and the laundry dried in the wind. Only these authorised lines could be used. No clothing could be hung up in the superstructure or on the guard rails that might be visible from outboard the ship. Many foreign ships displayed their crews' clothes drying. Leo's fellow hands poured scorn on such indiscipline.

Their day began at five in the morning and ended at nine in the evening, when the commander moved around the ship, preceded by the bugler, the corporal of the gangway and the master-at-arms. At each mess-deck the men stood to attention. When the rounds had passed, hammocks could be unstowed and slung overhead.

When HMS *Ajax* was in transit, seagulls fell away, and other birds appeared. The Mediterranean Sea acted like a huge barrier between Europe and Africa. Each autumn some large birds went east and made their way to

Africa through Turkey and the Levant. Others went west and gathered at the tip of Spain. Thousands of storks and kites waited for thermals to lift them high enough for the wind to help them over to the African continent.

Small birds like chiffchaffs and nightingales flew straight across the Mediterranean. When they grew exhausted, some took the opportunity of a rest on a passing battleship. One early morning on the upper deck, in the middle of the sea, Leo was woken in his hammock by a familiar sound. For a moment he could not make sense of it, and thought that it must have been remembered from his dreams. It seemed to be calling to him from out of his childhood. Then he heard it again, and looked up and saw, sitting on an arm at the top of the mast, a cuckoo.

Across the Royal Navy, the men's rates of pay were reduced. Those with families had less to send home. Morale fell on the ageing ships. Officers worried they would lose their jobs. At least married officers could bring their wives out to Malta, at their own expense, but crewmen could not. Ratings often ran out of money by the middle of a month and could not afford to go ashore to visit a canteen or cinema. Some scarcely ever left the ship. Leo was one of these. He was resolved to quit the Navy with savings. He bought soap and tobacco cheaply from the paymaster, the cost stopped from his pay. He did not intend to open a pub, like his friend Victor Harris who had sent him a postcard from Cardiff, but he turned other ideas over in his mind. He stayed on board, reading or playing shove-ha'penny in the mess, or else on deck gazing at the land that was always in sight. In Valletta harbour, a fragrance of spice, perfume and oranges wafted out from shore. Occasionally he scented cigar smoke. The buildings on shore were a light sandstone, the cloudless sky pale blue, the Mediterranean Sea a deeper shade. After tea the rig of the day was no longer compulsory. Leo changed into night clothing, an old serge suit worn without collar or lanyard, and watched the lights of the waterfront bars and the bobbing lights of the *dghajsas*. He listened to the bells of horse-drawn *karozzins*. His life was temporarily becalmed and there was nothing he could do but wait for the time it would resume.

Leo kept up his diving. On a stormy night in Malta, when HMS *Ajax* lay to buoys in the Grand Harbour, a steamer came adrift and collided with the bow of the ship. Leo inspected the damage and over the following weeks carried out underwater repairs.

In the summer Leo went swimming. Sometimes others went with him. They took a *dghajsa* over to the harbour breakwater. At its inner end was an area of flat sandstone, which he made his base for a picnic and a doze in the sun. Periodically he rose and dived into the sea and swam to a buoy moored a hundred yards out. There he heaved his dripping body from the shimmering water, and sat on the bobbing float.

The ship's plumber bent copper pipe for him with which Leo fashioned a snorkel. He acquired a pair of submarine escape goggles. With these Leo floated in the deep blue water, entering another domain, and watched multicoloured fish dart before him. He saw octopi and eels. His skin turned the colour of hazel.

In the summer of 1923, optional swimming periods were introduced. Between 7 and 7.30 in the morning and 5 and 5.30 in the afternoon, men could rise from the clammy atmosphere below decks and dive into the sea. Leo rarely missed an opportunity. He swam well away from the ship.

HMS *Ajax* was involved in occasional operations to keep the peace in trouble spots around the Med. From Gibraltar they oversaw the Tangier Patrol, ensuring the security of Tangier against incursion by Berber separatists. There was briefly action against Turkish Nationalists in the Sea of Marmara. In 1922 the Sultan of Turkey was deposed, and the *Ajax* conveyed him to exile in Mecca.

In April 1924 *Ajax* returned to Devonport, assigned to the Reserve Fleet. The clear waters and bright sun of southern Europe were replaced by grey seas and grey skies around the grey metal ship. June was dull and unsettled. July was wet and thundery, and cool. August the same, with frequent rain.

Leo asked to see the chaplain. He knew Reverend Martin from the library, and now visited him in his cabin. The chaplain sat at his desk and invited Leo to sit in an armchair beside it. He asked the young seaman if he knew of the damage that insects could do on board. Leo said that of course every sailor gets used to crushing a cockroach beneath his heel. And the cooks complained constantly about weevils in their flour.

'Silverfish,' the chaplain said. 'They're the most damnable little philistines. I've discovered they're eating our books.'

'That's awful, sir,' Leo said.

The chaplain admitted that in truth the small insects were consuming paper very slowly. The library was not in imminent danger. He asked what

it was Sercombe needed.

Leo said that he wanted to ask a question.

'You may ask anything you like,' Reverend Martin said. He gestured to the closed door behind Leo and told him that whatever was said in this cosy cabin was confidential.

Leo nodded. He frowned, and bit his lip.

The chaplain waited. Then he said that he had heard so many men express one anxiety or another, he did not believe anything could surprise him. 'Do you smoke, Sercombe?' he asked, and offered Leo a cigarette from a silver box.

The tobacco, or perhaps the action of lighting the cigarette and inhaling and exhaling, seemed to make it easier to speak, and Leo said, 'Do you think it be possible, sir, for a man to find himself in a life that is not his own?'

The chaplain smiled and said he was sure that it was. In fact, it was closer to the natural condition of man than any other.

'Out a place?' Leo asked. 'Out a time?'

'We are all wanderers,' the Reverend said. 'We are exiles upon the earth.' He reached up to a shelf above the desk and brought down a Bible, leafing through its thin pages. Then he found what he was looking for and, with a finger upon the page, read out, "Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come."

Leo stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray on the chaplain's desk.

'Of course, if you have lost God,' the chaplain said, 'I suppose this is scant consolation.'

'I ain't sure, sir, that God did not lose me.'

The chaplain shook his head. 'No, Sercombe. No. If there's one thing I am sure of it is that God loses no one. He will always be there when we truly need Him.'

Leo nodded slowly. 'I hope so,' he said.

'As you doubtless know, it's the padre's job on board ship in time of war to censor letters. To explain to the men what could and could not be said. I must say that I'm very happy to be divested of that obligation, but it did teach me something.' He passed the box to Leo, and took another cigarette for himself and lit it. He blew out the smoke and said, 'What I learned is that language is a puzzle. Words can be replaced and taken out and moved

around to try to say the same thing in a different way, only for one to find they say something new, or the same thing in an improved fashion.'

Leo said he believed the Reverend was surely right about that, and thanked him, and left the cabin.

In June 1926, a few days after his twenty-seventh birthday, Leo Sercombe completed his twelve years' service in the Royal Navy, with the rank of Able Seaman, and resigned.

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2

‘A field.’

‘A field?’

‘Enough for a vegetable garden, some fruit trees. A paddock for a horse.’

Victor Harris had asked Leo what he wanted. They sat in the small saloon bar of the public house Victor had bought in Cardiff while his wife tended the bar. There were only two customers visible at noon, both old men, sitting alone on different benches along the walls.

‘I’d build a cabin in the field.’

‘From the way you’ve spoke about horses they’ll need one, but what about you, Lofty, where are you going to live?’

Leo smiled. ‘You’re right, Vic. First I’ll build a shelter for the horse. Then I’ll build myself a cabin.’

Victor Harris nodded. ‘I can see that, I can,’ he said. ‘It’s a picture. But I can’t see where the money’s coming from. You’ve spent money on the land. What are you going to live on?’

‘I’ll hire myself out,’ Leo said. ‘Me, my muscles, my horses. And I’ll buy and sell them. Break them in, train them.’

Victor shook his head. ‘You never struck me as a man mean enough to break horses. And where do you reckon on buying this field a yours?’

‘I guess I’ll head back home,’ Leo said. ‘To the West Country.’

‘How much more d’you reckon you need?’

Leo took a deep breath through lips pressed close together. ‘About two hundred and fifty.’

The men supped their beer.

‘At least,’ Leo said.

‘Your trouble is, you only saved,’ Victor Harris said. ‘You never speculated.’ He asked Leo whether he had heard about the salvage operation up in the Flow.

‘A rumour,’ Leo said. ‘But I couldn’t rightly believe it. We saw what happened. Most a them ships are deep under the water.’

‘Aye, the Admiralty said they’ll rust where they rest. But then the price a metal started rising on the markets, see, and some Brummie scrap dealer’s got the contract to lift ’em.’

‘So it’s true, is it? I heard about this scrap merchant.’

‘He’s a madman, is what I been told, like. The rest of us saw rustin metal hulks, see, Lofty, sinkin in the silt. This bloke went up there and had a poke around and saw money underwater. He sent divers down, and they’re seeking ways to raise the ships.’

‘What’s he pay?’

‘I heard he’s payin labourers ten shillins a shift, and divers twice that. He works them hard. A bloke from here it was who told me. Went up, come back inside a month, said this feller, Cox is his name, works his men like beasts. The only one he works harder is his self. It’s dirty work and it’s dangerous. He said the money wasn’t worth being flogged to death for.’ Victor shrugged. ‘You might see it different.’

Leo remembered Cyrus Pepperell, a farmer who drove himself insanely hard. He was not sure he wanted to work for such a tyrant again.

‘Taff said this lunatic has raised the destroyers but he ain’t satisfied. Got his eye on the battleships, see? Goldmines. He’ll be needing more divers, Lofty.’

Victor’s children wandered in and out of the bar from the family’s quarters out the back. Leo could not see how Victor Harris could have fathered so many children. Victor said it was simple. Each child represented a different visit home on leave.

‘I’ve not checked the dates too closely, mind you. Whether the day they was born come a little sooner or later than nine months after my leave. If they did, I don’t need to know, do I?’

The men sat in the gloomy corner, watching Victor's wife Myfanwy at the bar, serving a third man, who had just come in, with a pint of draught ale. She had a grim unsmiling countenance, but in response to what she said, which Leo could not hear, the man was laughing.

'I couldn't ask for a better wife, boy,' Victor Harris said. 'If you find one half as good, keep a hold of her. Though she might not be over impressed, like, by life in a little cabin.'

Leo smiled. 'If I find such a woman, I'll build an extra room for her.'

Victor nodded. 'Now you're thinking straight,' he said.

3

On the train to Scotland, passengers in Leo's compartment spoke of the General Strike. One man claimed that strikers in Northumberland had derailed the Flying Scotsman. A large woman said that Baldwin was right, we were threatened with a revolution, and she didn't care how many Communists were arrested, they could have arrested twice as many as far as she was concerned. A second man said that the strike was a sin, as the Catholic Church had pronounced it to be.

Another asked if they did not feel some sympathy for the miners, who struggled on alone, but none did. He asked Leo for his opinion, but Leo said that he regarded himself as too ignorant of the facts to make a sensible contribution, and so kept his own counsel.

The steam train chuntered through the North of England. Past dirty factories, surrounded by piles of rusty iron and stagnant pools of oily water. Through cuttings, the rock on each side blackened by the coal smoke of the trains. Between rows of houses squashed together, with tiny gardens squeezed between their back doors and the metal fences of the railway. The train chugged across open country for a mile or two then back into the industrial grime of foundries and factories and railway yards.

When Leo travelled this way before, was he asleep in the darkness while they came through the North? Or perhaps the Jellicoes had taken a different line, further east. Smoke rose from factory chimneys. They passed

collieries, with grey and black slagheaps. Narrow streets wound away up steel hillsides. He stared at a refuse heap on which small figures scavenged.

Beyond York the countryside opened up once more. It was haymaking season. Leo did not know if summer breezes carried scents into the railway carriages stuttering past or memories defrauded his senses, but he knew the raw smell of fresh grass in the morning, the honey scent of clover. The damp earthy odour of the underside of hay as they turned it to expose it to the sun, the sweet dry fragrance of it being loaded in the evening. But there were fewer people in the fields than he remembered as a boy. And there were fewer horses. For on some farms tractors now pulled the mowers, and rakes that turned the hay. Men who had once worked with horses now rode the machines belching smoke over the fields. Perhaps his father was now driving such a vehicle. No. He could not see Albert Sercombe on a tractor. That would never happen. It was not possible. His father was surely a horseman for life.

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4

The man seated on the other side of the desk read the piece of paper Leo had given him. Once or twice he looked up, perhaps to correlate the tall, young ex-seaman standing before him with what was written in the reference letter. To equate the person with the words used to describe him.

‘To whom it may concern,’ he said at length. ‘Yes, it does concern me. Who is this Chief Petty Officer fellow, singing your praises? He could be your uncle for all I know.’ He picked up the letter. ‘This could be a forgery.’

Leo shook his head. ‘It isn’t, sir.’

The man narrowed his eyes. ‘It says here you can dive to ten fathoms. Which if it’s true means you’re plumb fit, sonny. You’ll need to be.’

‘It’s true, sir.’

‘Just out of the Navy and you want to jump back in the water, eh?’

‘I heard you pay well, Mister Cox.’

‘I pay good men good money. You’ll have to earn it. If you’re no good, you’ll be on your way.’

‘I don’t mind hard work.’

The man stood up. He was of average height and looked across his desk and up at Leo. ‘You want to know who you’re dealing with, sonny. I’m not some upper-crust, blue-blooded gentleman. I left school at thirteen. No one taught me anything apart from the writers of the books I read. Manuals. Textbooks. I’m an engineer, and I’m a merchant in metal. The people who know about these things said these ships couldn’t be raised. The experts.

Well, I raised 'em. I've proved 'em wrong with the destroyers, and I'll prove 'em wrong with the battleships.'

Leo listened to the blowhard. Another of them. Maybe there was something in his own withdrawn nature that brought forth their boastful soliloquies. He hoped that there might be more substance to Ernest Cox's bragging than the empty bluster of Henery Orchard selling dud horses or Victor Harris on HMS *Benbow* fleecing his gambling customers.

'Put a piece of metal in front of me, sonny, any metal. You can blindfold me ... all I need is a spanner to tap it with and I'll tell you what metal it is, just by the sound of it. What do you think of that, eh? How many men do you reckon could do it?'

Leo did not know the answer, but he guessed the one Cox wanted to hear. 'No other, I reckon.'

'Yes, that's right, sonny,' Cox said, nodding. 'No other bugger could do it. You've done your twelve-year stint, you've spent years on board big ships, and I'll wager you've no idea what metals there are on these Hun boats. Well, I'll tell you. Cast steel was used for the stern, the stern frame, the rudder frame and suchlike. Wrought iron was used for cables, davits and so forth.' He did not count these items off on his fingers but with each one slapped the back of his right hand into the palm of his left. 'There's armoured cable, sonny, steel rope, anchors, turbine blades.'

He might have been describing the fruit of the Tree of Life, the paradise of God become a scrap metal yard.

'And when we go inside what are we going to find? Non-ferrous metals. Brass, copper, lead. Phosphor bronze, gunmetal, manganese. You see, Leo Sercombe, I don't give a tinker's cuss what objects were once used for. Their function means nothing to me. Irrelevant. All I see is the metal and how we can get it. Come along, I'll show you round our little kingdom.'

Ernest Cox wore a clean white shirt beneath a tweed waistcoat, jacket and plus-fours. His brogues shone. At the door of the office he lifted a trilby from a hook and put it on his head. 'Mac!' he yelled, marching along a corridor and into another office. Leo followed.

'I may have got you your sixth diver, Mac, just in time,' Cox said to the man studying ship's plans at a table. Cox made it sound as if he had recruited Leo himself. 'He's a Navy man, stationed here in the Flow back in the days of the internment. His name's Leopold Sercombe. Leo, meet

Sinclair MacKenzie, chief salvage officer. He's a diver too, so there's no pulling the wool over his eyes.'

Another man came into the doorway. Cox and MacKenzie were middle-aged. This one was younger, not much older than Leo.

'Ah, Ern. We've got a fellow ex-Navy man to keep you company. Not on submarines, I'm afraid, this one, but a good diver, he claims. Ernie McKeown's my chief engineer, Leo. Come along. It's almost time for lunch.'

The base of Ernest Cox's operations at Scapa Flow was in the old naval quarters and depot in Lyness on the Island of Hoy. Cox rammed his trilby further down onto his head against the stiff wind and walked out into the sunshine.

'We've cleared Gutter Sound of its destroyers,' he said. He took Leo to the old barracks, whose huts now accommodated his workers in a series of dormitories. 'You'll be in here with the other divers,' he explained, opening the door of a hut. There were half a dozen beds. Clothes and equipment lay scattered around, though there were a number of cupboards and lockers. Leo noticed a wireless set on top of a dresser.

There were other huts for mechanics, carpenters, electricians. Perhaps there was a hierarchy as onboard ship that would become clear soon enough. Cox showed Leo all the accommodation – for labourers, linesmen – to impress upon him the scale of operations. They walked back, past a hut that had been converted into a cinema. Another with billiard tables and a bar.

They approached a larger building from which voices could be heard, and the sounds of plates and cutlery clanking. Cox pushed open the door and strode in.

'All right, Father?' a man addressed him. Cox did not reply, but picked up a fork from a table, and a glass. He rapped the fork against the glass. Men ceased talking in a widening circle from him.

'Listen up, lads,' Ernest Cox announced once there was silence and full attention directed towards him. 'We've got a new diver here, name of Leo Sercombe. He's a Sassenach like myself so you Jocks better not give him any grief on that account.' He pointed to a table. 'There's some divers,' he told Leo. 'They'll settle you in.'

5

William Peterson was the dive leader, a fair-haired, stocky man in his forties. That afternoon he took Leo out in a launch. They sailed up Gutter Sound and into the channel between Hoy and the small Island of Cava. It was all as Leo remembered. A battlecruiser was lying on her port side, with thirty feet of her starboard side above the high-water line. Two cranes were situated on a floating platform beside her, their grabs gutting the ship. The crane-drivers were extracting black matter from her innards and transferring it to a barge.

‘With the strikes, the price a coal’s gone up four-fold,’ Peterson said. ‘That’s if ye can get it at all. We need two hundred tons a week fer the tugs and all the machinery. Father Cox had the idea to open her up. Found her bunkers full. We’ve got enough free German coal here to see us through tae Christmas. The wee big man’s a genius. Ye’ll see.’

The ship was the *Seydlitz*. Peterson said that there were four further battlecruisers below the water in a line running north. One was so big that her bridge, funnels and two masts were still above the water. Leo remembered her well. The others were fully submerged. Each one weighed more, Peterson said, than the weight of all the twenty-six destroyers they’d already raised.

‘He’s a genius but he’s a madman,’ William Peterson declared of Cox. He showed Leo where coloured floats or marker buoys floated above the first battleship to have been surveyed and selected for salvage. SMS *Moltke*.

The Admiralty had decided to transfer all operations south. It was strange to look across the Flow and see no Royal Navy ships, just as it was strange to see the naval base at Lyness taken over by the salvage company of Cox & Danks. The sight was uncanny to Leo, used to seeing the British Fleet in occupation.

‘She’s upside down,’ Bill Peterson said. ‘As if there’s not enough to be worrying about.’ He explained how they’d used the spring or flood tides to help raise the destroyers. How they got wires under the hulls at low tide, drilling through the silt the ships were sinking into, and lifting them at the highest tides, pulling them clear from the suction of the ocean floor.

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6

On the day following, the divers got to work on the wreck of SMS *Moltke*. She weighed over twenty-six and a half thousand tons, unloaded. She was six hundred and twelve feet long, and ninety-eight feet abeam at her widest point. Her draught was a little over thirty feet. The great ship lay upside down in eighty feet of water.

The German destroyers or torpedo boats had been raised with wires attached to two floating platforms, tightened by twenty hand-operated ten-ton winches. It was a revolutionary method that had worked amazingly well but it would not be sufficient for these far larger battleships.

The divers went down in pairs, each with an assistant on the boat plus a reserve diver, ready to descend to their aid in an emergency. As well as Bill Peterson, three of the other four divers had been with Ernest Cox from the beginning. Their names were Sinclair MacKenzie, Nobby Hall and William Hunt. The fourth, named Harry Grosset, had been there almost as long.

Leo was kitted out. The men wore deep-sea diving suits of rubberised twill. The sleeves had vulcanised rubber cuffs for a watertight joint at the wrists. They wore heavy round helmets made of copper, with a glass aperture or window at the front, and a smaller one to each side. These helmets were screwed to the breastplate or corselet by a slight turn.

The divers worked two three-hour shifts per day. Leo went down in the afternoon with Bill Peterson. Harry Grosset was the reserve diver up in the boat. Leo was connected to his linesman, Magnus Scott, by a breathing hose

and a lifeline. The air supply was fed to him from a hand-winch compressor. A pressure gauge on this pump indicated the depth Leo had reached and regulated the air pressure accordingly. The hose was made of tough rubber and fed into the helmet. As he breathed, Leo found the window steamed up with condensation. To clear this, he had to open a small tap or spitcock and gulp in a mouthful of seawater to spit on the glass.

The lifeline was a rope used to pass signals up or down by means of tugs according to the simple code he had used in the Navy and that fortunately was universal. The lifeline was passed around Leo's waist, between his legs and up under his right arm. Bill Peterson assured him that it had a breaking strain of over a thousand pounds and that if he was in trouble Magnus Scott would pull him to the surface. All the assistants understood how to prevent the divers suffering from the bends, and knew to pull them up gradually, in stages. There was also a telephone line attached to the lifeline, but Bill warned Leo that this quite often shorted, especially when you'd been obliged to use the spitcock.

The diving suits were filled with air, which was pumped into the suit through a line from above. The diver himself could regulate this, and thus adjust his buoyancy, by means of an outlet valve. If he opened this valve, air would escape and so he descended. When it was time to return to the boat, he closed the valve and the suit would fill with air and so help his ascent.

Leo wore lead boots weighing fifteen pounds each that anchored him and helped him keep upright while walking on the seabed or the wreck. He bore forty-pound weights, one strapped to his chest, another to his back, that aided his balance beneath the water.

Leo Sercombe and Bill Peterson descended slowly into the waters of the Flow. Even now, in midsummer, beneath the surface the water was cold. Under his suit Leo wore first an all-in-one suit of cotton underwear, then another of wool. Over this he wore a full set of clothes. Shirt, pullover, trousers. He wore two pairs of thick socks and a woollen hat.

They descended into a strange world. When they reached the capsized, upturned SMS *Moltke*, Leo did not realise it was the ship they had come to, he thought it a huge rock or reef no one had told him about for it was covered by an aquatic forest of seaweed, taller than a man. The hull was blistered with barnacles, soft corals, anemones. The two divers took the

small knives from the scabbards at their waists and hacked at the trunks of the seaweed, but these were thick and tough, and they made little progress. When they rose to the surface and reported on what they'd found, the next pair, in the afternoon, went down with axes.

The seaweed had to be cleared so that the external vents, torpedo tubes and side valves could be found, and any other holes opened when the ship was scuttled, for in order to be raised it had to be made watertight again. The first weeks were spent clearing these limbs and saplings from the hull. Small openings were filled with wooden plugs, which were taken underwater and hammered in tightly. The wood then expanded as it absorbed seawater. Larger holes were measured and the divers made templates out of thin plywood. These were sent to the workshops on Lyness Pier, where stronger versions in metal were produced. The divers then used bolt-punching guns to attach these plates onto the hull, and rendered them waterproof with so-called pudding joints made of canvas strips or gaskets packed with loose fibres of old rope oakum. These joints were compressed when the bolts were tightened.

Leo Sercombe and Sinc Mackenzie were performing the final part of this operation one afternoon, smearing the joints all over with tallow. They'd been underwater for a couple of hours, applying the tallow with a large paintbrush, when the water above them went black. Before he could begin to make sense of what might be causing this, Leo was yanked upwards by his rope and breathing tube, and dragged through the water. He collided with Sinc Mackenzie, who was hurtling by likewise. In the turmoil, Leo fell still, lying face up, and caught a glimpse above him of massive creatures gliding over his head. Then he was yanked askew again. It occurred to him that this was a strange experience, spinning around in the sea, he must remember what it felt like. Then as suddenly as the whirlpool had engulfed them the water stilled. Leo came to rest. He saw that Sinc was all right. When he looked up, the creatures had moved on. There were pulls on the lifeline that told the divers to ascend. When they reached the surface and clambered back into the boat the two men there told them with great excitement that a school of forty-foot whales, larger than either of them had ever seen, had just passed over the wreck site. One of the whales must have tickled the divers' lines with its huge tail.

Once the outside of the upturned hull was secured, the divers ventured further down. They found, still attached, a large boat made of two-ply oak in fine condition. They detached this boat from her fixtures, floated her, and towed her ashore. She was still in such good shape that from then on Ernest Cox used her as his own launch in the Flow.

The divers worked their shifts six days a week, through the autumn and into the winter. The occasional Orcadian gale stopped all work, but otherwise the divers agreed with each other that beneath the bleak grey northern sky and the bitingly cold winds, underwater was the best place to be. At least every other day each man did a shift as the reserve diver, which should have been a rest, but none of them enjoyed being stuck in a boat that bobbed and bucked in the surface swell. The reserve diver and the diving assistants were customarily soaked by water washing over the deck. It was better by far to sink beneath the surface from the furious wind and waves above.

The divers worked with their bare hands in the cold water and their fingers became numb and swollen, but the deeper they went, the calmer the silent world into which they descended. As they could only move sluggishly so it seemed to Leo that time itself slowed down. He did not know if this was some mysterious quality of the ocean, combined with their transit closer to the centre of the earth.

The divers were cordial enough with the other members of the workforce yet remained separate from them. All the men went to the flicks, and to the bar and canteen, but most of the time the divers sat at their own table, or retreated to their dormitory to play cards or listen to the wireless. They lived within a larger community of men but at one remove from them. At first Leo thought it was because they were the highest-paid workers and so saw themselves as superior, or others saw them so, but it was not that. It was something else. Perhaps the danger of their job. Perhaps others could feel that danger and smell it and kept away for fear it might somehow threaten them.

Ernest Cox brought his wife and daughter up North on occasions, and the engineer Ernie McKeown lived in a small hut with his wife, but otherwise it was just like the Navy, a world without women. Apart from Leo and Cox himself, Nobby Hall was the only other Englishman, another ex-Navy diver.

Leo read books Missis Cox obtained from a library on the mainland. When the divers played vingt-et-un it was for matches, not money, for none wished to waste wages that were hard-earned.

At Christmas some of the men went home, but others stayed in Lyness. Either they were from parts of Scotland far from Orkney, or they had no home to go to.

On New Year's Eve they gathered in the canteen to see the New Year in. The cook made them haggis with mashed swede and cabbage and mashed potato. They ate by candlelight, the candles stuck with their own dripped wax to the wooden planks of which the tables were made. When they had finished eating the men all sat and drank steadily. Leo sat with Nobby Hall at their table. None of the other divers had stayed and there were empty seats at the other two tables, occupied by no more than a dozen men in all. The cook joined the men on the furthest table.

One of the labourers called across, 'You's drinking beer even tonight?'

'That firewater don't agree with me, mate,' Nobby told him. 'It burns me up.'

The labourer did not respond. He only stared at his own glass and continued to do so. Leo had a bottle of malt whisky before him, Nobby a dozen bottles of ale. These were sealed by ceramic stoppers with rubber gaskets, held in place by wire bails. With each bottle it took Nobby a little longer to lever the wire loose. By the sixth or seventh he'd acquired the need to examine this contraption closely, blinking, before attempting to open it. It became a steadily increasing challenge as the night wore on.

'How the fuck do ye drink that piss water anyways?' the labourer called out. Nobby grinned stupidly. Leo poured himself another glass of malt. He drank the whisky neat, but with a glass of water beside it, which he swallowed in between sips of the liquor.

'On this night of all nights,' the labourer said, his voice loud and slurred. 'Suttin over by their selves like a pair a fuckin Toby jugs.' He did not look over but continued to gaze into his own glass of dark brown liquid.

Every now and then a man would rise clumsily from his chair and stagger out of the canteen. Either to stumble to his dormitory or more often to throw up then return for more drinking. The labourer and the other men at his table sat in sullen silence, but the furthest table seemed to accommodate comedians, for there was badinage and laughter. Leo considered joining them but he was not sure his legs would carry him there. He told himself

that he could not hold his liquor, he was an idiot, he should abstain from alcohol. Then he wondered if he had said this aloud and looked around, but so far as he could tell, no one responded. Well, it was hardly interesting. Then he realised he'd forgotten what was not interesting. He tried to remember but could not. His brain did not work. Neither did his vision. The canteen building was not built on firm foundations, it tilted and swayed. Someone should tell Mister Cox.

'Ye'd rather sup that gnat's piss than good Scottish whisky,' someone said. Who said it? It was that man over there again, with the black beard and the red skin, gazing into his glass.

A man at the far table was singing, another had produced a small squeeze box, and a third was dancing. Leo watched him. All the other men on that table were laughing, but Leo considered the man's dancing to be elegant, even graceful. From out of his stupor he enjoyed watching this candlelit performance. Yes, it was mightily impressive. He wished only for that hectoring man to say nothing more.

'On New Year's Eve ye've nae wish tae drink with us,' the labourer called out. 'Are ye stuck up because ye're a divin fuckin swankpot or because ye're a pair of English cunts?'

Leo was stupefied. Then all of a sudden he was not. He was sober. His vision was clear. His mind was lucid, though he had no thoughts as such. He simply acted. Leo stood and walked over to the closer table. The labourer glanced up and saw his approach and rose awkwardly, his chair clattering on the floor behind him. He stood on his own feet for no more than a second. The diver Leo Sercombe hit him with two punches, each to the man's jaw. The first with his left fist spun the labourer's head, the right shortly following caught the man's jaw while it was still turning. Everyone heard the crack. The man was unconscious as he fell, collapsing like a boneless doll.

The singer ceased singing, the musician stopped playing his squeezebox. The men around them stopped laughing. The dancer still cavorted, for he was as drunk as anyone in the room and lost in his flailing. After a while he began to become aware of the fact that things had changed, though even as he looked up and around him he stamped on his boot toes to and fro. Then he came to a halt, swaying.

Leo looked at the prone figure of the man he'd laid out. Then he walked out into the bleak Orcadian night. He strode away from the barracks, down

to the jetty, shocked by what he'd done. He'd thought he lacked the capacity for violence. He felt sick, not from the alcohol but of himself. Where did it come from? Did a man's seed condemn his progeny to defects similar to his own? The same flaws? A son becoming his father. Was there no escape? That pure wash of anger that drove him into action, it was instinctive, and had felt as natural as anything he'd ever done.

The waters of the Flow were filled with stars, but the surface of the sea was choppy and the stars bucked and swam in his vision as if the heavens themselves were not fixed but all in flux. Perhaps they were, and their stasis in the firmament above was an illusion created by the great distance between them and the earth. All was impermanent – the rocks, the seas, the planets – to imagine otherwise was obtuse. All he had here was a brief span. Was he compelled to be someone he did not wish to be? Better surely to fill his pockets with stones and jump from the jetty.

'Don't let 'em get to you, mate.'

Leo felt a hand press his shoulder.

'Jocks love to get aggressive when they drink,' Nobby Hall told him. 'It don't mean nothin. Bobby back there'll be his friendly old self come Monday. At least he will if his jaw ain't wired up. If I weren't drunk myself I'd a give him back the banter. That's all he wanted.'

'How'd you stop yourself?' Leo asked. 'Gettin angry?'

'Just let it sail over me, mate,' Nobby said.

'A wise man,' Leo told him.

Nobby laughed. 'I s'pose it helps that I weren't never much cop at fightin. Come on, mate, let's get to the dorm. It's freezin out here and I'm about done in.'

As they took the launch out to the wreck each morning and afternoon, it was tossed on the waves. The wind blew loud and wild. Rain fell, soft or hard, from vertical to wind-driven horizontal, in large sharp drops that stung the face or else so fine Leo did not know it was falling until he realised his face and hair were damp, his clothes covered in tiny droplets barely visible to the naked eye. Thunder rolled and rumbled over the Flow. Lightning crackled. The black sky loomed over them.

Yet there were other days when the sea was eerily calm and the sky clear and blue, the air warm, a summer's day in the middle of winter. On one such, Leo went down with Bill Hunt, the second lead diver, to survey what had been the upper decks of the ship, but were now underneath. They found her funnels and masts and the upper bridge all buckled under the weight and skewered into the ocean floor. The *Moltke* was stuck fast, but her bow was higher than her stern, and she was on a list, so that there was room to attach explosives. Tom McKenzie performed the demolition, placing charges of gelignite made from guncotton, nitroglycerine and potassium nitrate, with which they blasted the funnels and other impediments off the superstructure of the battleship.

The divers entered the interior of the vessel, to seal holes they could not access from outside. They carried submersible electric lamps, which gave out a dull, foggy glow. They found that lobsters had made their homes in

compartments, and defended their territory with large claws. One afternoon Leo went down with Harry Grosset. He was cutting a ply template for a hole when he looked to the side and saw, in the dim yellow light of the lamp, that he was being watched. He could not see the man's body, only his head. He was sure that Harry was behind him somewhere, this was someone else. A bald man with dark, sad eyes and fine whiskers. The man beheld him. Leo returned his gaze. After some seconds had passed it occurred to Leo that the man was not wearing a helmet. This was not possible. It seemed to him that the man's face was unusually small, and somehow unnatural, but in what way he was not sure. He could not make it out. He wondered if he was looking at a ghost. The shade of a German sailor. Or a creature, one of those of whom the Scottish divers had warned him, who came up to the Orkney shallows from their home in the deeps of the oceans to grab a human mate.

Then the odd little man turned and swam off. Leo watched him swim away, and realised it was a seal that had been observing him.

Conger eels were everywhere. As Leo pushed an air-pipe through a porthole one bit him on the hand. It did not seem too bad, as he could not feel it and the cut did not bleed much underwater. But when he came up to the surface the blood began to gush out and he had to have the wound hurriedly dressed.

The divers worked their way through the ship blocking holes. For those too large to be plugged yet too awkward to be covered with a plate they poured *ciment fondu*, a cement that dried chemically rather than by evaporation. It was pumped into an opening through a long pipe like a fireman's hose.

One morning in late January Leo went down with Bill Peterson. They followed guide ropes that had been left by the last pair working in the ship the day before, and passed down through the decks until they reached the upper deck now at the bottom of the ship. Every door and porthole had to be sealed so that the entire hull was rendered watertight.

When the scuttled ship had turned turtle, everything loose had been tumbled about and settled on the ceilings that were now floors and covered in a slimy carpet of oil, coal dust and decaying matter. Fuel oil and liquid from the bilges had spilled everywhere. When they disturbed the sludge, no light from their lamps could penetrate it; they had either to wait for it to settle or to work in darkness. The light was dingy anyhow and with every

step the two of them raised the oily silt, which spread through the filthy water darkening it further so that Leo felt he was walking through ink, unable to see more than the faintest glow from his lamp. He lowered himself through a hatchway into a mess room. Bill Peterson remained outside to make sure his partner's air and lifeline did not get snagged.

Leo felt around until he found a wooden ladder. He climbed down it towards the ceiling of the room, where he expected to find an open door that they hoped to be able to close tight shut. Suddenly the ladder came loose from the wall. It squirmed free from his oily grip and shot up through the water, propelled by its own liberated buoyancy.

For a moment Leo waited. He believed that he could sense the wooden ladder beside him rising like a vertically propelled torpedo through the black water. Then he felt his lifeline and his airline pulling themselves taut, lifting him up with them. He rose a yard or two and stopped. The ladder was stuck. He tugged the lifeline. It was caught fast, pinned by or entwined around the ladder. If the ladder had also ruptured his airline he was a dead man. He might be anyhow.

Leo hung blindly in the inky darkness, his heavy boots and the lead weights around his torso pulling him down but his trapped lines ensnaring him. He shut the air valve in his diving suit. After some moments he realised to his relief that the suit was filling with compressed air through the airline, and soon he began to rise. He held his arms above his head. When he found the ladder he grasped hold of a rung and tried to pull it down but it was stuck fast.

Leo took one hand off the lowest rung of the ladder and opened the valve to let air out of the suit. He thought that the lead weights added to the weight of his body might help to pull the ladder down. He held onto the rung as his suit lost buoyancy, but the ladder did not budge. All that happened was that he became aware of heat in his arms that he realised was pain from taking the strain of his own weight and the lead. He changed tactics and closed the valve again and after a minute or two felt the tension in his arms relax, and soon he began to rise once more. He rose beside the ladder now, keeping hold of it rung by rung.

Suddenly the ladder bucked out of Leo's grasp. He thought that the whole ship had shifted, listing on the seabed. He floated in the blackness. He wondered if death would come now violently or if he might curl up and hang blindly in the strange fluids of that womb-like tomb. There seemed to

be no further movement or reverberation. He felt around for the ladder and found it again, then had it sprung from his grip once more. It banged against his helmet. This time he did not try to find it but pulled the lines and discovered that one of them, the lifeline, was now free. He rose, following the remaining, pinned, airline. He was aware of turbulence in the water nearby, presumably the ladder being shifted downwards then bobbing back up, but as it did it yanked him after it on the airline. Someone was doing this. Some insane bastard was messing about with the ladder and with his lines.

Leo rose. His hands came into contact with something that moved. It was oily as everything else and so difficult to decipher. He tried to keep hold of it but it was slippery and was moving, then he grasped something that seemed also to grasp him in an oily handshake and he understood that this was Bill Peterson. They came together and though they were unable to see each other they could tap on each other's helmets. Painstakingly, by taking Bill's hand and putting it to the ladder, and to his lifeline, Leo hoped that he might make his colleague understand what had happened and the plight that they were in. They wrestled with the ladder and with Leo's airline, slithering around in the murk, trying to help each other and work together though it was impossible to know if they actually were, blindly groping for what felt like hours and hours. Until suddenly the airline came free.

Leo rose and felt the floor of the room above him and followed the lifeline to a hatch and half-swam, half-clambered through it. Bill ascended beside him. As they rose together Leo understood that their lines were entangled and they had no choice. He wanted to hug Bill Peterson with relief but, as two men in diving suits in deep water, this was impossible. He signalled by tugging on his lifeline to those in the boat above that they were coming up, and they made their way back. They rose side by side. When they had been pulled into the boat and their helmets removed, Magnus Scott said, 'Have ye two fellows been doing the tango doon there or what?'

Bill Peterson related what had happened in the boat there and then, as he would do many times in the hours and the days following. To the boss, in the dormitory to their fellow divers, in the canteen to the other men. He liked to tell the story with Leo there beside him, for every time he told it he finished by assuring those present that, 'This laddie's got one calm head on his shoulders. He has that, I can tell you. He's one cool customer.'

Then it was Leo's turn to speak. 'Bill saved my life,' he said.

Someone else had once saved his life underwater. Lottie Prideaux. He did not tell Bill, or anyone else, about it, but he began to think of her again, he could not help it. Of his promise, despite her son and any other encumbrances. Of what it meant.

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When the holes were finally sealed in February, six twelve-inch centrifugal pumps were set up on the floating dock. A further dozen six-inch submersible pumps were placed beneath the surface. Water began to be sucked out of the great warship, and continued, hour after hour. Over the days following thousands of tons of water were pumped out. It was not possible to say exactly when the ship might be salvaged, but after a week Ernest Cox and his team knew there should be some indication. Some movement. There was none. They stood on the floating dock.

‘Turn them off,’ Cox ordered.

Divers were sent back down. Since Mackenzie and Nobby Hall descended in the morning. At first they could not find a problem. No holes that had been missed or some other unforeseen problem peculiar to the battleship. Then they saw that water was seeping back into the hull, through tiny leaks in the pudding joints.

Leo Sercombe and Harry Grosset were the next pair to go down, on the afternoon shift. They were told to collect a plate and bring it back for inspection. They chose the one closest to the surface where the light was best, though the sea was choppy and it was not easy to begin unscrewing the first bolt. Leo was attempting to apply the spanner when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Harry pointing. Leo obeyed the direction and saw small fish nibbling at the outside of the pudding joints.

They did not unscrew the plate but went up to the boat and returned with a fishing net.

The fish were identified as saithe, a species of cod, and they had been feeding off the tallow that had been spread on the outside of the joints. Tom McKenzie had a tank set up in one of the sheds, filled with seawater and populated by saithe. Then he experimented with new sealants. After a few days he found that if he mixed a little Portland cement with the tallow the fish did not eat it. With this new mixture the divers painstakingly re-covered all the pudding joints.

Once the new compound was set, Ernest Cox ordered pumping resumed. The stern of SMS *Moltke* was embedded in the gravel and silt of the ocean floor, her bow up off the ground. On the third day of sucking water from the ship the bow began to rise. This was no good. If there was a quantity of water trapped amidships the ship's back could break under the strain and she would be lost, her scrap worthless. Leo watched as Ernest Cox, Tom McKenzie and Ernie McKeown tried one thing after another.

To lighten the ship's weight at the stern, the giant propeller was loosened, worked off the shaft and hoisted out. This did not seem to help. Water was let back in and the bow lowered, and a destroyer scuppered to add its weight to that end. They pumped the water out again until the ship began to rise but it did so in a volatile manner, rolling and see-sawing, and they let her down again.

All this took weeks. Leo was amazed at the time it took. Victor Harris had said that what Cox did was to speculate to accumulate, but this was speculation on a grand scale. Every action Ernest Cox took was a new experiment, for who had ever salvaged battleships this size? An entire sunken navy? Every problem was a new one, and there was no guarantee it had a solution.

Perhaps the stern needed a little help to free it from the suction of the gravel and sand. Cox ordered the divers to attach a series of nine-inch cables to the gun turret and to other strong points aboard the stern section. These were connected to the winches they'd used to raise the destroyers, attached to one of the floating platforms. Again water was pumped out of *Moltke*. The cables were made taut. This time, when, on the third day, the bow began to rise, labourers turned the winches. There were twelve winches, with four men on each holding one of the handles. Leo stood smoking with Harry Grosset at the back of the platform. Harry told him

how when they'd raised the destroyers there would be another platform on the opposite side, with the same number of winches, so that they'd lifted those boats in a wire cradle.

The bow inched out of the water but there was still no movement in the stern. Ernest Cox barked out orders through his megaphone. It was imperative that the labourers all pulled in unison. Cox yelled for each twist and with a great effort, heaving and grunting and sweating, the men slowly turned the handles. The taut wires began to sing or hum with the strain. Suddenly there was a loud crack. Leo flinched for he thought that someone had fired a gun. He looked up and saw a length of severed cable rear up into the air and come down towards the floating dock, writhing and whiplashing like some steel-wire snake. He threw himself to the floor. He heard another gunshot, then another, as one cable after another snapped, and he heard men yelling, and the sound of the cables as they swished through the air, thrashing, and struck the dock and the winches on the dock and other such machinery.

Leo did not raise himself up until the noises had abated and there was only one sound other than the wind, which was that of a man groaning. When he rose he saw that others had done so before him and were tending to the groaning man, one of the labourers. Another lay still on the deck. Two men knelt beside him. Then they rose and turned away. Other men stood watching. One of these took off his jacket and stepped forward and laid it over the head and shoulders and upper chest of his former colleague.

All work stopped. The injured man was recovering in hospital. The funeral of the other took place two days after the incident. The men accompanied the coffin by boat to the harbour on the mainland and thence by foot to the church in Kirkwall.

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On the morning following, they were told to gather in the canteen. There Ernest Cox addressed them. The divers sat at their usual table.

‘I don’t know what’s gone wrong, boys,’ he said. ‘Either we can’t lift the stern or when we can her weight seems to shift around. Maybe turning turtle’s loosened everything up inside her. There’s air trapped in some places and water sloshing about in others. The only way to find out what’s happening when we try to raise her would be to have men inside, and that’s too dangerous even for these thrill-seekers.’ He gestured to the divers’ table. ‘I wouldn’t ask you to do that,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I would not. What happened to those two lads was a terrible accident. We all know the risks in this work, and I know you’re all brave as lions, especially you Jock lads, but I won’t go beyond a reasonable limit, no, I won’t, not for any one of you.’

Cox looked around. He was dressed as smartly as he always was, whether he was office-bound or about to spend the day aboard the boat or dock in terrible conditions. His brogues shone with brown polish, his white shirt was freshly starched. There was a woman on Hoy who did his laundry, and new clothes arrived in packages that his wife Jenny Jack had regularly sent to the Flow.

‘But I’ll tell you this, boys,’ he said. ‘Don’t let anyone tell you Ernest Cox knows when he’s beaten. He doesn’t. I’m going to explain to you now what it is we’re going to do.’

Cox nodded to someone at the door. A young lad carried in a large chalkboard and rested it across three chairs, leaning it against their backs. Cox took a stub of chalk from his pocket and drew a side-on outline of the hull of a ship. Then he drew three pairs of vertical straight lines from the top to the bottom of the ship. With crude cross-hatching he filled in the narrow space between each pair of lines, so that the ship was graphically divided into three parts.

Ernest Cox turned back to the company. ‘The hull of a warship,’ he said, ‘is built with many different watertight compartments, partitioned by metal walls or bulkheads. Now, boys, we’ve been making her watertight and pumping out the water. It hasn’t worked. So do you know what we’re going to do next? We’re going to do something different. In fact, we’re going to do the opposite.’

Leo glanced across at Tom McKenzie and Ernie McKeown. It was apparent from their bemused expressions that whatever was coming was going to be as big a surprise to them as it was for everybody else.

‘That’s right,’ said Ernest Cox. ‘Instead of pumping out water, we’re going to pump in air. Compressed air. We’re going to make these three bulkheads airtight, so that we’ve three separate sections of the ship and can control the air pressure in each section separately. Then we might be able to lift her in a controlled manner, do you see? Make the bow less buoyant or the midships more buoyant, as the case may be. We are going to do something, boys, that has never been done before, and in the work you do in these next weeks and months you will write yourselves into the history books.’

10

Now that Ernest Cox had decided what he wanted done, he brought in experts to advise him. The head diver Bill Peterson took part in these consultations and relayed their conclusions to Leo Sercombe and their other colleagues.

The three bulkheads ran through the many decks and countless compartments in the ship. It would have taken the divers years to seal them underwater. Enough air had to be pumped into the hull to enable men to work freely within it. In order to maintain this state, and allow men to pass from the open air and enter the ship whose air was in a pressurised state, airlocks had to be made.

Ernie McKeown found disused boilers six feet in diameter and twelve feet in length. Their tops and bottoms were cut away to render them tubes. Eight of these were welded and bolted together in the workshop in Lyness. Steel ladders were fitted the length of these new pipes, inside and out. This long airlock was carried out to the *Moltke* on a calm day on one of the tugs and taken to the fore end of the upturned hull at low table, when it was not far below the waterline. The spindly airlock was lowered into place by the tug's outriggers and chains, and bolted onto the ship. It was then secured with dozens of wire stays riveted to the hull like the guy ropes of a tent.

Tom McKenzie climbed into the airlock and down the ladder and cut through the bottom plating of the hull. An upper hatch was fitted at the top of the airlock and another, inner, hatch, twenty feet further down.

Two further airlocks were made and attached to the hull likewise, one for each of the three new sections to be formed.

Leo went out on the tender to the floating dock moored by the *Moltke*, from which compressed air was being pumped into the upturned battleship. He followed Tom McKenzie on a swaying rope gangway across from the dock to the airlock then climbed the metal ladder up the outside. They opened the upper iron door and climbed down the ladder into the lock. Tom McKenzie swung the door upwards into place, and turned the air valve. Compressed air flew shrieking through the valve with a sound like a hundred whistles.

McKenzie put his mouth to Leo's ear and yelled, 'It's a wee bit strange the first time.' He leaned back and gestured to his throat so that Leo could see him making a swallowing action. Leo did the same, repeatedly, responding to the sensation in his ears under the increasing pressure. He thought that something in his head would burst, but did not know what. His eardrums or blood vessels or brains. Soon he had no saliva left, his mouth and throat were dry. Again he copied Tom McKenzie who gripped his nostrils between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and blew, easing the pressure in his ears. Leo watched the needle on the dial of the air pressure move slowly round until the whistling and shrieking faded away. He did not think that anything could be worth repeating this experience for every time he came out to the ship from now on.

'Aye,' Tom said, 'you'll get used to it soon enough.'

Now they opened the inner door and climbed down the ladder and into the ship. The water-filled world they had moved through in their diving suits, and viewed from inside their copper helmets, or felt through darkness like blind men, they now traversed in breathable air. Everything was covered in a thick slime of oil and coal dust. A dark and stinking world. They wore oilskins and rubber macintoshes which became smothered with this filth. Lights were strung along passageways.

The three bulkheads ran up through the levels or decks of the ship, in various compartments. Throughout the spring of 1927 the divers were joined by others, labouring to seal them. They were like miners, but working under the sea instead of underground. Pipes were cut with oxyacetylene burners. These consumed much of the fresh air in order to maintain their heat at three thousand degrees, so the atmosphere was often foul. Pipes were blocked with wooden plugs set in red-lead putty. Buckled

doors were replaced by cement patches and fills. With the ship upside down, doors were often now twenty feet above the ceiling that had become the floor, so new ladders had to be attached to armour plate.

In the German crew's accommodation, they found photographs, clothing and personal effects in lockers and lying scattered amid the debris. Leo found bottles of fine wine, but it could not be enjoyed, for the pressure of the compressed air had blown the corks in. Harry Grosset found chocolate bars in a cupboard in the canteen, which he brought up and passed around. They still tasted good. Of course there was no evidence of the German sailors, who had scuttled their ships and escaped. Somewhere out on the bed of the North Sea lay the wreck of HMS *Queen Mary*, and the bones of Leo's friends interred within her.

In bad weather the men emerged from the top of the hundred-foot airlocks into wild blowing sky and had to hold tight and climb down the ladders on the outside with the locks pitching in the savage wind.

In May of that year all was ready. The bulkheads were airtight, and each was separately fed with compressed air. All the men left the ship and on a calm day late in the month gathered around her at a high spring tide, on the tugs and tenders and floating platforms. The last stage of the job was not rushed but instead slowed down, as the ship filled with air under ever-greater pressure, towards the point where negative buoyancy would give way to positive buoyancy. Leo stood on the tug *Sidonian* with the other divers. All of them had worked on some at least of the destroyers and they told Leo that if this worked as Father Cox hoped it would then he was about to see something he would never forget.

Ernest Cox strode the deck of the largest platform, equipped with his megaphone. He checked the gauges that showed the pressure, on fourteen-inch dials, to the nearest quarter of a pound, and told the men on the various machines to give more air, or slow down, or shut off. The compressors throbbed and generators chugged. Labourers stood smoking on the floating docks, waiting if needed for they knew not what. As well as the airlocks protruding from beneath the surface of the Flow, with their multitude of guy wires keeping them stable, rubber pipes now squirmed in the rough water like sea snakes, and electric cables ran down to feed the lights and other equipment inside the submerged ship.

'Look around,' Nobby Hall told Leo. 'We're all here waitin, like for a miracle. Father Cox there's like one of them old prophets, ain't he?'

Leo smiled and said it had not occurred to him but perhaps this was right. Nobby said he hadn't been one much for worship, but they'd had readings in school, and he seemed to recall vaguely a story in the Bible about making iron swim.

'You're right,' Leo said. 'Elisha led the Israelites to the River Jordan, and as they were cutting trees to build dwellings, one man dropped his axe in the water. Elisha made it float back to the surface, so the man could retrieve it.'

Nobby Hall grinned. 'There you go then, mate. Father Cox is like the Prophet Elisha. There you go.'

The day was unusually calm. Men chatted and smoked on the boats, then gradually they stopped speaking and turned their attention to the site of the wreck. Leo could not see anything happening. Yet they all sensed it. Workers on the floating platforms stopped what they were doing. Everyone looked towards the water.

'She's rising,' said Bill Peterson quietly.

Leo watched the three pillars of the airlocks creep upward. There came a long low groan from under the water. Harry Grosset said he had once heard a whale make such a sound. Bubbles of air appeared on the surface and popped. The sea began to ripple and roil and pitch like something cooking or fermenting. It frothed and foamed. It seethed and simmered.

The tugs pitched and swayed in turbulence; men lost their footing. Compressed air escaped from underneath the ship in twenty-foot bubbles. Suddenly there was a rush of water and the great broad hull reared up out of the sea, groaning, long tendrils of seaweed flailing from her sides in the sun.

Once positive buoyancy had been reached, and the suction of the mud in the seabed had given way, there was no way of controlling the ship's ascent. They could only watch as a million and a half cubic feet of surplus air was expended in seconds. The driving force shot the *Moltke* to the surface, sending waterspouts soaring upwards around her, as if heralding this monstrous arrival from the deep. Holding his breath, Leo watched the huge ship, all her twenty-four thousand tons of metal, rise above the surface and tower above them, seeming to breathe there in that ferment or get her breath back from the enormous effort of her resurrection, while sprays of water

containing the filthy slime inside the ship turned the surrounding sea a dirty brown, oil and air and bubbling seawater all gurgling together.

Sinc Mackenzie yelled, ‘She’s up!’ and Leo realised that all the men around him were cheering. He joined them. What they had just seen was a sight given to few men. Gradually the great upturned battleship settled, afloat. Ernest Cox ordered the tugs brought alongside her and secured.

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11

On the days following, the battleship was towed alongside Lyness Pier. The pier railway was extended with a long curve, and re-laid on *Moltke's* upturned hull. A light engine towed a three-ton crane along the tracks. Openings, six feet square, were cut into the hull. Men went down with oxyacetylene burners and cut loose whatever they could. Everything metal, large or small, that could be lifted out of the ship was raised by the cranes through the hatches in her hull cut for this purpose. Gun steel, with its high content of nickel and chromium. Boiler plates, with their low content of phosphorus and silver. Cox knew what everything was worth. Three thousand tons of metal were removed.

The open holes were plated over, and the ship was once more airtight. It floated, still upside down. Two corrugated-iron huts were riveted on the hull, each painted white. One was a machine room to house the three compressors required to maintain a constant air pressure for the journey. The other a kitchen, bunkhouse and mess room for a fourteen-man runner crew. Leo volunteered to join it. Ernest Cox planned to tow the ship, lighter than it had been but still weighing over twenty thousand tons, to the Admiralty dry dock at Rosyth in the Firth of Forth.

Two towing bollards were fixed a hundred feet from the bow of the upturned hull, and lines from these were taken up by a large tug. A hundred feet further back a bollard was bolted on the port side, another on the starboard, and a small tug secured to each.

Lifeboats and rafts were attached to the *Moltke*, and the tugs towed the huge overturned German battleship out of the Flow, through the Pentland Firth and out onto the North Sea. The tugs hauled the ship south, her great weight pulling them back, so that their progress was slow but steady in the swelling sea.

On the morning of the fourth day the *Moltke* approached the Firth of Forth. Ernest Cox stood surveying the channel before them. Somehow he managed to look as smart as ever in his Harris tweeds and brogues and the trilby pushed down tight on his head.

‘You’ll tell your grandchildren about this,’ he said, turning to Leo. ‘I know you’ve got no children yet, lad, but you’re young, you surely will.’ He stamped on the metal plate they stood on. ‘Aye, Leo, you can say that you were one of Ernest Cox’s men. No one’s lifted such a ship as this. No one’s towed a ship so far upside down either. How about that, eh, sonny?’

Leo did not think he had ever seen a man so satisfied. With good reason. ‘Tis been quite a year,’ he said. He could not do as others did and address Ernest Cox as ‘Father’.

‘The first of many,’ Cox said. ‘It’ll be like the destroyers. We learned from all our mistakes on the first one. The rest came up quicker every time.’ He put his hands on his hips and squared his shoulders. ‘You’re a good diver, Leo Sercombe. Mac thinks highly of you, you know. Bill Peterson too. I intend to raise your pay. You’ll be earning good money with me.’

Leo nodded slowly. ‘I appreciate what you’re sayin, Mister Cox. But this is it for me.’

Ernest Cox looked at Leo with a mystified frown upon his face. He did not seem able to understand what he’d heard.

‘I’ve been long enough in the North,’ Leo said.

Cox scowled. His face reddened and it seemed he was about to curse. But he was in too good a mood to be angry. He shrugged. ‘I’ll be damn’ sorry to lose you, sonny,’ he said. ‘Have you had bad news?’

Leo shook his head. ‘No.’ He drew on his cigarette. ‘I’ve been a wanderer, at other men’s beck and call, long enough. I should make something of my own.’

‘What kind of thing?’ Cox asked.

‘A field. A horse.’ Leo smiled. ‘A home. It don’t sound like much.’

‘If you’ve got none of those things, sounds like a lot,’ Ernest Cox said. ‘To make it work might not be easy.’

'I doubt it will.'

Cox rested one hand on the young man's shoulder. 'Few things worth doing are, sonny.'

Leo looked around. He had to admit that the man spoke from a position of authority. Cox looked up at Leo and said, 'But we're not done here yet. We've still to bring this piece of scrap to the dock.'

*

Ernest Cox radioed ahead for an Admiralty pilot, and arranged for him to come out and meet them at Inchkeith, at an agreed time, to guide them through the Firth of Forth, under the great bridge, and on to the dock at Rosyth. The galley cook announced that breakfast was served. They ate their morning meal of porridge followed by bacon and the last of the eggs they'd brought, with fried bread, and mugs of tea. The radio operator came in and reported contact with the leading tug.

'The pilot's on board, Father.'

Ernest Cox swallowed a mouthful of tea and said, 'He can't be yet.' He strode out of the corrugated-iron hut onto the hull and marched along towards the fore end. Other men followed him. 'Binoculars,' he said without turning round.

Tom McKenzie had a pair slung around his neck. Stooping forward, he removed them and walked faster to catch up with his boss. Cox took the glasses and stopped and raised them to his eyes.

Leo came up level with the two men and followed Ernest Cox's gaze. He did not need binoculars to see that a boat was now tied to the leading tug, a hundred feet ahead of the *Moltke*. Beyond, a second boat was approaching out of the Firth, with the Royal Navy ensign flying.

Without lowering the glasses, Ernest Cox said, 'Get me a boat.'

Leo looked at Tom McKenzie, who gestured towards the aft of the upturned hull. 'The rowboat'll be quickest,' he said. Leo accompanied him to the small lifeboat. Tom McKenzie waved others over too. They untied the boat and lowered it to the water then unrolled the rope ladder, with its wooden spars. Leo climbed down first and fixed the rowlocks in position while Tom McKenzie and two others followed. They found their oars and raised them as Ernest Cox climbed down the ladder and stepped into the boat.

The men on that side pushed off from the *Moltke* with their oars and they rowed out and on, around the side tug tied to the ship, towards the leading tug. The sea that had appeared calm from on top of the hull was choppy in the small boat.

'Faster, men, faster!' Ernest Cox yelled. Leo rowed hard, his unaccustomed muscles on fire.

When they reached the leading tug, Ernest Cox directed them to steer the boat between the two larger ones already tied to her. As soon as one of the crew on the tug had grasped the rope thrown to him and pulled their boat flush with the side, Ernest Cox rose and clambered out. The others could hear him yelling, 'What the bloody hell is going on here?'

'It's gettin crowded on that tug and no mistake,' one of the rowers said.

Tom McKenzie caught Leo's eye again and said, 'We'd better go after him.'

They heaved themselves aboard the tug and walked across its deck. Mac climbed the short ladder to the bridge. Leo stayed at the bottom and watched from there. On the bridge of the tug the skipper introduced a man he said was a Firth of Forth pilot. He explained that the man had hailed him, and come on board.

'We're towing this hulk to the Admiralty dock at Rosyth,' Cox said. He pointed to a man in naval uniform. 'And this Admiralty pilot is going to guide me.'

The Firth pilot shook his head. 'I can't allow that.'

'You'll do what the bloody hell I tell you,' Cox said.

'The tug skipper here accepted me,' the Forth pilot said. 'Once I'm appointed I can't be removed until the vessel's docked.'

Ernest Cox turned to the Admiralty pilot. 'You're a naval officer,' he said. 'Pull bloody rank or something.'

'I've been contracted to do the job,' he explained to the Firth pilot.

'That's no concern of mine.'

'I can't be removed either,' the naval pilot said. 'I refuse to leave this bridge.'

Tom McKenzie stepped forward. 'Can you two not work together?' he suggested.

The pilots looked at Mac, and at each other, with similar expressions that seemed to combine distaste with incredulity.

'Pilots working in pairs?' one asked.

Leo turned and walked back across the deck of the tug. He leaned over the side. The two men in their lifeboat looked up and Leo shrugged. He stood and walked to the back of the tug and rolled a cigarette and lit it. As he exhaled the smoke of the first drag he heard faint cries in the distance and looked behind him. The men of the runner crew on the upturned hull of the *Moltke* were waving and yelling. One of the other tugs sounded its horn. Leo turned and looked forward. He saw that though the tugs had stopped towing some while earlier, all the vessels were drifting on the ebb tide. He reckoned the tide had about a five-knot run. He looked ahead and saw to his horror the massive Forth Bridge looming.

Now the men above him on the tug saw what was happening. They were heading for the central pillar of the bridge! One of the pilots took command, or they worked in unison, Leo did not know, but the order was given to the tugs to cast off their tow lines. They did so, and all watched the twenty-thousand-ton hulk of out-of-control metal float towards the pillar.

If that pillar was struck by the tremendous weight and motile force of the *Moltke* it would be a disaster. If a train was crossing at the time many people would surely be killed. Cox would be ruined anyhow. All the men's jobs would be lost. Leo would never receive the rest of his pay. He watched in horror, unable to breathe. The miracle of the raising followed so soon by catastrophe. *The haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the pride of men shall be brought low.* Leo stood on the leading tug and watched the hulk turn broadside and glide through the left-hand bay, missing the pillar by no more than a few feet. He gasped a huge gulp of the Forth air.

The tugs caught up with the *Moltke* on the far side of the bridge and once more took her in tow, one lashed to either side, the leading tug pulling her forward. They brought her to the dry dock and inched her in, Ernest Cox yelling orders from the hull with his megaphone. Spectators came and went along the side of the dock to view the extraordinary sight. Leo and the rest of the running crew stood upon the hull like hunters who had captured this wild and huge beast of the deep, this iron leviathan, and brought its corpse to land.

When the docking was complete Ernest Cox threw his megaphone into the air, and one by one embraced his men. The dock was closed and drained. The *Moltke* rested on pillars in the dry dock. Her upper decks, now beneath her, were covered with barnacles and sponges, blue mussel shells,

and anemones in the full range – red, orange, blue-yellow – of subaquatic colour.

On the days following the men gathered the gear off the hull of the *Moltke* and took it on the tugs back to Scapa Flow. Leo said goodbye to them. Ernest Cox arranged for his pay to be delivered, and Leo carried his bag and got a lift to Waverley Station in Edinburgh, to find a train and begin the journey down to the South West of England.

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Part Six

THE GREY THOROUGHBRED 1923–1926

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1

In 1923, female students were admitted to the Royal Veterinary College in Camden, London, for the first time. Two women, Lottie Prideaux and Muriel Furst, took six-month courses. Both had previously worked as assistants to veterinary surgeons, Muriel to her father in Birmingham. Since assisting Patrick Jago during the war, Lottie had worked on her own, attending to animals on the estate. Digs were found for them to share close to the college.

‘Well, my dear, you’re off to live in the great metropolis,’ Arthur Prideaux said to his daughter at breakfast on the morning she left. ‘A day I never thought would come. Perhaps you might even find time to enjoy some of the delights of our capital.’

‘I shall not,’ Lottie told him. ‘As you well know, Papa, I intend to work hard, learn all I can, and return as soon as possible.’

Her stepmother’s teacup was returned to its saucer with a loud chink. ‘I cannot believe you,’ she said. Alice could not hide her envy. She wished to bring her children up in London. She allowed that bucolic isolation might be acceptable for their infancy, but maintained that the stimulation of city life was an absolute necessity once they acquired the use of reason, which she believed to be at the age of seven. Arthur pointed out that from that age the boys would be away at school most of the year, and whatever other arrangements prevailed, they’d surely spend summer in the country. Their

eldest child, James, was not yet quite seven, and Alice's parents had made their town house available for as many visits as she might wish.

'I don't care how hard you study, Lottie,' her stepmother said. 'I'm going to come and sweep you off to Liberty's. They've new premises and I can't wait to visit.'

Lottie raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'Thank you, Alice,' she said. 'You are far too generous. But I warn you, you'd have to drag me into town.'

The main doors set in the façade of the college were opened at 8 a.m. Most mornings the two female students stood there waiting. The doors gave access to a vaulted archway that led to the main quadrangle, laid to lawns and flowerbeds. The only evidence of its veterinary function were the gravel setts or walkways, and the quadrangle resounding to the clatter of shoes and cracking of whips as horses were trotted, being studied for lameness. The buildings surrounding the quadrangle housed a bone room, botanical classroom, dissecting room, pathological laboratory, and the offices of the professors.

On the ground floor of one side of the quadrangle were stables, generally occupied by horses awaiting assessment for soundness, and a loose box for use while examining horses' eyes.

'I don't think I ever really believed such a place as this existed,' Lottie told Muriel during their first week. 'Devoted to the study of such animals. I might have dreamed it.'

The middle quadrangle had a massive glass roof supported on iron columns. At the northern end was a table at which small animals were attended to in the Poor People's outpatient clinic, which took place each morning between 9 a.m. and noon. Owners came with their moggies and mutts, and sat waiting their turn on a bench along the wall. Muriel spent every morning here, for virtually all her work in Birmingham had been with domestic pets. Students had to work in pairs. She and Lottie interviewed owners, examined the patients, made a diagnosis and proposed treatment. If an operation such as castration or spaying was required, they led the patient to the small-animal operating theatre off the archway between the quads. Under a professor's guidance the women performed the operations, taking it in turns to act as surgeon or anaesthetist.

The veterinary work that occupied Lottie at home was chiefly with large animals on the estate, and it was to these she turned her principal attention

while at the college. She attended lectures on hygiene, surgery and the pathology of farm animals. There were always cattle, sheep and pigs awaiting examination in a yard behind the lecture theatre. An area of the middle quadrangle was covered in straw and in this bed horses were cast and operated on in the afternoons. This was the domain of final, fourth-year students, but Lottie observed whenever she could. Not that she reckoned she'd be able to manage the arduous and awkward work while dressed in a long skirt. Back home on the estate Lottie wore what she liked.

At first, Muriel beseeched her friend to stay with her so that they could work on the small animals as a pair, but as male students queued up to offer themselves as colleagues she let Lottie go. Muriel was a plain, stoutly built young woman, a couple of years younger than Lottie, yet there was something that drew men to her. Lottie could not quite see what it was. A teasing lilt in the way she spoke with them, perhaps. A sense of self-awareness when she moved, how she moved, that attracted them.

In the room they shared back at their digs Lottie asked Muriel if she knew what she was doing.

'I do now,' Muriel said, 'though I didn't used to. I don't ask them to push themselves forward. It makes no sense, does it? You're twice as pretty as I am.'

'I didn't mean that,' Lottie said. She did not tell Muriel that she herself did not intend ever to trust a man again. She was simply curious.

'Ten times prettier. And they're mostly sons of vets, just like I'm the daughter of one. They know you're from nobility.'

Most of the students were younger than Lottie. She was approached, but she told one prospective suitor that she was engaged to be married to a peer of the realm, another that she was a divorcee, and the invitations ceased.

*

The Professor of Surgery was a pioneer of equine abdominal surgery, and Lottie attended all his lectures. She spent as much time as she could in the dissecting room, and volunteered to assist at post-mortem examinations. She was permitted to attend the London, Scottish and Midland Railway stable to the east of the college on Saturdays, when lame horses were examined. Most Sundays she came back into the college to help the laboratory assistants. When Alice sent a telegram saying she would pick her

up from her digs the following Saturday morning, Lottie replied with the words: REGRET TOO BUSY. SEE YOU BACK HOME. She made no trips to the West End, or Oxford Street. The six months were gone before she knew it, and she returned with renewed confidence to the West Country.

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2

Lottie Prideaux beheld the vicar's pair of cocker spaniels. The younger one scurried around her, rose on its hind legs, demanding food or attention or simply out of uncontrollable excitement. The other lay on a rug in the drawing room, glancing up at her with a defeated expression.

'She's been poisoned,' Reverend Doddridge said.

'Who on earth would do such a thing?' Lottie asked him.

'A thief.'

'You've been robbed?'

'No,' the vicar said. 'He got poor Mabel but Edna chased him off. I dreamed I heard her barking in the night, but did not wake.'

Lottie did not believe the excitable young spaniel at her feet would chase away any intruder, but rather welcome them.

'Or possibly some other blackguard,' the vicar said.

'Do you have enemies?' Lottie asked. She knelt and examined the stricken bitch.

'The call to righteousness has many enemies,' the vicar replied. 'Myself, personally, none that I know of. Unless some member of the Chapel believes cruelty to animals a legitimate expression of schismatic dissent.'

Lottie wondered if this was the vicar's attempt at humour. She suspected not. His devotion to his dogs was well known, and he took their well-being more seriously than that of members of his flock. He had been the incumbent for over forty years, and always kept two female spaniels. As

one neared her end he bought a puppy, always unrelated. He did not breed but had the puppies spayed as soon as they had had their first season, during which he protected them from male canine attention under lock and key. Mabel was a little over six years old. Lottie herself had lethalled the previous ailing spaniel, Reverend Doddridge hovering over them like some grim guardian angel as she applied first chloroform, then when the dog was unconscious a concentrated vapour. Reverend Doddridge had the gardener dig a grave in a spinney in the vicarage garden, where the old girl could rest with her predecessors.

‘Or perhaps it is distemper,’ he said. ‘I’m sure Mrs Dagworthy has some castor oil. And syrup of buckthorn. Is that what she needs?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Lottie told him.

‘Can’t you see the poor girl is fading before our eyes? She’s paralysed ... that’s what distemper leads to, is it not? Or clots in the blood vessels, they’re deadly too, aren’t they?’

Lottie massaged the quiet spaniel. The younger one tried to lick her fingers as she did so. She asked the vicar if he wouldn’t mind removing Edna to another room, as the youngster’s antics were distracting. He said he could not leave Mabel in her distress and instead lifted a small bell that was on a reading table and rang it vigorously. They heard footsteps approaching along the stone-flagged passage from the kitchen, and the housekeeper Mrs Dagworthy appeared in the doorway.

‘Please take away this unquiet dog,’ the vicar said. He gently picked Edna up and, cradling her in his two large hands, passed her to his housekeeper, who turned and carried away the yapping puppy.

‘You may have been right the first time,’ Lottie said.

‘Mabel’s been poisoned?’

‘It looks to me like dropsy. It feels like there is an obstruction of the portal circulation.’

Reverend Doddridge said nothing, and when Lottie glanced up at him she saw the puzzlement on his face.

‘The liver,’ Lottie said. ‘She might perhaps have consumed something with lead in it. We all know how greedy spaniels can be. They’ll wolf down all sorts of muck, indiscriminately.’

The vicar looked pained, as if he could hardly bear for one of his dogs to exhibit a human vice. Lottie reassured him that Mabel was young enough to

recover, if given calomel, and also a decoction of broom, which could be got from the chemist in Wiveliscombe.

‘But most important,’ she said, ‘is to rub her right side, from the last rib to the hip, with embrocation.’

‘Every day?’ Reverend Doddridge asked.

‘Certainly,’ Lottie told him. ‘The influence you produce on the nerves of her skin will be carried to her liver, it’ll be just what she needs.’

‘I shall do it, without fail,’ the vicar said.

‘And if Edna exhibits signs of jealousy,’ Lottie added, ‘you may give her a massage too.’

Reverend Doddridge smiled. This produced a somewhat sinister effect upon his face. ‘That is a fine idea, Miss Charlotte,’ he said.

‘Don’t worry,’ Lottie said. ‘Mabel’s greed is not life-threatening. Unlike some incidences. A fortnight ago, cows got through a fence into Mrs Tucker’s garden, over at Manor Farm.’

‘I suppose they gorged themselves on her vegetables?’ the vicar asked. He rose to his feet. Mabel already looked perkier. ‘Or her flowers, perhaps?’

‘A reasonable assumption,’ Lottie said. ‘But false, I’m afraid. They went for her washing on the line. Most of the beasts were little affected. They passed the various socks and vests through their four stomachs. But one greedy Ruby Red tried to eat an entire bedsheet, and choked on it. She was dead when I arrived.’

Lottie rode her motorcycle back to the estate. Villagers and farmworkers watched her pass. A plume of snuff-coloured dust rose from her wheels. Her home was a cottage once inhabited by the Wombwell family. Mr Wombwell had died young, neither of his sons had returned from the Great European War, and when crippled Florence Wombwell died a fortnight after Lottie came back from the veterinary college in London, in 1924, she’d asked her father if she could live there. Arthur assured her there was no need to move out of the big house, there was plenty of room for everyone. Alice said she should have a larger house, they could build a new one in the grounds for her, it was unbecoming for Lord and Lady Prideaux’s daughter or stepdaughter to inhabit a labourer’s tied cottage. But Lottie insisted it would suit her perfectly. She had it emptied and stripped. Floorboards were freshly oiled, rotting window frames replaced. Plumbing was installed. An

extension was added onto the back of the cottage with one room for her surgery, another for storage and preparation of medicines.

On Saturdays Lottie saw domestic animals in her surgery. The queue of patients and their owners often stretched into the afternoon, attending from an ever-wider radius around the estate. On weekdays she visited the farms.

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3

Each day dawned hotter than the one before in the summer of 1926. Without rain, many crops struggled. In his study Arthur Prideaux watched the needle on the slowly turning drum of his barograph, hoping for a sign of change in the atmospheric pressure, but the line on the graph only scrawled upwards. By the middle of July the mercury in the thermometer on the wall in the hall rarely dropped below eighty degrees even after nightfall.

On Sunday 11 July Arthur and Alice and the three boys were joined for lunch by Lottie and also Alice's mother, Maud, Lady Grenvil. They began with a chicken broth. Alice asked Lottie how she managed in this heatwave, riding her noisome motorcycle in those heavy clothes, and manhandling large animals.

'I must confess, I wouldn't mind a little rain,' Lottie said. 'A light breeze.'

'It's ghastly,' Maud Grenvil said. 'I was brought up in India, where one went up into the hills when the heat in the plains grew unbearable. Here, what can one do? Climb Dunkery Hill? One would simply expire in the attempt and that would be that.'

Garnished ham and galantine of veal were brought from the kitchen, served with a hard-boiled egg salad, another of beetroot and potato, a third of tomato and watercress, which Alice's mother proclaimed was efficacious not only for women in their confinement or recovery from childbirth, but also for those heavily outnumbered by male members of their household.

Alice laughed and said, ‘Thank goodness you are here, Mama. But don’t worry. The odds will be shortened at the end of the holidays, when Edward joins James at Tyttenhanger Lodge.’

George heard this and demanded to be allowed to join his older brothers at preparatory school. ‘There won’t be anyone left for me to play with,’ he protested.

Arthur Prideaux turned to his eldest son, James. ‘Could you ask your younger brother,’ he said, ‘not to be in quite such a hurry to dash off and leave me at the mercy of these women?’

James smiled, but George frowned and said, ‘Couldn’t you call in reinforcements, Papa?’

Alice repeated ‘reinforcements’, and said it was an impressive word coming from a five year old. Edward explained that it had occurred in the book Aunt Lottie was reading to them. George denied this. He knew the word anyway, he hadn’t got it from anyone.

‘Do you know, I read an article the other day,’ his father said. ‘It claimed that, far from coining new words all the time, increasing our potential to express all we experience, in fact the English language is losing more words than it gains. More slip out of use, are forgotten, become archaic, than are invented. The language is impoverished, and so are we.’ He looked around the table at his sons. ‘Rather sad, don’t you think? You chaps, it’s up to your generation to reverse this sorry trend.’

The boys had milk jelly for pudding while the adults took coffee and chocolates in the drawing room. Afterwards, a wicket was set up on the lawn, stumps hammered into the hard earth, ruining one bat, and bails laid on top. Arthur and Lottie joined in the game. James said it was a belter of a wicket, and his father warned him not to bowl any bumpers. Lottie bowled underarm. She said it was as cumbersome to play cricket in a skirt as it was to do most other things. She regretted that she didn’t wear breeches on a Sunday as on weekdays.

George swung wildly and missed. Edward possessed a pair of pads but would not let anyone else use them, and wore them himself even when fielding in the slips. They used a tennis ball, though James could easily send it for a six into the jungle. The Labradors nosed round after it while a replacement was tossed down from the terrace, where Alice and her mother watched from beneath parasols.

Play was interrupted by the housekeeper Gladys Whittle, who informed her ladyship that his lordship had a message from the stables. *It has arrived.* Alice passed this on. Arthur called out, ‘Draw stumps. Play over,’ and marched off towards the side of the house leading to the stables. Edward said it was unfair, it was his turn to bat next, Gladys should be twelfth man and bring some drinks out to the pitch and they could resume after. But the others were already following their father.

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4

The horse was unlike any that had ever been seen on the estate. He stood some seventeen hands high. His glossy hide was grey. He had deep shoulders and a strong chest, a short back and powerful hindquarters. His withers were well defined, the neck long and his head refined, handsome. Altogether he was an incredible combination of muscularity and elegance. Lottie looked at his eyes. They were bright and shining, commanding. She had witnessed such creatures before, in the enclosure at Epsom, and they were striking then, led round by their dwarfish riders. But to see a pure thoroughbred here in the stable yard of their home in a hidden corner of the West Country was quite different. He stood there like some magical creature, a visitor from a higher realm.

Even her father and Herb Shattock, inspecting the stallion, seemed diminished beside him.

'I thought you should wish to have a look, master,' the groom said. 'Before he goes over to the stud farm.'

'I should indeed,' Lord Prideaux said. 'Let the poor chap have a day or two to recover from the journey.'

As they spoke, the two men ran their hands over the animal's skin. Perhaps they were aware of doing so but Lottie thought not. They could not help themselves in their appreciation of his conformation, his beauty. He had a certain nervousness, rising off his hooves on the cobblestones of the stable yard. Yet he gave no indication of a desire to escape. He possessed a

regal bearing, a poise, that suggested his awareness of the impression he made on these human beings and enjoyment of their attention. His restlessness was the expression of the energy latent within him, ready to explode into action when required.

Lottie wished to caress the stallion too, but held back, letting her father enjoy the moment. Watching the two men, master and closest servant, so alike in physical stature, it occurred to her that with a slight calibration or adjustment of class relations they could be best friends. Or perhaps without, in fact, realising it, they actually were. She did not know. Perhaps the differences between them, of wealth, of power, of freedom and opportunity, were insignificant compared to what united them. Horses, the land, their love and care for herself, and her mother before her.

The boys were in the yard. Alice implored them to keep away from the stallion. ‘Come back here,’ she cried as each boy took a step closer than his brothers. Lottie turned and looked behind her. At the end of the stable block a crowd had gathered. Word had spread through the house, the gardens, across the estate amongst those perambulating on their afternoon off. A maid, a gardener, farmers and their wives, children, ploughmen who worked every day with heavy horses, all stood and beheld the remarkable beast.

*

On the day following, Lottie returned to the stables after breakfast. There was no one around but she heard noises and followed them to the paddock. Herb Shattock’s eldest lad led the grey horse on a long rope, circling him. Arthur Prideaux and his head groom leaned against the upper pole of the fence, watching. Lottie joined them, and stood beside her father. She asked how long they had the stallion for. How many mares did her father intend him to cover?

Her father turned to her with a grin upon his whiskered face. ‘I’ve not hired him, my dear,’ he said. ‘I’ve bought him. He’s ours. We’ll breed from him, but we’ll also hire him out. I’m convinced there’s nothing to compare with him in the entire West Country. Unless they’re deeply camouflaged.’

‘I had no idea, Papa,’ Lottie said. She shook her head. ‘I thought my father was a man of caution.’

Arthur Prideaux removed his hat with his left hand and with his right wiped the sweat from his forehead. He nodded in the general direction of the big house. ‘Not a word to Alice. I’ve not told her yet. She still hopes to persuade me to make our main home in London, when George goes off to school. But once I’ve explained it to her, she’ll realise that with this new commitment to the stud farm, I couldn’t leave it in someone else’s hands. I mean, behold this fellow. This beautiful hot-blooded horse. I intend to come and regard him every day.’

Lottie’s father was rarely so exuberant. He told her that the stallion had raced thirty times over five seasons. He’d won only four races. ‘But he was placed a further eighteen. If he’d won one or two more races I’d have had to pay a lot more for him, do you see? But he was often unlucky.’

The lad led the horse towards the spectators, then turned and led him away, his hooves kicking up the dry dust. The lad was in his shirtsleeves and there was sweat at his armpits and on his back.

‘You can see,’ Arthur Prideaux said, ‘what outstanding straight paces he has.’

‘Abundance a bone, there, sir,’ Herb Shattock agreed. ‘Excellent feet an all.’

‘He’ll add size and bone to our lighter mares, and quality to the heavier ones.’

‘That he will,’ the groom agreed. ‘And he seems to have a good temperament from what I seen so far.’

‘Indeed,’ Lord Prideaux said. ‘I wish to ride him.’

When Lottie turned to look at her father, she saw that Herb Shattock had done likewise. She herself wore, no doubt, a similar expression of consternation or dismay. Her father still gazed at the stallion with a benign grin. Herb Shattock narrowed his eyes. Lottie caught his gaze and glimpsed an infinitesimal shake of his head.

‘Is that a good idea, Papa?’ she said.

‘After lunch, Shattock,’ he said. ‘I shall ride him on the gallops.’

‘With all due respect, your lordship, do you not think he might be a bit high-strung for you, sir?’

‘I’ve ridden some of the meanest hunters in the Quantocks. With far worse tempers than this fine chap.’

‘But with nothin like his power, master. Look at him quiverin. Unless you hold him back. If you’re even able to. I mean, I don’t know as anyone

could, the speed of him. You bain't as young as you was, sir.'

Arthur Prideaux chuckled. 'You're saying I'm too old, my dear Shattock?'

The groom looked at a loss for words. 'Maybe if Miss Charlotte wished to ride him for you, sir. Or there's one a my lads I reckon I'd trust.'

Lord Prideaux laughed as if his groom had cracked the best joke imaginable. 'My daughter ride him,' he said, 'but not me?' He turned and began to walk away, still chuckling. Half-turning, he said over his shoulder, 'I shall come back after lunch. See if you can sort out a half-decent saddle.'

5

‘Is it merely indigestion?’ James Sparke asked. ‘Tis merely indigestion, yes? I think so.’

The boar lay upon the straw of his sty.

‘I let ’em give ’im too many raw spuds, Miss Charlotte, that’s what it is, no?’

Lottie stepped into the sty and examined the pig. He did not object.

‘I mean, ’tis not swine fever, that’s for sure. He ain’t so languid as all that and his skin ain’t cold, see?’

Lottie had been halfway through her lunch when Gideon Sparke knocked upon the door of her cottage and stood there, sweating and breathless in the heat of the day. He apologised for coming on a Sunday. Perhaps he had run there, but he was an overweight man, of much the same age as Lottie, so it was possible he had only walked.

‘Please, miss,’ he said, ‘Father asks if you’ll come and look at our prize pig.’

James Sparke held the tenancy of Wood Farm, the smallest on the estate. Though like all the others it mixed animal and arable, with varieties of each, he had a monopoly on breeding pigs. He sold a piglet or two for fattening to almost every farmer and labourer, and when the time for slaughter came he travelled around and did the job himself. The pigs were his main concern. He believed he had a gift for both understanding their character and tending

to their welfare. He worried constantly that should he fail to reach his usual high standards the master might relieve him of his unique responsibility.

As a rule James Sparke kept two boars and half a dozen breeding sows at any one time, as well as one or two of his own fattening pigs.

'How long has he been so inactive?' Lottie asked.

'No more an a day,' James Sparke said. 'Two at most.'

'Has he taken any food?'

The farmer shook his head. His son Gideon watched from outside the sty. One or two other members of the family hovered there too. Whenever Lottie made a visit to a farm, she often found her diagnostic examination being witnessed by a small crowd.

'If it was merely indigestion he would eat a little and would move about the field like the others.'

'But those red blotches, miss.'

'Symptoms, I believe, of measles.'

James Sparke groaned. 'No.'

Measles was a parasitic disease caused by small bladder-worms in the substance of a pig's muscles. On consumption by human beings in pork these developed into tapeworms. Measly pork was one of James Sparke's worst fears.

'Just because he has measles,' Lottie said, 'doesn't mean the others have, but we'll keep an eye on them. And separate him for the time being.'

The farmer asked her what the treatment was, and she said that oddly enough it was much the same as for indigestion. 'Add ten drops of croton oil to a small teaspoonful of sugar, and put this on his tongue. Give him some warm-water enemas if he needs them, which I imagine he probably does, and put some bicarbonate of soda in his drinking water. You might add some milk to it to tempt him. What's the matter, Mister Sparke? Do you not have these substances to hand?'

James Sparke was frowning. 'I do, miss,' he said. 'It ain't that. It's just that I don't believe he'll let me put nothin in his mouth never mind his rear end. I do adore him but he's a cussed beast and he don't like me.'

Lottie smiled. 'Then he is a most ungrateful creature, Mister Sparke. Will he take it from Gideon here?'

'He might, Miss Charlotte. The trouble is, I wouldn't let Giddy nor no one else near him.'

Lottie shook her head. ‘Get an old clog,’ she said. ‘Drill a hole in the end. Mix the oil and sugar in a solution of warm water. Press the clog into the pig’s mouth and pour the medicine in.’ Lottie knew how impatient she sounded but could not help herself. She doubted whether she would ever develop the soothing manner required of veterinary surgeons. She knew that she should be more indulgent of her patient’s owner’s foibles, and reassure him that he cared for his animal with unrivalled solicitude. But at least the more she asked James Sparke to do for his pig, the happier he would be. ‘Use a clog and he will swallow the medicine, and do so without choking.’ She turned to go. ‘Oh, and as soon as he begins to resume eating, mix one or two teaspoonfuls of both bicarb of soda and flowers of sulphur in his meal.’

James Sparke nodded. ‘Mornin and evenin, Miss Charlotte?’

‘Yes. Both.’

Lottie walked home from Wood Farm along a footpath that ran across a wheat field, her veterinary instruments in a rucksack on her back, her shirt damp beneath it. She wore a wide-brimmed hat that shaded her eyes from the full force of the sun. She reached out and tugged loose an ear of corn, and worked a grain from it with her thumb and forefinger. She put the grain in her mouth, and chewed it as she walked along, enjoying the nutty taste on her tongue.

Lottie had planned to watch her father ride the grey stallion. James Sparke and his prize pig had taken two hours of her time. Perhaps, she thought, her father had come to his senses and let the stable lad ride instead. Or would let Lottie herself. Despite Herb Shattock’s declaration of her competence, the prospect frightened her.

The ground on the path through the wheat field was hard as stone, and fissured with cracks. It was amazing how the crop thrived in the arid soil.

There was no doubt that the farmers called on Lottie now more often than they ever had on a vet, for whose services they’d had to pay. Hers were free, though being proud men or perhaps married to proud women they paid her in kind. Items of food were delivered to her cottage. Joints of meat, fruit, vegetables, butter, cheese, eggs. Often she could not eat it all herself and took her bounty in turn to the big house and handed it over to the cook.

It was equally not in doubt that under her ministrations there were already fewer animal fatalities, illnesses, contagious diseases. Lottie’s father

had given his daughter an allowance to live on. Now they called it her salary and both of them were happy. Arthur reckoned this arrangement was enormously beneficial to the success of the estate. Word spread. An article about them had recently appeared in *Country Life*. Lord Prideaux was held up as a model landowner.

Lottie walked past the empty paddock and through the spinney and up past the stable block. There was an almost buried sound of buzzing in the air, a hum in the background in the afternoon heat of the day. A crow rose from some shrubbery, croaking and squawking like one affronted by a rude remark and leaving in high dudgeon. Lottie gazed towards the gallops and saw a shimmering figure approaching out of the middle distance. She stood and watched. Through the haze, Herb Shattock led his own horse, a brown hunter of medium height, towards her. Then he altered direction, away from the stables, towards the manor house, and as he turned so Lottie saw something slung across the saddle. A dark object. It was the body of a man. His legs hung to the side Lottie could see, boots swaying slightly with the movement of the horse.

She ran towards them. As she came closer Lottie called out, but Herb Shattock did not seem to hear her. Neither, it seemed, could he see her through his tears.

They laid her father's body on his bed. A boy was sent to fetch the doctor, another the vicar. While they waited, the valet Adam Score asked to undress his master and wash him and dress him in clean clothes, but Alice said they must wait for the undertaker. She did not seem shocked or saddened but rather enraged by what had happened, her jaw clenched, bunched fists white at the knuckles. Maids kept the boys away. The house was silent.

Alice knelt beside the bed and took Arthur's hand in hers and squeezed it and yelled once, furiously, then leaned against his body and wept. Lottie looked out of the window. She saw Herb Shattock walk towards the gallops accompanied by two of his stable lads. He carried something with him. At first Lottie thought it was a stick. Then she realised it was a rifle.

She had once, in very different circumstances, dissuaded him from destroying a horse. She would not do so this time, and did not move from the window. She recalled that blue roan with a twisted gut, the vigil she had held in its loose box as it died in agony, how selfish she had been. She

should have let Herb Shattock destroy the horse and held her vigil for it after death.

Lottie recalled too the boy who had joined her and would not leave until after the roan had expired. When would Leo Sercombe return? He had said that he would, and she reckoned him to be a person of his word. Perhaps he had perished in the war, like so many. She did not think of him as often as she used to.

No, Lottie thought, even if she could get there in time, she would not stay Herb Shattock from his plan of action. Instead she turned and walked to the bed and knelt next to Alice and put an arm around her shoulders and allowed herself to weep beside her.

6

The vicar told the congregation packed into the village church for the funeral of Arthur, Lord Prideaux, that in the midst of life we are in death. Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower. He fleeth as it were a shadow. And if the Lord God saw fit to take the master from us at the age of fifty-seven there must be some purpose to it, though he, a mortal priest, could not see it. He said that he wished to provide consolation to Lord Prideaux's young widow, his three boys, his daughter, his friends, and all those who lived and worked upon the estate, not to mention their kin in the village. But he could not do so. Only the Lord God could. They must seek consolation from God, there was nowhere else. Put your trust in Him.

'And now, Lord, what is my hope? Truly, my hope is even in Thee. Deliver me from all mine offences, and make me not a rebuke unto the foolish.'

Arthur Prideaux's coffin rested on trestles in the chancel. Despite the season, and the congregation packed inside, the church was musty and damp. Lottie could smell the candles too. She was not the only unwed woman in the church. Even all these years after it had ended, the absence of men lost in the Great War was evident.

The atmosphere amongst the mourners was strange. Lottie glanced around. She understood that beneath the grief and sadness lay a thick sediment of fear. So many livelihoods relied upon the master. A hundred

people on the estate, in the house, in the timber yard, on the farms. Others in the village, like the blacksmith and the wheelwright. Including Reverend Doddridge himself, for Lord Prideaux was patron of the living. All feared for their futures.

Soon they would lower his coffin into the grave in the corner of the churchyard reserved for the Prideaux family, beside the plot holding Arthur's first wife, Lottie's mother. She imagined she would join them there one day. She looked at her three half-brothers. And presumably they would follow. One child after the other, time leading them like beasts in procession through the abattoir. It was impossible to imagine life in any other configuration than finite, mortal, doomed from birth to ultimate destruction. A more miserable scheme could not be imagined. Lottie looked up through the high windows. The sky was grey as the grey stone of the church. But the windows were oddly in flux, liquefiant, as if the glass were reverting to the molten form from which it was once fashioned. Then all at once Lottie understood that, after these blue cloudless weeks, it was raining outside, water sliding down the long windowpanes.

*

Rain fell on the thirsty earth, but the surface was hard and impervious and so at first water filled the streams, which overflowed and overwhelmed the field drains, or coursed across slopes or pooled in puddles. When the rain ceased, water still dripped from trees and buildings. The earth softened. It rained again and soil turned to warm mud.

Some days later Lottie went to the stables for the first time since her father had died. Herb Shattock was not there. A lad was in the bothy but she did not bother him. She walked to the field and haltered her horse, Pegasus, a big grey gelding, and led him back to the stables. The day was hot, the sun shining then disappearing into white clouds, then coming out again. Lottie saddled up the horse and mounted him and rode out to the gallops. Although her grey gelding was nothing like the stallion, she could feel what power lay latent in his form as if for the first time. She asked the horse how fast he could go and urged and kicked him to make him find his limit. The grass was slippery and the turf sodden. She rode the horse hard. When they came back to the stables, woman and horse were both sweating, Lottie's clothes splattered with mud and the grey gelding muddy too. She slipped

her boots from the stirrups and dismounted, sliding to the ground and staggering backwards, exhausted.

The stable lad appeared and came forward to help her if she fell but Lottie regained her equilibrium. When he asked if he should take care of the horse, she thanked him and said he could. Then she asked him where Herb Shattock was. He would not say.

'Do you not know?' Lottie persisted. 'Or you know and refuse to tell me? Is he not well?'

'He is well, miss,' said the lad.

'Where is he?'

'You'd best ask her ladyship.'

Lottie strode up from the stables. She felt the urge to run but restrained herself and so marched, breathing hard, to the house. She walked straight to the back yard and through the kitchen. She was aware of one or two people that she passed but only at the edge of her vision, outside her concern. She glimpsed them pause and watch, without addressing her.

Lottie found Alice in her father's office, seated at his desk. She asked if her stepmother had a moment. Alice looked up, through her spectacles, and blinked.

'Lottie, my dear,' she said, 'I have these letters to write. Why don't you go and change out of those filthy clothes? Come back and join us for lunch, then you and I can talk afterwards.' She returned to the letter she was writing.

'Just tell me one thing,' Lottie said. She tried to keep her voice even. She was not sure how successful she was. 'Where is my father's groom?'

Alice did not look up, or take off her spectacles. 'I do not know', she said, 'where he's gone.'

'What do you mean?' Lottie asked. She began again. 'Do you know then why he has gone?'

Alice shook her head slightly, perhaps to express her irritation at being disturbed. She removed her glasses and looked up at Lottie and said, 'I have dismissed him.'

It occurred to Lottie that she should sit down, for her legs felt unsteady, but instead she leaned forward and placed her hands on the desk and remained standing. 'On what grounds?' she asked. She could hear her voice wavering.

‘On what grounds?’ Alice said. ‘He let Arthur ride that monster.’

‘So did I,’ Lottie said. ‘I mean, we both tried to dissuade him, but we could not. Papa insisted.’

‘Then I shall blame you too, if you wish.’ Alice shrugged. ‘He then shot the beast, without my permission. Have you any idea what that horse cost? Yet the groom took it upon himself to ...’ She raised her hand and swept some invisible object off the surface of the desk. ‘Dispense with him.’ Alice shook her head. ‘What else could I possibly do? Shattock left me no choice.’

Now Lottie stepped back and sat down, in the chair against the wall. Her head spun, the room turned, the world was upside down. Or the world was turning, coming round to where it had been before. Didn’t her father believe he had no choice, when he dismissed Leo’s father all those years ago and threw the family out of their estate cottage? Perhaps the world was locked into a groove and though people thought they had free will, in truth they were condemned to repeat the actions of others and all men were little different one from another.

‘In the countryside people may act without reason,’ Alice said. ‘I’m afraid they cannot presume to do so with impunity. I had no alternative. None.’

‘Who do you intend to take over the stables?’ Lottie asked. She heard the words issue from her mouth, and understood them to be meaningless.

‘I don’t care.’ Alice shook her head again. ‘Dear Lottie, I have lost Arthur. I am twenty-nine years old, with three young sons to look after. I do not care about the stables, or about this ugly great house.’ Lottie looked up and saw that Alice’s cheeks were flushed. ‘I do not care about the garden, or the farms. I do not care about any of this, do you understand?’

‘What are you planning to do?’

‘We shall move to London now, of course.’

Lottie nodded. ‘Of course.’ The world was collapsing. ‘You will sell the estate?’

Alice laughed. ‘Oh, no,’ she said. She had an expression on her face that suggested she had bitten into an orange only to discover it was a lemon. ‘Your father inserted certain stipulations in his will. In the event of his death, the eldest son should inherit the estate when he comes of age. In the meantime, the estate will be held in trusteeship.’

Lottie nodded. ‘What does that mean, for now?’

‘I’ll mothball the house. We might visit in the summer holidays, but I doubt whether any of the boys will want to be country bumpkins, do you? As for the estate as a whole, you are welcome to stay and manage it if you like. Since it is your brother’s birth right, no doubt you’ll be motivated to look after it better than some land agent.’

Lottie leaned her head back against the wall. There was a rose or dome around the chandelier in the middle of the ceiling, with some kind of patterned inlay decoration. She wondered how many times a month or year it was dusted, by one of the maids standing on a stepladder, to keep it so clean. She lowered her gaze and looked at Alice. Her stepmother was only a few years older than she was. She had been so pretty, it was hardly a surprise that Arthur Prideaux had fallen for his best friend’s daughter. Yet she looked older now, her child-bearing figure no longer that of a slender maiden, the once sweet youthful face hardened.

‘What about the staff?’ Lottie asked.

‘Some may join us in London,’ Alice said. She fiddled with the papers on her desk. ‘Others will need to find new employment.’ She glanced across at Lottie. ‘Don’t look so disapproving. I shall provide them with good references.’

Lottie nodded slowly. She rose to leave. ‘All right,’ she said. She understood that she had no say in any of it, none at all. Even staying in the little cottage would be at Alice’s discretion. She walked to the door but turned and said, ‘If you thought Papa was a country bumpkin and you don’t like living here, tell me this. Why did you marry him?’

Alice lowered her gaze, summoning up memories. She looked up. ‘I returned home from Switzerland, agreed to come to a ridiculous pheasant shoot here with my father, and fell in love with yours.’ She smiled sadly. ‘I thought I could change him, Lottie,’ she said. ‘But he was more obstinate than I’d realised, and I could not. Perhaps Arthur was too old. Or I was too young.’

Lottie wiped her face with her hand. She shook her head. ‘But why?’ she asked. ‘Why change a man you love? Why would you want to?’

‘That is what we women do, dear Lottie,’ Alice said. ‘You’ll find out soon enough, if you haven’t already. They are simple creatures. We mould them. That is why they need us. We make them into the men they can become.’

Lottie sighed. She turned and opened the door and walked out. She went through the house and out of the front door and along the drive. Then she cut across the lawn in her customary short cut to the cottage. A light drizzle had begun, warm rain falling softly. Lottie walked on alone.

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Part Seven

THE RETURN 1927–1929

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1

Leo Sercombe surveyed the rolling land north of Maundown. Growing up, he'd seen the wooded cleeves in the distance, looming beyond the village, and now was drawn in that direction and walked here and there. Exmoor rose to the west, the Quantocks to the east. Leo had neither map nor plan, but he knew what he was looking for. A field. And so he strolled to and fro, round about, at random.

Leo stowed his old Navy kitbag in undergrowth and walked out for the day and came back to it in the late afternoon. The days were warm but the late-August nights were cooling. Leo lit a fire and slept close to it. If he woke in the night, he leaned over and set fresh wood upon the embers and left it to catch of its own accord. If such it did then in the morning he had only to blow into the coals to rejuvenate the fire and heat up his billycan for tea.

He entered the village of Clatworthy to buy food in the stores there but did not linger. He passed road workers who had made a fire. One fried bacon on his shovel while the other made tea. He passed a pair of tramps, each travelling one side of the road, eyes down, on the lookout for fag-ends.

One hot day Leo picked his way through bracken and gorse, in a valley of rough-split, broken shale. He saw sloughed-off skin. A place of snakes. As soon as he saw one alive, he saw another, then another, and trod slowly. The adders came in a range of colours. Reddish, yellowish, charcoal grey. One was almost black.

The summer was ebbing but haphazardly. Flowering grasses were going haywire. On hot nights gorse pods popped with a cracking sound like a horse whip, provoked to seed by the day's sun.

When it rained Leo plodded on in his oilskin, his boots clobby with mud, rain dripping off the sodden rim of his felt hat, or took shelter beneath a tree, leaning against the trunk. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it while looking out at the rain falling in the wood, listening to the sound of it, a background roar over which were laid the taps and tocks of raindrops on the ground. A cigarette was sometimes ruined by a single splodgy drop.

One afternoon the rainclouds rolled north and the sun shone from the south and a bright rainbow with a full spectrum of colours such as Leo had never seen arced across the grey sky over Exmoor like a dazzling gateway to another world. Then the sun dimmed, and Leo turned and watched a cloud move across in front of the sun, and when he turned back the rainbow was gone and all was as before. There was this world only, no other.

The wandering man doubled back on himself, criss-crossing his own designless tread. He dogged his own footsteps. He imagined he might crest a slope or enter a gully and see before him the back of his own figure walking. Or hear boots on the ground behind him and turn and behold himself in unremitting pursuit. Was such a thing possible?

Leo explored the coombes and woods, the sloping fields and steep pastures of the crooked landscape. Like some deluded cartographer he mapped that territory but haphazardly, and kept no record writ on paper or even scrawled in his mind. The perambulations of a crackpot.

He remembered his brother Sid once telling him of mornings after snowfall, tracing fresh nocturnal tracks of the animals with whom he shared this earth. Their unseen presence revealed. He told Leo that you could trail the habitual paths of badgers or study the logic in how foxes traversed the ambit of their domain. But sometimes you came across an animal's prints that had no pattern. Bereft of logic.

Sid had paused then. Leo waited for him to continue.

'Well?' Sid said.

'Well what?' he replied.

'Bain't you goin to tell me the reason?'

Leo frowned. 'How should I know the cause of such behaviour?'

'Well, bain't you goin to hazard a guess?' Sid had sat back, watching his younger brother, and grinned.

‘Has such an animal been wounded?’

Sid shook his head. With the forefinger of his left hand he pointed to his temple. ‘Them prints tell me,’ he said, ‘that creature’s gone doolally.’

‘How?’ Leo asked. ‘Like rabies?’

Sid shrugged. ‘Could be rabies. Or some such. All manner a malfunctions of the brain, which is but an organ and one that animals possess just like humans, so stands to reason some a them’s mazed as a brush. Don’t tell me none of your horses is.’

Leo gasped at this recollection of his brother. He heard the sound come out of his throat. How he missed Sid. He’d shut the thought from his mind all these years. Along with memories of his mother Ruth, his other brother Fred, his sister Kizzie. This familiar landscape brought them back. He missed them all. Then he took a deep breath and swallowed the memory again, pushing it back down into his guts where it was hid.

On he wandered. Then one evening he came across a hidden coombe, a depression between the hills of buckled rock thrown up from below in the heat of the earth’s eruption. Here the ruins of a hovel were surrounded by fruit trees, some gnarled, ancient, others self-seeded recently, randomly, from the pips that had passed through the bodies of hungry birds or simply from fallen fruit. A small untended field lay below the rubble. It curved steeply down then up again, little more than an acre scooped out of the south-facing hillside.

On one side of the ruin extended a shelf of land that might once have been a vegetable garden. The whole was bounded by wild hedges. It was like a child’s idea of where a smallholding might be created. It was perfect.

Leo found a spring a short distance from the ruins and placed his jerrycan there and watched it fill with cool water that tasted of clean stone to him. He ate the last of his bread and cheese and some ripe plums off one of the trees. There was plenty of wood lying about. Leo built a fire and heated water and made tea, and he sat gazing into the ungrazed pasture in the hollow below him, drinking tea, smoking, watching bats that came out as dusk fell and flew in veering circuits to catch insects in the twilight.

In the morning his blanket was covered in dew and his face wet with dew but he was not woken by it. What woke him came into his sleep as water flowing over stones. Downhill, but also uphill, which in the dream was strange but acceptable. Leo opened his eyes and saw that a blackbird

occupied the branch of a tree above him and sang notes of a liquid song, over and over, urging him to action. If only to get up, and leave its domain.

Leo rose and drank the clean water from the spring and packed his rucksack. He crossed two fields and walked along a lane towards a farmhouse. Grass grew along the centre of the lane. There was no movement and little sound but as he approached the yard two dogs came around a corner running. They bared their teeth and snarled at him. Leo stopped.

‘What’s up with you?’ he asked them. He stood. The dogs crouched low to the ground and slunk about, unsure what to do following their initial hostile welcome. One still eyed him sideways, growling, her hackles raised, but the other ceased. Her hair lay along her back and she came towards him bent low and submissive. Leo did not know dogs. This one’s meekness might provoke the other to further aggression. Or its servility give way to a resentful snap. He waited. Then he heard a voice calling. A figure appeared around the corner of the house, a stout moon-faced girl who did not stop moving when she saw him but came forward.

‘Sorry,’ the girl called. When she reached the angry dog she grabbed it by the scruff and with one meaty arm lifted it clear of the ground, turning it to look into its eyes. ‘Don’t be a gurt noodle,’ she said, then lowered her arm, directing the dog towards the yard. When it was a foot from the ground she let it go but at the same time propelled it in that direction. ‘Git on,’ she said. The dog landed and padded away. The other followed meekly.

The girl turned to Leo and enquired as to how she might help him, trespassing as he was on their land. He asked if this was her farm. She frowned.

‘Me?’

‘Are you the farmer?’ he asked.

She laughed at him. ‘Do you want to speak with the farmer?’

‘I do.’

The girl turned and walked back towards the house. Leo followed. Two other girls appeared around the corner and stood watching. They stared at him unblinking, unabashed. The pair looked much alike and though not identical were both similar to the first girl. He stole glances at them. They each had blonde hair so fair it was almost white, and round faces. They were solid, sturdy. He guessed their ages to be around eighteen or twenty,

but could not discern which was the elder, which the younger. Perhaps they were triplets.

The farmer was their father. He received the visitor in the kitchen. The family, such as it was, was evidently partway through breakfast. The farmer invited Leo to join them. One of the girls laid a fifth place, another fried bacon, the third brewed more tea. The farmer asked where he was from and Leo told him he was from around here originally, but he had come down from Scotland only recently.

The farmer rose and walked to the far wall. He indicated with his left hand the large framed painting he stood before. Woolly-haired cattle with extravagant horns grazed in rough pasture beneath misty mountains. ‘Glencoe,’ he said. ‘My father painted it. Your grandfather,’ he told the girls, as if they could not work out such a connection for themselves. The farmer was built on sturdy legs like his daughters. His round stomach pushed out against a white shirt and red waistcoat. His face was circular like theirs but in addition he had lost most of his hair so that his round face and the dome of his bald pate made his whole head look like a globe. He came back over to the table and sat down. Then he spoke of Glencoe and other parts of Scotland that he himself had seen as a young man. ‘A wild country,’ he said approvingly. ‘A wild people.’

Leo listened and ate bacon and eggs and drank strong, sweet tea. The farmer spoke about the painting. He said that his father was a good painter as their guest could see for himself, but not good enough. Farming was his second choice and that was why they were here now. Then he said, ‘And you, young man. How can we help you? I’m told you’ve been mooching about our land.’

Leo looked at the three daughters. Each gazed back at him unperturbed. He explained that he was looking to purchase a small plot of land on which to rest and grow a few vegetables and graze an animal or two. He described the scooped-out field beneath the ruin. The farmer stared at him. He turned to his daughters and shrugged, then turned back to Leo. ‘Show me,’ he said.

They walked in the warm but overcast morning. The dogs joined them. The sun was there behind grey clouds but struggled to break through. Leo led the way over the farmer’s own land. The daughters followed three abreast behind and the two dogs ran ahead of them, pretending to know where they were going but checking every few seconds that they were right. It felt like some extempore Sunday excursion from the farmhouse.

They stood on the shelf of flat land and looked at the rubble of whatever hovel had once stood there and at the fruit trees and saplings and at the little dip of a field. Spiders had strung cobwebs over the tall grass and the flowers in the grass, and the dew was still caught on the webbing and revealed them all across the field. The dogs went sniffing amongst the grass, chasing animal scents only they could smell, and they came out with their coats soaking wet from the dew and with spiderwebs all over their faces and their eyes so that they were blind, and lay beside the ruin trying to clear the mess from their faces with their forepaws.

The farmer looked upon this pocket of his farm as if it was a surprise to him. His daughters gazed in silence. Then he turned to Leo and said, ‘If me and my three girls here are to have you as a neighbour, we’d best see how we get on afore I sell you the land.’

Leo nodded.

‘Dost thou know aught of animals? Of farm work?’

‘I know best of horses,’ Leo said. ‘But the rest I know a little, and am quick to learn.’

‘Horses,’ the farmer said, turning to one of the girls. ‘Could be useful, Myrtle.’ He turned back to Leo. ‘I ask,’ he continued, ‘because I shall gladly rent you this portion of our estate. You can pay me five pound a year and also give me one day a week of your labour. And if we all get on as I hope we will, I’ll sell you the land in one year’s time. How does that sound to you?’

Leo looked once more around the field. ‘That sounds fair,’ he said. ‘It sounds good.’

2

The farmer's name was Wally Luscombe. He gave Leo timber for a hut and the three girls helped him build it with their tools. Each of them was muscular and competent with hammer and plane and saw. They gave him two of their laying hens. One or other girl came over every day with a scythe or a loaf of freshly baked bread or a jacket their father had grown too fat ever to wear again. Leo cut the grass. The year was too far gone for haymaking yet in those calm, dry autumn days the grass quailed in the pale sun and he turned it with a rake. It dried right through and he raised it in stooks.

Then one evening rain came, and it fell for much of the night. In the grey damp morning the soil and plants and flowers gave off rich odours, like beings that had been woken and breathed out the breath of a long sleep. Leo inhaled the smell. He tried to hold it in his nostrils. He'd known it each autumn, each year of his childhood.

That day the earth looked just as brown and parched as it had these last weeks, as if there had been no rain. But on the day following Leo woke and saw the colour of the landscape had altered, all was green and alive once more.

*

At first he was able to tell the girls apart only when they spoke. Agnes, the eldest, who told him she was twenty-one and had first addressed him, had a confident, commanding voice. Ethel, the middle daughter, aged eighteen, spoke softly and slowly. Myrtle, the youngest, who said she was sixteen and a half, spoke quickly, her words tumbling over themselves and sometimes catching in a stammer, over which she gabbled swiftly in the attempt to outrun it. Soon Leo could distinguish them by sight, too, even at a distance, by their slight differences of gait.

He dug the level plot. When he asked for advice, Wally Luscombe said, 'I never touch the garden, oh, no, that's all Agnes's work. I'm a farmer, Leo. A farmer don't make a good gardener, and a gardener don't make a good farmer.'

Agnes gave him some of her autumn onion, winter lettuce and spring cabbage to plant. Asparagus and rhubarb crowns too. As well as gardening, she was the housekeeper. She also did her family's laundry. She lit the furnace and boiled a big tub of water and boiled up the clothes. When she'd washed them, she wrung them through a mangle and hung them out to dry. On wet days she kept the furnace going but got rid of the water from the tub, bucket by bucket, to rid the room of moisture, then hung the clothes on lines run from hooks on the ceiling.

Ethel tended the stock. She bred calves and milked eight cows. She scalded the milk and made cream. She sold skimmed milk and cream at market in Bampton, and she carted vegetables there to sell too. One market day Leo saw her come home with a cow and a calf she'd bought, the calf in the cart and the tethered cow walking along behind.

Myrtle assisted her father with the horses. All helped each other as necessary. Leo worked one day a week as agreed for whoever needed him.

On Sundays the Luscombes did not attend church or chapel but worked as on other days. They insisted their tenant join them for lunch.

Wally regaled Leo with tales of his youth. The girls served the food and listened, or pretended to. Roast beef was tender and tasty, served with roasted vegetables and greens and thick gravy. Pork skin was crunchy and crackly. Leo told Agnes she was the best cook he'd known but for a certain gypsy woman by the name of Rhoda Orchard. The girls wanted to know more of this gypsy but their father overbore them, saying Agnes's true talent lay in wine-making.

‘This young woman can make wine from anything,’ he said. ‘Parsnip, rhubarb. Her peapod wine was a rare vintage. And her runner bean ... You would not believe it, Leo.’

None of the girls drank. Perhaps their father would not allow it. He wanted all the wine for himself. Or they chose abstinence. After lunch they insisted Leo make up a four at cards while their father nodded off in his armchair and slept off the great quantity of food and wine he’d ingested.

‘Which games have you played?’ Agnes asked.

Leo said he reckoned that from his days in the Navy he likely knew the rules of every game men had devised using a pack of royal cards. But the girls seemed to have invented rules of their own. In rummy, sevens were wild. In whist, the jack of hearts beat the king. Random aberrations. House rules, they called them, and obliged their guest to learn.

Leo snared rabbits, and pigeons. He caught small trout in the nearest narrow river. He walked the fields. He scouted horse mushrooms and made ketchup. He picked the last blackberries of the season. In his haphazard orchard were apples, pears, plums, damsons, greengages, of which particular variety – recorded or not – he had no idea.

One evening he heard yelling and stepped outside his hut to find Ethel running along the fence around his vegetable plot. ‘Tis Shadow the big gelding,’ she gasped. ‘In an awful terrible state. Come look.’ She took his arm as she spoke and pulled him along. Ethel was out of breath from rushing to Leo’s smallholding and slowed down. ‘Go,’ she uttered, and he let her fall behind.

The other Luscomes were all in the stable. The four horses stood in their line, three of them pulling lucerne through the ash bars of the high hay racks above the wooden manger. Shadow the big black gelding did not eat but stood still. Wally and Myrtle stood beside him, studying him.

‘He broke a fence into our orchard,’ Agnes told Leo. ‘He’s a greedy sod, that one. Filled his guts with apples.’

Shadow subsided on the cobbled floor, kicking and groaning in pain. His chain pulled taut his leather neck band.

‘He’ll choke, Father,’ Myrtle said.

Wally Luscombe bent and unbuckled the chain and Shadow clambered to his feet. With his mouth open and teeth bared he came at the man and girl.

'Whoa,' Wally said. 'Whoa, boy!' And the gelding stopped advancing and settled back in line.

Leo came forward. He saw that the horse's skin was hugely distended beneath him and tight as a drum. When Wally Luscombe turned to him, the expression on his face was one of despair. 'I can't recall,' he said. 'I just can't mind what you should do with gripes.'

By now Ethel had arrived in the stable. Leo asked her if she had linseed oil and turps in her cowshed. She nodded and he asked her to mix some half and half in a long-necked receptacle.

'I'll fetch a wine bottle,' said Agnes, and she followed her sister out of the stable.

'There's a loose box next door, ain't there?' Leo asked. 'Put him in there away from these others now.' Wally attached a head collar to the gelding and led him out. Leo followed, Myrtle coming after. It was still light outside, and it made them realise that their eyes had been adjusting in the stable to the dimness at the edge of night.

In the loose box, Leo looked around and saw rope hanging from a nail. He took it and cut a length. He twisted this and knotted it and brought it over. Leo stepped between father and daughter and up to the horse, speaking to it in his calm, gravelly voice. 'We're here to help you out, old fellow,' he said. 'You be blown with gas, we needs to release it.' He put his quick-spun rope twitch on Shadow's nose and looped it in his mouth while Wally held the head collar.

Leo climbed up on the manger and fastened the twitch to a beam above, obliging the horse to stand open-mouthed, with his head up. Leo jumped down. Agnes came in with a wine bottle which she gave to him. Ethel held up a hurricane lantern. Leo raised the bottle and poured the drench of linseed and turpentine down Shadow's throat. Restrained by the head collar and by the twitch, the horse was helpless to object.

Myrtle clambered onto the manger and stood there unsteadily, reaching up to loosen the rope twitch from the beam. Leo advised her to hang on a moment in case Shadow tried to spew the drench back up. He waited until he saw the horse swallow, the muscles of his brisket bulging. Myrtle loosened the twitch and climbed down. Leo undid the rope from the horse and asked Myrtle to put her ear up against Shadow's ribs and listen to see whether his belly was working.

'How do you mean?' she asked.

'Rumblin,' Leo said.

Myrtle bent and listened to the carthorse. She glanced up at Leo, keeping her ear to the horse's stomach, then looked back down towards the floor. She stood up. 'Nothing,' she said. She turned to Wally. 'I can't hear nothing, Father.'

'Full a gas, right enough,' Wally said.

The gelding knelt on the floor again and rolled onto his side, groaning with the griping pain. Wally let go of the head collar. When the horse came up again, his mouth open, he bit the wooden lip of the manger.

Leo grasped the head collar and spoke to the horse, telling him they needed to keep moving, and pulled him away and led him out of the box. Myrtle ran after him with a length of rope which she clipped to the head collar so that Leo could lead Shadow from a foot or two away. They walked up the yard and back. Ethel came out with her lamp and walked along off to one side, lighting their way. Wally and Agnes stood by the stable door, watching.

'If we keep him movin, the gripes won't be so bad,' Leo told Myrtle. 'He'll be more comfortable. And it'll give the drench time to work its way through.'

'To loose a passage for the gas?' Myrtle asked. 'The wind?'

'Aye, though he'll need to empty his bladder first, I should think. Let's have another listen.'

Leo halted the horse and Myrtle put her ear once more to the gelding's stomach. She straightened, shaking her head. They resumed walking the horse. They led him up the yard and when they came back Agnes had retired to the house. A while later Ethel hung the lantern on a metal bar sticking out from the wall of the stables, and followed her elder sister indoors.

They walked to and fro. The movement seemed to ease the horse's pain or perhaps he understood that this strange constitutional was for his benefit, so he submitted to it. Leo stopped him periodically and Myrtle listened to his insides, then they resumed leading him around the yard. He did not groan but once or twice he stopped and spread his hind legs apart and tried to piss but could not. Leo spoke to him at these moments, but it did not help.

'My father had some horses he could whistle for to help them stale,' he told Myrtle. 'The turps might aid him, but there's other things I should carry

with me if I were a horseman.'

The girl asked him what such other things might be.

'Sweet nitre would be one. To be honest, I do not know why a blown horse should be unable to piss. Perhaps the blown gut presses on the bladder. Or perhaps the apple juice here has had some ill effect upon it. I do not rightly know.' He shook his head. 'Oil a juniper was another my father kept close to him.'

Myrtle stopped. 'Wait,' she said. 'We've got some of that. I swear I've seen a little bottle in the stable cupboard with "Juniper" writ upon the label.'

The girl ran across the yard. Her father was no longer standing in the doorway. Leo walked the gelding up the yard and back and Myrtle came out with the bottle and a syringe. She gave them to Leo and took the rope from him. He drew a little of the oil into the syringe and injected it into the horse's mouth. They led him on.

Beyond the feeble light of the lantern the night was dark. Leo told the girl how horses used to suffer widely from asthma, or broken wind. More often in the old days than today. The worst form they suffered was an emphysema of the lungs. He told her how in the past, unprincipled dealers practised all sorts of tricks when selling an animal thus affected. One was to pour a pound or two of lead shot, mixed into a pound of melted butter, down the horse's throat.

Myrtle asked how on earth that had any beneficial effect. It sounded mad. 'Are you teasing me?' she wondered.

Leo assured her that he was not. 'The shot weighs the stomach down,' he said. 'It takes the pressure off the diaphragm, so the lungs have more play, and the horse can breathe almost natural. A course it don't last long. And if the new owner has the wit to study the animal's dung over the next day or two, he'll see in what way and how badly he's been had.'

So Leo spoke of horses. He told the girl stories that he remembered from his childhood, and his voice was for the black gelding too, calming him in his discomfort. The gelding stopped once more. He straddled again in the middle of the yard, close to where the lantern hung. He stood with his hind legs apart and his penis hanging down and the apple-sour urine at first dribbled, then flowed. It ran onto the cobbles and along the gutter.

'He'll be fittle now, I reckon,' Leo said. 'He'll make it.'

They walked the horse on. Myrtle said the swellings on either side in front of his hips remained. Leo said it would be about the right time to take the horse back into the box. No sooner had they entered than Shadow raised his tail and farted for an inordinate length of time, the whole stable echoing with the sound and the air filling with a stink of cider, until his huge extended belly had returned to its normal size. Leo advised Myrtle to give him a drink of water and to bed him down in the loose box for the night. ‘He’ll be right as rain in the mornin,’ he told her. ‘Let him off work, I should. Give him a bran mash and he’ll empty his bowels and be back to normal.’

The girl thanked Leo and he turned to go but stopped and turned back and said, ‘And I’ll fix that broken fence for you. By tomorrow that horse will have forgotten what bad the apples done him, but he’ll remember how much he liked the taste of ’em.’

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3

Leo walked across the fields. A sound like singing came on the wind, eerie voices. As he walked on he realised it was ewes and lambs, mothers and their lost children, calling plaintively to one another. In another field two horses stood, one with its bent leg raised as if cocked ready for movement, still as statues.

He stepped on pine needles through a gloomy conifer plantation, trees packed close together. The wood's silence was unsettling. No sound of birds.

He crossed a meadow where cattle lay. Then a chestnut horse came from a distance towards him, neighing and prancing, and the heifers rose and moved off out of its way. The mare was unafraid and came to him and stood. He stroked the horse. Her skin quivered under his hand.

Leo walked through the village, past the church, the shop, the school. Everything was smaller than it should be, the buildings had shrunk or perhaps he had grown to gigantic size and wandered through an eerie land. Two old men stood in the lane beside the lychgate. They greeted him. He did not recognise them, but touched his cap in reply. He passed the wheelwright, then the smithy. He stopped for a moment and watched Jacob Crocker's swarthy son, alone, hammering some metal on the anvil. How often as a boy Leo had stood watching the Crockers shoeing horses, putting iron tyres on waggon wheels. He looked around but there was no sign of Jacob, nor the tall crooked son.

Leo walked on out of the village and on to the estate. Men and women worked. Some saw the tall young man with the rangy tread but none looked twice at him. He did not believe even his cousin Herbert would recognise him.

His memory had flattened the land. He'd thought of it all these years as little more than undulating plain, but it was carved up and crooked, bumpy, with woods on hillocks and coombes in shade.

Leo went first to the home of Aaron Budgell and his wife. Perhaps he would be given word here of his brother Sid, who would be over thirty years old now, and surely no longer still lodging with them. Perhaps long gone from the estate. All was quiet. He knocked on the door. No one answered.

Leo walked on to the stables. Even as he approached, he knew much had changed. There was no sound of horses or of human activity. He stood in the yard. There was a faint smell of horse but also of petrol. He looked around. One of the boxes held not an animal but a motorcycle. The others were empty, and but for a single one with straw bedding were all swept clean.

He walked up from the stables to the manor house. He walked past the kitchen yard. The back door was closed and there was no activity there or the sound of such from within. He walked on along the path around the side of the house. There was something ghostly inside but he could not tell what, for the glare of the sun on the windowpane prevented it.

The lawns and the flowerbeds were tended. The windows at the front of the house were shuttered on the inside. There were no vehicles of any sort on the gravelled drive. Leo knocked on the front door and stood waiting. No one came. He tried the handle of the door but it was locked. Leo stood insensible as if some understanding might come to him but it did not.

Rufus Devereaux had once tried to persuade him that ownership was nothing. That he who looked upon a landscape owned it as much as the man with a piece of paper in a safe. More so, in fact. Leo told him that was easy to say for one who passed across the land like a shadow. For those who resided in one place it was different. Without the paper they were merely cottagers, powerless.

'Then they should take to the road like us,' Rufus had said, and the two of them had laughed together at the prospect. 'We are all tenants,' Rufus added, 'if only of our mortal form.'

Leo walked back around the side of the house and across the lawn. After a brief hesitation he stepped cautiously through the flowerbed and leaned forward and pressed his nose to a windowpane. With his hands he formed a shield and peered into a room whose every item of furniture was covered with white sheets. He began to lean back away from the pane but then he saw a man, a ghostly figure, moving about amongst the furniture. Then this man stood still. He raised a gun.

'Come away from there,' said a voice. It issued from behind Leo. He stepped back and turned around.

The man stood upon the lawn. He held a shotgun raised towards the intruder. He had a thick beard and wore rough working clothes. 'I seen you traipsin about,' he said. 'Get your thievin carcase off this property. Now.'

Leo put his hands up in the air and trod carefully back across the flowerbed to the lawn.

'I was just ...' he began.

The man cut him off. 'I done told you to quit. So shut your mouth and go. And don't try nothin or I'll blow your bowels out.'

Leo nodded and turned and walked away.

4

Lottie Prideaux hitched Pegasus to the buggy and drove out of the estate. The horse was too large, barely fitting between the shafts. He trotted with his neck upright and his head high and his trot was more of a prance. This job was beneath him and he wished to make that clear.

At Wiveliscombe Station Lottie put the brake on the buggy and told the horse not to be foolish. She walked towards the station then stopped and looked back. The horse was not watching her but gazing in quite another direction, eyes fixed apparently on a distant horizon.

Lottie stood on the platform. Her guests had stayed the night in Exeter and were expected on this early train. Others on the platform waited to be taken to Barnstaple, or stations in between. Lottie spoke with a woman whose pig she had once treated for gastritis. She asked the porter to be ready to help with her guests' luggage.

The train came in to the station. It had two carriages. The guard stepped down from the first and called to the porter. The people on the platform began to board the train. A woman emerged from the second carriage. She looked about her then turned and helped a man down the step and then to the platform. The guard passed luggage down and the porter stacked it on his trolley.

Lottie walked along the platform. The man stood, turning his head slightly from side to side. The woman held his right arm. In his left hand he held a cane. The woman said, 'You must be Miss Prideaux.'

The man said, ‘Lottie,’ and pulled his right arm free and held it out in front of him. Lottie grasped his hand and shook it.

‘William,’ she said.

The man withdrew his hand and gestured to his right and said, ‘May I introduce my sister, Helena Carew. Helena, this is Lottie Prideaux.’

The women shook hands. Lottie turned and walked slowly along the platform, and the Carews walked with her. She enquired after their journey while the porter wheeled their luggage to the buggy and loaded it. Helena helped her brother up onto the seat. Lottie gave the porter a threepenny bit and he thanked her and pushed the empty trolley back into the station, then Lottie drove back to the estate.

The Carews stayed in Lottie’s cottage. They ate a cold lunch and in the afternoon Lottie left them while she answered an emergency call to Wood Farm. In the evening she served them cottage pie with peas and carrots, apologising for the quality of her cooking, followed by trifle made for her by one of the farmers’ wives.

‘Do you remember how you used to cut up those dead animals?’ William asked her. He tilted his head towards his sister. ‘While other girls her age filled their heads with length of skirt and style of hair, Lottie was finding out for herself how animals are put together.’ He turned back towards Lottie, as if to look at her though his eyes were sightless. Perhaps it was habit, from when he could see. But he never quite faced her directly. It was as if he was gazing past her, miscalculating a touch. Or perhaps he imagined there was someone else standing there, and it was this ghostly figure he addressed.

Helena said that Lottie was pretty enough to be able not to bother herself about styles. As William shifted his head a little, Lottie understood all at once that it was not his eyes but his ear he was directing. His head was tilted the better to hear what she or Helena said.

Helena told Lottie that she worked as a nurse in a children’s ward in the South London Hospital. The hospital was for females only, except for boys under the age of seven, and all the staff were women. Helena expected to become a Matron eventually. She said that she did not envy the younger women studying medicine and training to be doctors. They were forced to make brutal decisions and the women now qualifying had to ignore the prompting of their natural compassion and develop callous masculine traits.

‘Perhaps you have a more benign view of women than I do,’ Lottie said. ‘I fear we’re no different from men. Just as capable of cruelty.’

‘How can you say that, less than ten years after the worst bloodbath the world has known?’ Helena demanded. She made a vague gesture towards her brother. William listened closely to the conversation.

‘If women had power,’ Lottie said, ‘or wielded the weapons, would it all have been different?’

‘Of course,’ Helena said. She wore her hair cut short, almost shorn like a nun’s, as if like them to renounce any claim to femininity. She wore no lipstick. Her clothes were those of an older woman, or else a young woman of the previous epoch. Her eyebrows were paler than her light brown hair.

‘Then might it make sense to let us have the power, in the hope that you are right?’

Helena made a sound with her mouth as if spitting something out from between her lips. ‘You’re trying to trip me up with sophistry,’ she said.

William turned towards Lottie. His eyelids were closed, not upon curved eyeballs but sunken sockets, and Lottie suspected that the skin of one lid was not the original but had been taken from elsewhere on his body and grafted there. ‘My sister’, he said, ‘has a pessimistic view of the world. If not a tragic one. She prefers the fallen world as it is to an unknowable future.’

After supper Helena insisted that her brother go to bed. She helped Lottie with the washing-up, the two women working around each other in the cottage’s small kitchen. With a tea cloth Helena dried the utensils they had used. Lottie reached around her, putting cutlery or crockery away, on shelf or in cupboard. She asked how William was coping. Helena said the worst thing was having nothing to do. He lived in her flat, where he listened to music. The wireless was a further distraction. He could go for walks alone, in a gradually increasing radius, but she sensed that it gave him little pleasure to grope along the pavements of Clapham. And on the one or two occasions he’d broken free onto the Common he’d become disorientated and distressed, and was brought home cowering.

‘This is the first time he’s spent a single night away from my flat. To be honest with you, I don’t think it’s a good idea. But I foolishly read out your invitation for us to visit, and once William heard it he was set on accepting.’ Helena gave Lottie the wet tea towel. ‘I constantly worry about him while

I'm at work,' she said. 'That he'll be robbed, or beaten, or step into the road and be run down.'

'How ironic, considering his adventures,' Lottie said. 'When he travelled all over the world.'

'Oh, yes,' Helena agreed. 'Ironies abound. Do you know, William was the best shot in his regiment? He should have been a sniper, but such work was considered beneath officers.'

'And now you support him,' Lottie said.

'Oh, he has his pension,' Helena said. 'I have to work.'

'And *your* life?' Lottie asked.

'Apart from my job, William is my life,' Helena said. The Carews' mother had died and their sister taught in a school in Yorkshire. 'Look at me,' she said.

Lottie frowned. 'What should I see?'

'A plain Jane,' Helena said. 'Oh, no, don't make a face. It's true and I know it. Someone like you wouldn't know what that's like and why should you? Nature fashions us according to her whim. No doubt you have many suitors at your hunt balls and country parties.' She waved her hand towards Lottie to indicate, or perhaps to dismiss, Lottie's looks.

Lottie reckoned that if she wished to, Helena could make herself far more appealing. She chose to hide rather than accentuate her looks. Perhaps she had embraced her sisterly martyrdom as a calling, a vocation, twinned with her nursing.

'I'm an old maid now. There are many of us in the hospital. It's not so bad.'

Lottie said that surely Helena was still young.

'Men have had their pick. For women like me, our would-be suitors lie in the fields of Flanders.' She shook her head. 'Listen to me. I can't bear people who feel sorry for themselves.'

On the morning following, they walked to the big house, all boarded up, and wandered through the garden. Lottie told William that he would hardly recognise it now. Alice sent the gardener Alf Satterley instructions throughout the winter. Plans, drawings, the names of fashionable plants. And when she brought the boys down for their holiday she oversaw new developments, standing over the gardener or his boy as they worked.

Lottie laughed. ‘I thought he must hate it and would leave as soon as he could find another job, every alteration a desecration of the garden he’d created with my mother. But then I realised that I was wrong. Old Mr Satterley began to enjoy it. A new collaboration. He’s getting younger by the month.’

From the other side of the kitchen garden wall an engine suddenly roared into life, sputtering, then backfiring, and Lottie saw William flinch, bending low and covering his head with the arm that was not holding the cane.

‘It’s a lawnmower,’ Lottie said.

Helena took her brother by the shoulders and reassured him that it was only the mower and all was well. All was calm. William stood up once more and smiled, though he was trembling, and said what a chump he was. Helena caught Lottie’s eye and opened her own wide and raised her eyebrows as if to say, you see? You see?

They walked further. Lottie admitted she now managed the estate, the job William had held, briefly. They walked up the hill to Hangman’s Wood and looked out. Lottie named the farms they could see. Helena said that when William had described the estate she didn’t somehow imagine it to be as large as this.

In the evening, after their meal, William gave Lottie some new records and she played one on her gramophone. She confessed to never having heard of Jean Sibelius. The work was the *Karelia Suite*. William said that although Sibelius was inspired by his native Finland, and indeed the work had been adopted by the patriots of that country, it summoned for William this place, Lottie’s own West Country. They sat and listened, and the scratchy recording of the boundless music filled the room as if it came from far away, from Finland itself perhaps. Yet Lottie understood what William meant. It could have been inspired by this land.

Helena nodded off. When she jolted awake she apologised and said she was exhausted from the journey and no doubt the fresh air. William suggested she go to bed, he would be fine with Lottie here, and to her surprise Helena acceded and went upstairs to her room.

Lottie poured William a brandy and they drank. He suggested another piece of music but Lottie said no, she would like him to meet her horse properly. William smiled and said that he would be delighted.

The moon sat like a boat in the sky and stars blazed across the firmament as brightly as they did on only a few nights as clear as this in a year. It was fortunate timing. Then Lottie was reminded that for William the darkness was total, all year round, in or out of doors, wherever he might be. But the silver light was helpful to her, and it meant that Pegasus was not spooked when they reached the gate and she called him up out of the field. Lottie opened the gate and walked through, and when the horse came to her she fed him a carrot she'd brought with her and put the halter on him.

'Come in,' Lottie told William. He followed the bars of the gate and found the metal loop over the post and lifted it. He opened the gate a little and squeezed in and closed it behind him.

'Over here,' said Lottie, and he stepped towards her. She took his hand and placed it on her horse's neck. 'He's called Pegasus,' she said.

'He's tall,' William said.

'Almost seventeen hands. He's strong, but gentle. And with a lovely soft mouth.'

William caressed the horse and put his head to the horse's neck and smelled him. Pegasus turned his head and snuffled against the strange man's skin.

'What does he look like?' William asked.

Lottie described her handsome grey gelding.

'Do you know,' William said, 'I miss riding.'

Lottie said that she had a notion. She reopened the gate and led her horse to the stable yard. William followed the sound of their steps. In the yard Lottie tied the rope to a ring in the wall and fetched the bridle from the tack room, which jangled as she carried it. She removed the halter and replaced it with the bridle, throwing the reins over the gelding's head, then reaching the bridle over his ears and under his jaw and feeding the bit into his mouth. Over the bridle she attached a head collar.

Lottie fetched the saddle, and swung it over Pegasus. She bent and reached down and pulled the girth strap under his belly and secured it. Then she stood and waited. William had come up and stood a few yards away.

'He's a terror for blowing himself up,' Lottie said. 'Then holding his breath. I have to wait for him every single time I saddle him. It does him no good but he never learns.'

William listened. Eventually Pegasus breathed out and Lottie cinched the girth strap another two notches tighter. The horse did not neigh or strut or

make any noise that would give the impression he thought it strange to be harnessed in the dark. William remarked upon this. ‘As you told me, Lottie, he has equanimity. Or perhaps one should say equine-nimity.’

Lottie smiled. She invited William to step forward to the horse. ‘You’re on his left side.’ She took the reins in her left hand, and lifted William’s right hand and gave them to him. Then she stepped to her horse’s head, and held the head collar, and told William to mount whenever he was ready.

William reached his right hand up and felt for the cantle at the back of the saddle. He stood for a moment, not moving, and it occurred to Lottie what an overwhelming prospect this must be for him, how unfair a challenge she had presented him with.

Then she saw him lean forward and to the side until his face was up against the horse’s neck. William was smelling the animal. He leaned back, and took his right hand off the saddle and felt for the stirrup, and when he had found it he lifted his left foot and inserted it. Then he put his right hand back on the saddle. Her horse was so tall. And William had not mounted a horse in ten years.

Only now did Lottie remember the mounting block, on the far side of the yard. How stupid she was. She was about to suggest they go over there, when William flexed his muscles and pushed off with his right leg from the ground and pulled with his left leg in the stirrup and rose up and swung his right leg over the saddle. Pegasus’s back dipped to take the rider’s weight. William sat in the saddle and gave a gasp of satisfaction or relief.

‘All right?’ Lottie asked.

William smiled. ‘A piece of cake,’ he said.

Lottie fetched a longer rope and a whip from the bothy and came back and clipped the rope to the horse. She held the rope in her right hand close to Pegasus and carried the rest of it coiled in her left. She led the horse away from the yard on the path down through the spinney towards the paddock. Wood pigeons cooed in their sleep on the branches. Two or three flew up. William held the reins loosely in his hands. Lottie walked into the middle of the paddock feeding out the long lunge, then she made a clicking sound with her teeth and told her horse to walk on and circled him anti-clockwise around her. She reckoned there was enough light for Pegasus to see the whip as she pointed it for him to follow. William held the loose reins and the horse walked around, his hooves sending up granules of silver sparkling from the sandy ground.

‘Are you all right?’ Lottie called. ‘We can keep him as slow as you like. He won’t mind.’

William did not reply but kept riding. Lottie could not quite tell how much he had to concentrate to keep his seat. He sat awkwardly, too tense. It must be so hard to balance without sight. Wasn’t balance connected to the ears? Would being deaf be worse? She did not think so. She brought the horse to a gradual halt herself, using the rope and clicking her teeth and telling Pegasus to slow. Then she turned him and resumed circling clockwise.

After Lottie had changed direction two or three more times, she could see William’s posture relaxing. He squeezed the horse with his legs. Either Pegasus did not wish to respond to an unfamiliar rider or the horse was too big and strong for subtle persuasion so William kicked him with his heels and this time Pegasus broke into a trot.

Horse and rider circled the woman in the middle of the paddock. Then Lottie slowed Pegasus and walked towards him casually, looping the rope in a coil hanging from her left wrist. When she reached them she saw how heavily William was breathing. She asked him if he was all right. When he smiled she could see his teeth white in the moonlight.

‘As good as I’ve felt in a long time,’ he said. ‘A long, long time.’

‘Have you had enough?’ she asked.

‘Not nearly,’ he said.

They resumed. William kicked the horse to a trot and after one circumference kicked him again and the horse eased into a gentle canter. Though the speed was greater, it was easier to ride a canter than a trot and William looked so comfortable that Lottie was tempted to let him ride off the rope. It was a fanciful notion. She did not see how it could work. A horse required instruction. It demanded it. And if a rider could not see where he was going how could he give direction to the horse?

They rode counter-clockwise then stopped and turned. Lottie approached the horse, coiling the rope loosely, and unclipped it from the ring on the chinstrap of the head collar. Perhaps Pegasus would not need direction. ‘He’s yours,’ she said. ‘He can see where the fence is and he won’t want to bash into it. Just give him a loose rein and go at the speed you wish.’

William nodded, said ‘Hup’ to the horse and kicked him. Pegasus took off. He carried his mount at a canter in similar circuits to those he had performed constrained by the rope. Somewhat eccentric, perhaps. Lottie

turned where she stood, watching them canter around her. Was it possible that the horse knew his rider was blind? When they came close by she saw William grinning.

Then she heard a yell behind her.

Lottie turned. At first she could see nothing. Then a figure emerged from the trees in the spinney and Helena came marching towards them. ‘Stop!’ she yelled. ‘What are you doing? Stop at once! ’

William slowed the horse. Lottie walked over and clipped the rope back to the head collar. Helena came into the paddock and rushed over to the horse and grabbed her brother’s leg and body. ‘William,’ she said. She turned to Lottie. ‘Help me get him down,’ she said.

‘Helena, I’m fine,’ he gasped.

‘You don’t sound it,’ she said. ‘Nor look it.’

Lottie held the rope and asked William if he was all right to dismount. He said he was. He kicked clear of the stirrups and leaned forward and swung his right leg over the back of the horse and slid down. Helena stepped forward and held on to her brother as he did so, making the manoeuvre more awkward than it would have been, and making the gentle solid horse a little jittery so that it stepped this way and that as William gained the ground and recovered his standing balance. Helena staggered with him, away from Pegasus. Lottie did not doubt that Helena imagined that if she were not there her brother would topple over. William’s sister turned him away from the horse and hurried him out of the paddock.

Lottie led Pegasus back to the yard. She removed his saddle and his bridle. He’d worked up a little sweat and she brushed him down and watered him, and before she put him back in the field she told him he was a good horse, a noble beast, and she thanked him. It was a gamble but she believed it had paid off, despite Helena’s interruption. Not all horses would have had Pegasus’s patience. But with such horses, what could not be done?

In the morning at breakfast Helena announced that they were leaving today, and would appreciate a ride to the station. She rose from the table and went back upstairs to pack their suitcases. William sipped coffee. Otherwise he sat in silence, impassive. Lottie could not tell what he was thinking. Perhaps his eyes would have told her.

Then he cleared his throat. ‘I’m sorry, Lottie,’ he said, quietly. ‘My sister needs me as much as I need her. I have to go with her.’

‘Of course.’

‘She can’t understand what you did last night, but be assured that cantering on your Pegasus, I felt human again.’

Lottie reached over and put her hand upon his on the table.

At Wiveliscombe Station the porter unloaded the luggage from the buggy and stacked it on his trolley. Lottie accompanied the Carews. Helena said that there was no need for her to wait, she must have many things to do with her estate management and her veterinary practice requiring her attention. Lottie said that of course she would stay and see them safely onto the train.

They stood and watched other passengers arrive. After the clear moonlit night, the morning was cool. People wore more coats and hats than they had done in months. In due course the Exeter train pulled in. Lottie kissed William goodbye. Helena helped him up the steps of their carriage and told him she would be along shortly. ‘Wave your cane,’ she said. ‘People love to help a blind man.’

William walked on into the carriage.

‘I knew we should not have come,’ Helena said. ‘I had established some calm, a certain order, in my poor brother’s life.’ She spoke in a fierce whisper. ‘I have only this to say to you. Many women felt some obligation to marry their sweethearts who’d been wounded.’ There was hatred in her eyes, as if all the tension her body could muster was concentrated there. ‘Who’d made such a sacrifice. I knew there were women who felt no such obligation, no such sense of duty, I might say even love. But I had not met one face to face before.’

The shock of Helena’s words thumped the air from Lottie’s lungs. She could hardly breathe. ‘We,’ she gasped. ‘We were not sweethearts.’

‘My brother certainly thought you were.’

Lottie shook her head. ‘I don’t see how.’

Helena held her arms out to either side and pulled a mocking expression at Lottie’s obtuseness, or insincerity. ‘Letters exchanged?’ she said. ‘Keepsakes sent, between this slice of West Country heaven and the hell of the trenches?’

‘We were friends,’ Lottie said.

‘Friends?’ Helena spat.

‘But,’ Lottie said, ‘William never said anything. All these years. Never asked anything of me.’

Helena smiled. ‘We may have no money, Miss Prideaux,’ she said. ‘But my brother remains a gentleman.’

She turned and climbed up into the carriage. Lottie stood trembling on the platform. She waited, as if to wave away her guests, but was not sure if she could move anyhow. The porter trotted along the platform, shutting the heavy doors, which closed with a resounding clang. The guard waved his flag, the coal-shoveller fed the oven of the locomotive, the driver engaged the gears. The big steam engine hissed, smoke rose from the chimney with the smell of cinders and burning coal, and the wheels began turning slowly. The solid weight of train pulled out of the station. Lottie watched it leave, motionless. She waited until it was out of sight and when she turned she saw that she was the last person on the platform. The whole station appeared deserted. The young porter had disappeared. The stationmaster had retreated to his office.

Lottie walked unsteadily out to the buggy and released the brake and climbed up. She took the reins and clicked her chattering teeth, and Pegasus pulled the buggy in a broad half-circle out of the station yard and back towards his home.

5

There was a weeping silver birch in the hedge of Leo's field. Its green leaves turned autumnal and fell first from the crown of the tree so that it gave the impression of a man with long yellow hair balding on top. There was an old oak with tufts of twigs sprouting from the trunk like an old woman's bristles.

At night his small hut was like a cave, so quiet that at times Leo could hear his heartbeat, and other rumblings from within his own body. It was unsettling. He rose and went outside and rolled a cigarette, and smoked it surrounded by the cool dark.

One evening, the thrum of rain upon the roof sounded so much like horses approaching that he stepped outside to greet them but there were no animals there. It happened again, and he told himself that it was only rain drumming as before but he could not quite convince himself, yearning so for the sight of a rag of half-wild horses.

One morning towards the end of the year he was disturbed by a fluttering about him. There was a sudden diminution of the dour winter light. Leo raised his head. Birds flocked and swooped. Starlings, making no noise except for the faint swooshing of their wings. How many were there? He tried to count them but could not. A flock of thousands, perhaps the coming together of the twelve tribes of West Country starlings in some avian exodus, flying headlong together. The flock all but disappeared over a stand of elm then veered south and flew around and came back not far away.

Heading now for a sycamore, only to wheel around and pass above him. He could see no reason nor pattern to their flight yet they flew together, each so close to those all around, as if they knew what they were doing, as if they were following some crazed choreography of flight. He decided that the only possible explanation for their display was that they performed it for a witness, a spectator. Who else but him?

Leo had constructed his hut around a brick fireplace which he now used. He gathered wood that had broken off but been caught in other branches of a tree, without ever touching the ground, and he cut ash, for it burned well when still green. He cut hawthorn and piled it up for a second winter, for he remembered his father saying that he'd as soon have hawthorn logs as coal. Elm he knew was good too. Perhaps the nocturnal visitor who showed up one night had been waiting for smoke. He could not tell in the dark which of the girls it was who took off her dressing gown and nightdress, who lowered herself to the straw mattress and slipped in beneath his blanket. He asked her what she was doing and she laughed, soft and low, and he knew it was Ethel. Leo said he was sorry, he could not love her, his heart was pledged elsewhere, that was his fate and he could not help it.

Ethel said she did not demand his heart. She lay beside him on the mattress and snuggled up to him. Her skin was cold and she was shivering and he put his arm around her and pulled her strong ample body close to his hard bony frame, and slowly she warmed. Her breath smelled sweet and milky. When she moved upon him he knew he could not escape nor did he wish to.

Afterwards, they lay in the dark. Leo listened. He could hear her breathing and he could hear wood burning. 'It's so quiet out here,' he whispered.

Ethel did not reply at first. Perhaps she too listened, to verify the truth of his statement, or perhaps she slept. But then she said, 'They call us the heathens. I suppose you know it already.'

Leo said that he did not. How could he?

'When Mother died,' she whispered, 'Father asked God why He'd took her. Leaving him all alone with three young maids to care for. God didn't say nothing. Father said if He couldn't even be bothered to reply then Father couldn't be bothered to visit Him and he took us out a church. Father said it proved that God was an illusion, and he did not have time to waste

on what did not exist. It would be like trying to run the farm with our toy animals. There was only flesh and blood, he said, and that was all there was. We none of us been back since.'

They lay in the dark. Somewhere outside an owl hooted in the distance, and after that the night seemed even more silent than before. Ethel's meaty body smelled faintly like the cattle she tended, her sweat gave a beefy odour that was not unpleasant. It made Leo hungry for her. They each whispered as if someone might be listening. Some person or animal or other entity. Perhaps God Himself.

'I believe Father was wrong,' Ethel whispered.

'You want to go to church again?'

Ethel chuckled. Her laughter was soft and deep and murmurous, and he could feel it in her body against him. 'Not particularly, Leo. It ain't that. It's more that I don't reckon the fact that God did not speak to Father proves He don't exist.'

'Perhaps He spake but your father did not listen?'

'I'm sure He never spoke,' the girl said. 'People talk about the silence of God but that's where He is, I reckon.'

They lay in the warm quiet dark, nestled one into the other, the embers of the fire still glowing.

'That's why you can feel Him this time a night,' Ethel whispered. 'The quiet is His clue for us, Leo. The hint of His great silence, see?'

Leo squeezed Ethel's ribs where he held her. He felt her turn to him. She kissed him on the cheek then she disentangled her limbs from his and rose from the mattress and pulled on her nightdress and gown, and her boots, and slipped out of the hut.

On some winter nights Leo left his fire and his warm cabin and went outside and lay on the cold hard earth and gazed at the star fields in the black sky above. The world was empty and if in the distance a vixen squealed, a dog fox barked, it did not make the world seem less empty but more so. He was alone in this great silence. He lay shivering on the ground. He was nothing. As if the times he should have died had wiped his name out anyhow from the unwrit annals of time. He was no man or perhaps he was every man. Leo lay watching stars that hung as they had for a hundred thousand years until it came to him that he could slip into numb sleep and freeze there, an icy corpse, so he rose stiffly and returned to the cabin.

Pigeons roosted on the branches of leafless trees. Crows guarded the evergreens. When the pigeons rose into flight, their wings smacked with a sound that brought back to him his mother flapping wet crumpled linen before she hung it on the line. One day he heard what his brain told him was the horn of a bike or motorcycle parp in that empty landscape and he gazed around. Then he looked up and saw five, six, seven geese flying in lopsided formation, an irregular chevron, south across the grey sky. Later that day and on the days following he saw other geese leaning forward, hurrying, in their annual airborne trek along paths wired into their blood. Once he saw a flock of twenty-five or thirty. Usually they pilgrimed in smaller scrums, with even the odd solo goose, left behind or lost or perhaps just cussed birds preferring their own sullen company to that of their kin.

Ethel came to him that winter, dead of night, unannounced, a few times more. She assured him she knew what she was doing. She understood enough of women's cycles to be sure when it was safe. Once he heard her footsteps crunching on hardened snow as she approached the cabin. She always gazed at the fire when they lay together. Leo told her that he'd heard that the stems of Brussels sprouts, left to dry and harden, burned well. She said that some folk on the hills were said to bank their fires up with pomace, the apple husks from the cider press, which dried like peat and gave a good slow burn. They spoke in low whispers, until she rose and pulled on her clothes and left.

One morning the ground was covered in frost. In the low winter sun a pair of magpies flew across Leo's line of sight, bothering each other all the way, whether in combat or play he could not tell.

Made frisky by what the weather had done to their world, the Luscombes' dogs rolled like horses in the white frosty grass. Leo carted manure to the fields, dug over Agnes's kitchen garden, helped Ethel turn out her stock. Then it came time to turn the soil.

They moved amongst the horses by the light of oil lanterns, feeding them with corn and chaff in the manger and with clover in the rack.

Leo helped Myrtle put harness on Shadow and one of the other horses, Scarlet, for a two-horse team. They put the collars on, that would take the weight and pull of the plough on the horses' shoulders, and their bridles,

then led them outside to drink from the stone trough below the pump. Then they hooked the traces to the collars.

Wally said he knew last year he was getting too old for the plough. Myrtle was strong but even a man's thicker wrists and ankles could be ruined by the work. If he was honest, it was the first thing he'd thought of when Leo turned up. Ploughing.

Leo worked the teams in the Luscombes' arable fields for three weeks. Today was the last field, in a high corner of the farm, and a sharp wind blew. All horses hated the wind. Leo tightened the handkerchief around his neck and pulled his felt hat tight on his head. He passed a coppice in which poplar trees squealed as their trunks and branches rubbed together.

The day was cold and clear, the cool air clean in his lungs.

He urged the horses up the hill, and turned them on the headland, and brought them back down. A plough wheel squeaked. The odd snort issued from Shadow's steaming nostrils. The soil up here was light and stony and fell in soft almost crumbling furrows. In wet muddy patches it stuck to the share or to the board, and Leo stopped the horses and cleaned the mud off with a thin spade Myrtle had given him. At a click of his tongue, the team plodded on.

Peewits foraged behind them in the soil they turned over, dark brown until it reacted with the air and paled. Seagulls squawked and bullied the smaller birds. Leo's hands had blistered from holding the wooden handles, and chapped in the cold wind, then hardened. His feet inside his socks and boots had chilblains. His frame had accustomed itself to the work, bent to the plough. The sharp coulter cut into the vegetation ahead of the ploughshare and the share negotiated its passage through the stony soil, and turned it over. Leo could feel himself walking with a rolling gait, shoulders swaying with the plough. It was how his father had come to walk always. The gait of a ploughman.

Though it must have happened by degrees and he'd not really noticed, by late morning Leo was no longer cold but sweating in his shirt and jacket, his corduroy trousers, Wally's leather leggings strapped below the knees. When he glanced around he glimpsed a weak watery sun behind the clouds.

The two horses had different temperaments, and aptitude for work. Scarlet had a tendency to laziness and slowed down, to let her partner in the traces take the strain. Leo told her to gee up and she would do so for a while, then lapse again. His father had explained to him that all his horses

had names with two syllables. When you urged one on you stressed the second syllable. Here on the Luscombes' farm likewise. 'Scarlet. Gee up.' Occasionally Leo took up the long thin whip, not to strike the mare but for the sound. He swung it towards her and with a flick of his wrist the whip cracked the air beside her head. The loud report had a more durable impact upon her exertions than his voice.

Shadow, the hair thick on his rounded rump, was steadfast. He kept a regular pace. Leo did not need to hurry nor to urge the black gelding faster. Whether he walked at the same speed as Wally Luscombe or the horse somehow adapted his clip to that of the man behind him, Leo did not know. Shadow slowed as soon as Leo whoa-ed them, and when he made a sound with his tongue and teeth the carthorse resumed without hesitation. It seemed that Shadow knew what Leo wanted at precisely the moment he himself thought it. He understood all of a sudden that this was what it meant to be a horseman. Not what a man or a woman did or how they acted but the alliance between human and animal. The affinity between them.

Leo finished this last field early in the afternoon. He looked across the ploughed furrows and knew a satisfaction all ploughmen must feel. He rode side-saddle on Shadow back to the yard. Scarlet followed. Their harness jingled. Sweat marks on the big black horse dried white in the wind.

Myrtle told Leo that he needed a pig. She said that Ethel haggled for one each spring from an old farmer by the name of James Sparke on the Prideaux estate, over beyond the far side of the village, itself two miles away. They would get him one as well. Leo asked Myrtle to tell him more of this estate, but she admitted ignorance of anything else. 'A pig would like it here. You could give it the run of your orchard.' She said its meat would have a subtle taste of the fruit. 'If you eat pork from an orchard pig,' Myrtle said, 'you can save yourself the bother of making apple sauce.'

One Sunday lunchtime Myrtle asked Leo why he had no friends. She thought it sad. None came to visit and he never went anywhere, not ever. Agnes bought his tobacco for him when she went shopping. Myrtle's eldest sister reproved her. Agnes said Myrtle took advantage of being the youngest to say what should not be said. Wally Luscombe apologised to Leo and poured him another glass of rhubarb wine.

Leo told them he once knew a man in Cornwall whose best friend was a mule. Wally nodded and said that during the European War many mules were shipped from parts of the Empire to the West Country. They were unloaded at Avonmouth Docks and distributed around the counties. Train loads were brought to Wiveliscombe, and sent to local farms.

‘We had half a dozen here,’ he said. ‘Not that these girls will remember.’

‘Of course I remember, Father,’ Agnes said. ‘I wanted to keep one, but you wouldn’t let me.’

Wally Luscombe laughed. ‘Twas the army wouldn’t let you,’ he said. ‘Once the mules had recuperated they were rounded up again and sent out to France.’

There was a photograph on a wall in the dining room of Wally Luscombe and a blonde-haired, round-faced woman who had to be his wife, and the mother of the three very young girls in the picture. Leo had seen it every time he came to lunch and waited for it to come up in conversation, but it never had. Today he felt bold enough to ask after Mrs Luscombe.

‘It was a canker that did for her,’ Wally Luscombe told him. ‘It grew inside and ate her all up, all we could do was watch her waste away.’

‘I reckon ’tis your ma you girls take after,’ Leo said. ‘Which with all due respect, Wally, is a good thing.’

Agnes said that a photographer had come riding along their lane and offered to take a family portrait for a reasonable fee, and though her mother declined the offer as too expensive Agnes and her little sisters managed to persuade her otherwise. They fetched their father in from the fields while the photographer prepared his equipment in this very room. And now they had this image to remember her by.

‘We have our memories,’ Wally Luscombe said. ‘But what happens to them? They fade. They grow confused inside our heads. This gradual erasure must have tormented mankind from the very beginning, I reckon. That we cannot hold onto our memories of those who’ve died, and then we die ourselves besides. So man learned to draw, and over hundreds – indeed hundreds of thousands – of years, improved until he was able to produce a likeness. But it was not quite good enough. Not ever. Still men strove. No longer with oil and lead and chalk but optics. Chemicals.’ Wally gestured to the photograph with a grand sweep of his arm, that all might look upon it once again, but this time see it not merely as the portrait of this family but as the summit of man’s development. Of civilisation.

Wally tapped his skull. ‘No,’ he said, ‘there is no museum in which to exhibit our memories. No gallery but that inside our heads ... vague, faded. Ha! But now we have photographs. And look here, Leo, we are only one West Country farming family. We have one photograph, taken by an itinerant photographer who set up a tripod over there in that corner and hid beneath a black blanket. Will man stop there? No. Men never stop. Not if there’s money to be made. This be our brack. Our flaw. We cannot help ourselves.’

The girls sat placidly watching him. ‘How long will I remember my Louise?’ he asked. ‘But I look at the photograph, her likeness, and summon her up anew.’

The girls sat, listening, or dozed with their eyes open, as snakes do.

‘One day, Leo,’ the farmer said, ‘every man will have his own camera. He will have a hundred images. A hundred thousand. On every inch of every wall. Our memories will become meaningless. And will men become less tormented?’

Wally Luscombe took up his glass and swallowed a draught of rhubarb wine.

‘Thus spake the godless prophet,’ Agnes muttered under her breath.

‘Perhaps’, Wally continued, ‘the reproductions will themselves be reproduced, ad infinitum. The world will drown in images of itself.’ He chuckled at the prospect.

‘No, I do not believe so,’ Leo said. ‘Man will turn to dust, and everything man-made likewise. The earth will be restored to how it was before.’

Agnes raised her eyebrows and lifted her head, while rising from the table and grasping crockery, as if to say that men might utter nonsense but women had the work of the world to do, as always. She carried the plates to the kitchen.

‘I do not remember our mother,’ Myrtle said. She nodded towards the photograph. ‘Except for this one image. Thus she lives on.’

‘Yes,’ her father concurred. ‘It do confer upon the sitters a certain immortality.’

Myrtle said that now she thought about it, she did not know whether any posterity belonged more to those in front of or behind the camera.

‘The photographer?’ Wally said. ‘Why, I bain’t never thought of that.’

Agnes came in and out of the dining room, gathering cutlery and crockery with increasing abruptness. Betrayed by her youngest sister who’d

left her sorority to join with the philosophers. Ethel still sat impassive.

'Like my father,' Wally said. 'He painted that picture of some Highland cattle, an' 'tis that daub by which we remember him.'

'We do not remember him, Pa,' Myrtle said. 'Us three. Grandpa died before any of us was born. But you could say we honour him.'

'I do wonder,' Leo said, 'if graven images be idolatrous, are memories likewise, in the eyes of God?'

Wally nodded sagely. 'In the eyes of godly men, at least.'

'You mean that both images and memories are forms of hubris?' Myrtle asked Leo. 'Of man's arrogance?'

Leo frowned. 'Perhaps it is a flaw less in man than in God's craftsmanship. We were fashioned to inhabit the present moment, but we carry with us the past and so can never live in true innocence.'

Wally and Myrtle considered this proposition. Agnes carried out teacups rattling in their saucers. Ethel blinked, and said, 'My stock live in the present and I must tend them.' So saying, she rose from the table and walked out of the room.

'What about our game of rummy?' Agnes called after her.

The more he saw of them, the more easily could Leo discern the physical differences between the sisters. All three wore old-fashioned bonnets outside to keep even the low April sun from their white skins. Agnes, ashen, blue-eyed, had the broadest, flattest features. Ethel's were finer, but she was slightly cross-eyed. Myrtle was almost pretty. Agnes, on the other hand, struck him as the sharpest card-player of the three, while Myrtle was surely the least bothered. It occurred to Leo that he'd stumbled upon some genetic pattern, that in female human siblings intelligence declines as beauty increases. Perhaps in males it was the opposite. Then he laughed. What ridiculous notions the brain conjured, with the help of rhubarb wine.

Myrtle asked if he was laughing at her. Not only was it rude, it was also dim, for the conversation had moved on, in case he had not noticed.

Leo said no, he was not laughing at anyone, only at the memory of his old friend's mule, who used to listen to them talking with an expression that suggested the animal understood and was hanging on every word.

'Perhaps he was,' Myrtle said. 'No one knows how horses reason.'

Leo nodded. 'I have heard that said,' he agreed.

6

There was a barrow or sett of badgers in a bank under the hedge on one side of Leo's field. Each day at dusk they emerged, and set off along their paths. He recalled his brother Sid telling him how these trails could be hundreds of years old, badgers using the paths and the burrows of their ancestors. He watched them trek in search of food.

He observed a badger excavate and consume an entire wasps' nest, ignoring the stings of the desperate insects that swarmed around. Badgers scratched out bulbs, they ate berries. Their chief diet appeared to be earthworms, of which Leo reckoned they consumed hundreds each night. They could smell insects in the soil. If they found a rabbits' nest they'd take the young. One night he saw a sow kill and eat a hedgehog.

Some way from the sett the badgers dug shallow pits or latrines, and there they went to defecate. The boars were calm beasts. They lounged around and removed fleas and ticks from each other with their teeth and claws. But as winter turned to spring, with the breeding season upon them, the males began to fight.

The first green shoots emerged from the soil of Leo's allotment.

There was much to see, for one who had eyes. One morning he saw two hares in his field stand up on their hind legs and strike at each other with their forelegs. He had heard of hares boxing, males fighting each other, yet he now knew this was wrong. What he saw was a female fighting off a male.

One afternoon at the beginning of May Leo heard the sound of a combustion engine in the distance. He stopped and stood and listened as it grew louder, throbbing and insistent, coming towards the farm.

When Leo reached the yard, Wally Luscombe stood before a tractor. The body of it was painted bright red. It had two front wheels with rubber tyres like those of a car and two enormous back wheels as large as the wooden wheels of a waggon. From these uncovered steel wheels metal lugs protruded, for purchase in the earth. They had left the mark of their passing across the yard. The engine was all enclosed. Wally must have climbed down from the seat and left it running. The machine clanked and vibrated and chugged as it stood there like some beast getting its breath back from some great exertion. The three Luscombe daughters beheld it.

‘Take a closer look,’ Wally yelled. ‘Twon’t bite. It might run you over, it might run away with you, but ’twon’t bite.’

Myrtle took hesitant steps towards the machine. Agnes was shaking her head.

Wally climbed back up onto the seat and shouted something at Myrtle that Leo could not hear. Wally pressed buttons, pulled levers, kicked pedals, smoke belched out of a slim metal chimney and the machine churned into motion. Wally took hold of the steering wheel with both hands and wrenched it to one side. The two front wheels turned, and the tractor proceeded to chug around the yard in wide circles that grazed the stone barns, its driver laughing with delight.

Agnes turned on her heel and disappeared. Leo followed her to her vegetable garden. She told him that they could not afford the exorbitant cost of this vehicle, and she did not believe they could recover that cost by hiring the tractor and its driver, Myrtle, to farmers round about. Her father liked to give the impression he was frugal, sensible, but when he was set on something he flittered their money.

Later, Agnes brought tea and biscuits to the yard, for her father declined to leave his glorious new acquisition and come inside. He could not shift his eyes from its beauty, though he had switched the engine off now, and was showing Ethel how to start it with the crank handle.

Myrtle sat on the driver’s metal seat, which was perforated with circular holes and resembled precisely that of a haymaker. Leo looked around and saw that one of the horses was not with its fellows out grazing but in the

stable. Curiosity had overcome its fear, and it had come to the half-door and was looking upon the strange beast now at rest in its yard.

'We shall have a tank installed to house fuel,' Wally proclaimed. He told Myrtle that she would have her first driving lesson tomorrow. Leo ate a ginger biscuit. Ethel told him quietly that her father had been reading up about tractors and their use, extolling their virtues to his daughters, for some time, but none had thought to take him seriously.

'I'm a modern man, you see, Leo,' Wally said. 'I give my daughters the credit. They keep me thinking on the future. Where things are going. How.' He did not stand still as he spoke but kept shifting beside the tractor and touching it, caressing its cooling metal parts or its rubber tyres like a horseman assessing the conformation of a horse. 'A tractor can plough a ten-acre field in a tenth of the time it'll take a team of horses. In the morning you need not feed and groom and harness your tractor, you just hitch what you want to that tow bar there and crank the engine and off you go.'

'Our father gave up religion,' Agnes told Leo. 'He's become an evangelist for the machine age.'

Wally Luscombe ignored his daughter. 'And at night,' he said, 'when you're tired from a long day's work, you don't have to wipe 'em down and brush off their fetlocks, all dobb'd up with mud. You drive into the yard, switch off the engine and go on indoors.'

'What of our horses?' Myrtle asked, looking towards the stables, where the one carthorse still gazed out.

Her father dismissed them with a wave of his arm. 'We'll sell 'em,' he said. 'The knacker's yard'll take 'em if no one else will.'

Leo walked into the village for the second time since his return. He stood outside the shop. The shelves in the window to the left of the door were lined with jars of sweets just as they had been when he was a child. Acid drops, pear drops, barley sugar, some fused together by the heat of the sun. His sister Kizzie would order four ounces of one or another and Missis Prowse would break them apart with her wooden spoon, then after weighing them in her scales she folded a square of paper into a funnel and poured the sweets in.

Leo pushed open the stiff, sprung door. The bell rang and a man behind the counter and two customers turned and gazed at him as he stepped inside

and let the door close behind him. He nodded to them, then they turned back and resumed their business. The shopkeeper in his stained white apron cut rashers of bacon. Leo walked through the shop. There was a door at the end that led to the bakery, but the door was closed and there was no aroma of yeast in ferment or bread baking. Leo smelled instead cheese, and tea, and paraffin from the forty-gallon iron drum.

Unlike the other reliquaries of Leo's childhood, the shop seemed larger. Then he identified his reflection in a vast, mahogany-framed mirror on one wall, an advertisement for soap scrawled in ornate lettering upon the glass, in which the room appeared to extend its length again.

The first customer paid and the second, an elderly man, handed the shopkeeper an old beer bottle and requested it be filled with vinegar. The shopkeeper held the bottle beneath the wooden tap of the vinegar barrel. A feeble woman's voice called out, 'Make sure he don't get no more'n a pint.'

Leo saw as he had not before that an old woman sat on a low stool behind the counter. It was Missis Prowse. The left side of her face had collapsed, her left shoulder leaned down, her left arm hung loose by her side. Leo turned away. There were long bars of soap, candles, cotton reels. Packets of dried peas. Tins of corned beef, which Leo had never touched, for he'd heard that it contained as much horsemeat as beef.

The aged customer left the shop with his vinegar. Leo stepped to the counter and said, 'Give me a twist or two a tobacco, Gilbert, and some papers and a box a matches.'

Gilbert Prowse did not move but frowned and stared at Leo. He wiped his hands on his apron. 'Do I know you?' he asked.

Leo smiled and introduced himself. 'Leo Sercombe.' He asked what had happened to the bakery.

Gilbert blinked at Leo. 'They in Bampton come round the village in a bloody van,' he said. 'All kinds a bread. Rolls. Buns. And cheap. People stopped buyin off us. Father closed the bakery. Do you know what he does now?'

Leo said that he did not.

'He drives their bloody van.' Gilbert grunted a mirthless laugh. 'Loves it. The only thing he misses is bein warm on cold days. Mind you, he don't miss bein hot on hot days. Used to sweat like a porker in there.'

Gilbert asked what Leo was doing back home. Leo told him he was visiting, he did not know for how long. He'd been in the war and stayed on

in the Navy and then worked up North.

Gilbert nodded. He told Leo he'd lost a lot of his accent. He hardly sounded like a man who came from the West Country. But then he said maybe Leo hadn't lost it, maybe he'd never had it, because come to think of it Gilbert could not remember ever hearing him speak. Perhaps Leo had only learned to talk as an adult, somewhere in the North Country.

Missis Prowse in the corner chuckled out of the side of her slack mouth at her son's wit. Leo recalled his sister Kizzie striking Gilbert when he'd made fun of the younger boy. Perhaps he still held a grudge against the Sercombes. Leo paid for the tobacco and left the shop.

Leo walked past the vicarage. A man had climbed a poplar tree in the garden and was fixing an aerial. Another dug a hole. He stopped digging and laid the shovel aside and lifted an old bucket. He sank this in the hole he'd dug. Then he looked up and saw Leo watching.

'Do it amuse you to ogle a labourin man?' the digger said. 'You can join in if you want, I got a spare shovel.'

'I wondered why you'd dug a hole to bury a rusty bucket, that's all,' Leo said.

The man frowned. 'For an earth wire, a course.'

A man came out of the vicarage front door and marched across the lawn. He wore a dog collar but he was many years younger than the old vicar, Reverend Doddrige. He spoke to the man up in the branches of the poplar tree. Leo walked on. This new vicar was quite likely the first person in the village to install a wireless. The man of God could listen to voices coming through the ether, and know that these were real.

The countrymen sat in the bar. They drank from mugs of beer or cider. Some emptied their mug in one or two draughts, possessed of a great thirst that the ale slaked briefly, and they gasped after each long swallow, a sound of satisfaction.

Others sipped their beer, savouring the taste of the hops, or perhaps not in fact enjoying the alcohol, or its effect upon them, but drinking only because it was the price of being there, in the taciturn company of men. Leo was one such. None knew him. None addressed him. Most if not all would have known or known of his father, but had no way to connect them.

Leo rolled a cigarette. He drank a mug of beer then went to the bar and asked the landlord to refill it. If a world was coming without horses, he sought no place in it.

The sound of wooden skittles came from the alley. In one corner of the bar two men played cribbage. Another thumbed shag into his clay pipe. Occasionally someone spoke, then there was silence once more for a while. A toast was raised to some woman in a neighbouring village who'd recently passed away.

'I ain'tafeared a death,' said an old man. 'My only dread's of bein buried alive. They think I'm gone but I ain't, I's only sleepin, and then I wakes up in a box, under the mud.'

'Don't worry, I should say,' a fellow codger told him. 'Not much you can do about it.'

'Oh, yes, there is. I put instruction in my will to have a vein cut.'

This provoked laughter. 'You's got a will? What else you stipulated? Left your jacket to a scarecrow? You bain't got no will.'

'Maybe not, but if I did, that's what I'd put in it.'

Leo drank much beer. The privy was a bare dim shed with a gully on the floor along one wall, running into a drain. He returned to the bar.

One man said, to no one in particular, 'You seen that maid up Berry Lane? 'Er's in the family way and no mistake.' He took a slow gulp of beer, reward perhaps for this contribution to the conversation.

Another man took a pipe from his pocket, placed its stem between his teeth, closed his lips and puffed. He inhaled and exhaled, in brief rapid bursts of air. He looked at the bowl, or tried to, cross-eyed, then took matches from a different pocket and lit the pipe, pursing his lips and opening them a little periodically to get some kind of suction or airflow going. Once he had done so he removed the pipe from his mouth and said, 'And we all know who takes the credit for that, don't we? Marriage ain't put a stop to Gilbert Prowse's philanderin.'

A third man took a sip of cider and said, 'He's a sinner. But it's hard to blame a man who finds his self with a frigid wife from seekin warmth elsewhere.'

One or two men nodded in agreement. The second man puffed his pipe, pondering this a while, then he said, 'A frigid wife must be worse than one what's on heat permanent, like.'

More men nodded. Then the first man took another slow draught of beer and burped, and said, ‘That’s what they says the matter with his poor old lordship’s daughter, why ’er’s alone on the estate. Goin about the place in men’s breeches, on that damned motorcycle. Her don’t want a man.’

‘My old girl reckons her wants a woman,’ the pipe-puffing second man said.

Leo raised his mug and swilled the beer around. The mug was less than half full. He left it on the table where he’d sat and rose and walked to the bar and asked the landlord for another pint.

The landlord said, ‘You sure you ain’t had enough for one night, young fellow?’

Leo considered this proposition, swaying a little on his feet. Then he nodded. ‘Yes, I’m sure,’ he said. ‘I need just one more.’

He watched the landlord pull the beer, and place the new mug on the bar, and with a section of cut wood draw off the foam atop the mug. The landlord shook the wood and put it back in its place beneath the bar.

Leo paid for the beer and carried it towards the man who had spoken of his old lordship’s daughter. Leo reached the man and raised the mug and poured its contents carefully over the man’s head. At first the man did not appear to realise what was happening. The beer fell upon him, drenching his hair and sliding down over his face and shoulders. Then he began to splutter and wave his arms and twist his body. He moved like someone underwater. When he’d emptied the mug, Leo walked back to where he’d been seated before and placed the empty mug beside the one he’d drunk from, and stumbled out of the pub and all the way back to his cabin on the Luscombes’ farm.

When he heard the tin bowl clang against the metal bin, the horse raised his head and turned. Presently the woman appeared and poured the oats and chaff into his feeding tray, and the large grey gelding fed. When she had done the same for the small pony in the box adjoining, she climbed the ladder to the loft and pulled hay loose and dropped it into the horses' wooden mangers below.

There was not enough work for the last stable lad so Lottie had to lay him off. He found employment in the lace shop at the Heathcoat factory in Tiverton. There were only the two horses left. Pegasus, her big grey gelding, and the rotund old pony. He was well over twenty years old and had once worked in a mine. Now he could no longer pull even an empty cart. His heart was weak and he had arthritis in the hips and shoulders. Lottie exercised him, on a long lead, but lately he'd begun wheezing, which she feared meant a collapse of his windpipe and did not bode well. Yet the Shetland pony had not grown crotchety in his ageing decrepitude, as some horses did, but was a grave and easy-going beast. He was a grass or field companion for the big grey. Pegasus preferred his unobtrusive company to solitude.

Lottie descended from the hayloft by the stone steps outside and crossed to the bothy. It retained the scent still of Herb Shattock's pipe tobacco. She'd brought her horse's saddle and his bridle and reins there earlier after she'd taken Pegasus for a ride, and cleaned them with a cloth and warm

water. They were now dry. Lottie unstrapped the reins and undid the bit from the bridle. She got down the glycerine saddle soap and the neat's-foot oil from the cupboard and picked a cloth from a pile in the basket and set to rubbing soap into the old leather. She had never cleaned her own tack throughout her childhood. The mundane task was not enjoyable, exactly, but one could lose oneself in the routine, in the smell of lanolin in the soap and the slow shine of leather.

When she heard footsteps approaching, Lottie stopped what she was doing and stepped outside. A man came trotting into the yard, leading a pony. He held the end of the leading rope with his left hand and with his right held it tight beside the head collar. He came to a halt, leaning backwards. ‘Whoa there, easy,’ he said to the horse. ‘Hold up.’

The pony came to a stop and the man said, ‘Good afternoon, miss.’

‘I’d say it was closer to evening myself,’ Lottie replied.

‘I’ll not argue with you, no, I won’t, miss, honest to God. I could but I’ll not, don’t you worry about that now.’

The man wore patched trousers, a once white cotton shirt and a faded waistcoat beneath a frayed tweed jacket. On his head he wore a trilby, at a jaunty angle that may have been due to being bumped out of skew as he trotted but Lottie suspected was not. The hat sported a red feather in the band.

‘What can I do for you?’ she asked him.

‘It’s what I can do for you, miss, is more to the point. Will you look at this sweet mare, miss? I’ve clipped her neat but she’ll grow feather on her elegant fetlocks if that’s what you prefer. Will you take a good look at her and tell me she’s not a beautiful little beast?’

Lottie regarded the bay mare before her.

‘Here’s a cracking little hoss, miss. She’s a temperament of gold, she just wants to please. She moves to the squeeze of a leg and stops to the squeeze a the reins.’ As he spoke, the gypsy turned the horse for his witness. ‘She’s beautiful balanced paces … here, I’ll show you. And her canter is so comfortable now you’ll believe you’re a Chinese empress, miss, being carried in a cushioned litter.’

‘Wait a moment,’ Lottie said.

But the horse dealer would not pause. He continued. ‘She’ll hack out alone and in company, perfectly calm, miss, if that’s what you want. But if you want to hunt her she’s bold with water and ditches, with drops and

jumps. She'll jump a hedge twice her height, brave as a lion she is. She just enjoys everything she's asked to do, and you can't say that about every hoss.'

Lottie smiled. 'What makes you think I'm in the market for a horse?' she asked.

'This mare deserves the best possible home,' he said. He looked around the stables. 'And a refined woman like yourself to look after her. She loves people. She's excellent to bathe, to box. To catch, to clip. To stable, to shoe.'

The man ran the bay mare away through the stable yard and turned her and brought her back. She looked sound, certainly.

'Happy with dogs and farm animals,' the dealer gasped. 'She's not fazed by traffic, miss. I can see you smiling there and I can tell what you're thinking.' He looked around. 'Where's the traffic? Here we are in the heart a the country and we've not a lot more than a little farm machinery. That's what you're thinking, is it now? But mark my words, we'll have a lot more traffic around the narrow lanes in days to come.'

The man told Lottie that his bay mare was four years six months old almost to the day. She stood at fourteen point three hands unshod.

'I take it you're selling her,' Lottie said.

The man's shoulders slumped. He looked sad. 'That I am, though I'd rather not. But if you want her badly, I'll let you have her for twenty-five pounds. Though it pains me. Look. See. She's no lumps or bumps or vices.'

'There are two reasons', Lottie said, 'why I cannot pay you. Do you know who I am?'

The man nodded. 'I do, miss.'

'I'm afraid we are no longer wealthy. You may imagine that I am, but it is not so.'

The man frowned, momentarily flummoxed. Then he said, 'You can have her for fifteen pounds, miss. She's the last a my string, I've had a good day, haven't I, and I've a place to get back to before nightfall, that's the truth of it.'

'The second reason', Lottie said, 'is that I cannot bear being taken advantage of.'

'Honest to God, you're a hard woman. You're trying to break my heart and take her off me but I know when I'm beat. All right, I give in. She's

yours for ten. If you'll not give me that then I'll take her up on the moor and let her loose, that I will.'

'What is wrong with her?'

The gypsy was aghast. 'Wrong with her, miss? Wrong with her? Are you wondering if she's any good on the gallops, is that it? Yes, she's a jumper, but she's nice paces on the flat, too. She's potential to be good. Very good, to be fair.'

Lottie shook her head. 'If you'll sell her for ten pounds she must be worth less. But I like the look of her. Listen to me. If you tell me what is wrong with her, and she's not a bad one, if whatever it is I can cure her of it, I'll take her off you.'

The horse dealer stood there in a state of agitation, wrestling with his self-respect. Then he came to a conclusion. 'Do you know what, miss? I once had a hoss, a young hunter what had taken to bolting. I had him along with a bunch of others I was selling, see? I was always honest with the groom here, Mister Shattock it was, and he took a shine to this hunter. I warned him that once a hoss had bolted it would do so again, for a beast finds intense pleasure in bolting, see? Mister Shattock nodded in agreement with me, but he took the bad hoss and none of the other good ones. He gave it laudanum and the hoss calmed. He calmed the bolting clean out of him, would you believe it? And that animal became your father's favourite hunter.'

Lottie could indeed believe that Herb Shattock had done as the gypsy claimed.

'My name is Levi Hicks,' the man said. 'Ask anyone, I'm a hossman to the ends a me fingers. I'll tell you what's wrong with this dear hoss. Everything I've said to you is true, miss. She's a good doer who lives on fresh air. I mean, she's a clever girl, she makes you smile, miss, doesn't she?'

'She does.'

'She's not a bad 'un, honest to God. You'll cure her if you have the time. I would but I've not got the time, do you see? I've got to turn my money over, have I not?'

Lottie went into the bothy and found her purse. She took a ten-pound note and went back outside and handed it to the horse dealer. He took the note between the fingers of his left hand and in a single dextrous action folded it and put it in a pocket. Then he handed the rope to Lottie.

‘You’ve got a beauty there, miss, truly.’ He began to walk away.

‘Wait, Mr Hicks,’ Lottie said. ‘Are you going to tell me what’s wrong with her?’

Levi Hicks stopped and faced Lottie once more. ‘Someone treated her bad,’ he said. ‘Real rough. She’s lovely outdoors but pardon my language, miss, she’s a bitch in a loose box. You watch her, ’cos she’s lightning quick.’

The gypsy horse dealer bent obsequiously forward and tipped his hat, then turned and trotted out of the yard.

On the day following his excess of alcohol in the inn, Leo Sercombe rose early and walked once again to the village, and through it, and on to the estate. The sky was grey, heavy, overcast.

Leo made straight for the gamekeeper's cottage. He knocked on the door. This time he could hear commotion from inside. Yelled instruction. 'Answer it, Stan.'

The door opened. A boy stood in the doorway. He was perhaps ten years old, but he could not be, for there stood Leo's brother Sid. He stared up at Leo, with his black Sercombe eyes. Leo gazed back. He could not move. The joints and the bones of his legs turned soft and would not support him, and he reached a hand out to the frame. Had he plunged through some trapdoor into the past? Or Sid risen, a revenant child, from the past into this present moment? Which must mean that Leo himself was dead. He could not breathe.

The boy broke the spell. He turned and called softly, 'Father.'

Another, smaller child came to the door. A girl. In duplication or doubling of the uncanny, she resembled Leo's sister, Kizzie.

Then a man came up from behind them and placed his hand on a shoulder of each child and studied Leo, until from his lips there grew a smile that bloomed as a grin transfiguring the whole of his face. He stepped forward between his children.

Leo hugged his brother's solid flesh. He rested his chin on Sid's head and inhaled the smell of him. When Sid let go and grasped him by the elbows with two meaty hands, Leo felt the strength of the man.

'Let me look at you,' Sid said, taking a step back, still with a grip on Leo's arms. 'You'm grown tall as the old man.'

Leo nodded. 'I spec one of us had to.' He looked down then, and saw the children still staring up at him. They each had those blackcurrant Sercombe eyes.

'This be our kids right here,' Sid said. 'This boy's my Stanley and this maid's our Elsie. You two, this here's your uncle Leo, what as I've told you of many a time. Elsie, tell your mother we've got another mouth for breakfast, and us is comin right in.'

The girl turned and ran into the kitchen. The boy followed. Sid ushered Leo inside, and on after the children.

'Come on and meet the missis,' Sid said. 'Gracie, here's my long-gone brother, Leo. Leo, this be my better half, Gracie.'

Sid's wife had a round and pleasant face, blue eyes. Sid stood beside her facing Leo, and put his arm around her shoulders. Stanley stood beside him, Elsie by her mother. 'This is it,' Sid said. 'What you see's the whole of us. Take a seat, young brother, if yon long legs will fit under the table.'

They ate porridge sweetened with sugar. 'So this is where you live,' Leo said. 'Head gamekeeper.'

'Aye,' Sid confirmed. 'Head, but there bain't no other.'

'Aaron Budgell gone?'

'Gone down, boy. We buried him, along with his proudest possession, the bump on that bald head of his.'

'I recall it.'

'Few forget it.'

Gracie cut slices of bread, on which they spread plum jam. She poured mugs of tea. She was short and plump and moved slowly, performing actions with efficient elegance, giving the impression that what she did was practised, choreographed.

'Is that silly wife a his still about?' Leo asked.

'Went to her sister,' Sid said. 'Over Wellington way.'

When the children had eaten, Gracie told them to hurry along for school. The girl rose from the table and carried her mug and plate to the sink but the boy stayed where he was. Gracie said his name: 'Stanley.'

'Oh, they can be a little late for school today, can't they, me lover?' Sid said.

'Don't blame me if her gives 'em a dap with the cane,' Gracie said.

'They'll go dreckly,' Sid told her. 'Tisn't often they meets an uncle for the first time.'

Leo asked how the work was.

'What work?' Sid replied. 'Tis a different blimmin game now. The shoots is nothin like they was. 'Tis business folk come out from Exeter, a few from Taunton, they pays for the privilege and brings their important clients. To show off, I s'pose. Most of 'em can't shoot straight. I tell this lot here, 'tis not like 'twas for Mister Budgell, with his lordship. You mind how he used to go potterin along the hedgerows with his gun and his two Labs and me?'

Sid shook his head, then grinned. 'You know that old larch plantation up yonder? Four or five year ago I had six- to seven-week-old pheasants in there and one day about a million blimmin starlins decides to come and set up residence. You can imagine, boy. Ruined that wood, they did, with their droppins. But you know how brittle larch is? They all flies down and stands on the branches, I watched 'em, thousands of 'em, and then ...' Sid clapped his hands '...the branch snaps, just like that. Laugh? That'd make you chuckle, Leo. The ground they'm stood on gone beneath 'em, and they all squawkin and fussin like they wants someone to complain to but it's their own fault.'

One thing Leo had already discovered. Sid was as garrulous a man as he'd been a youth.

'Twas no good for my pheasants, I had to move 'em. I tried everythin to be rid of them starlins. Hawk kites. Sulphur fires. I shot a lot but not enough to make no difference. Eventually in the spring they up and left a their own accord and they never come back. But then about ten million elder trees come up from under where they'd roosted. From seeds in the berries they ate, see? Oh, they ruined that wood, boy.'

Leo asked Sid what trouble he had with poachers. 'Can't be easy when you're single-handed.'

'Tis not too bad,' Sid said. 'I've got me a handy ash plant, I've knocked one or two about with it.'

The boy Stanley rose from his chair and left the kitchen.

'So long as they ain't greedy, I don't mind the odd local helpin his self to a rabbit or two.'

The boy returned holding a thick stick, which he handed to Leo. The end to be held was the circumference of a cricket-bat handle. The plant thickened towards its other end, which bulged with some kind of growth or tumour in the wood. Leo smacked this into his palm. 'No, I shouldn't like to be struck with this.'

'My lad here's keen to keep. I've told him there's likely no future in it but he won't listen. Will you, Stan? You could walk about with this boy and he'll show you where a fox has made his spring upon a rabbit. A pheasant without its head, what's done that, Stan?'

The boy had been watching the men intently as they spoke. Now, required to speak himself, he looked away. 'An owl,' he said quietly.

'That's it, an owl gone bad. And how's about if just the brains is gone?'

Again Stanley looked elsewhere. 'Jackdaw, more an likely.'

Sid nodded, and turned to Leo. 'See? Knows his stuff already. Only just turned eleven. I swear he's better an me with his imitations. If I'm after a stoat or a weasel, Stan here can imitate the shrieks of a dyin rabbit someit lovely, bring the vermin out for me to shoot. I've took im out at night, though Gracie don't like it, do you, me lover?'

Gracie said, 'I do not.' She said to Leo, 'What if he meets a bad 'un?'

'I'd run along, don't worry. Us'd hide and run along, Stan, right? And you and your sister better run along now. Go on.'

Stanley whispered, 'Can I show Uncle my ferret?'

'You heard right, Leo,' Sid said. 'He's got his own ferret. No, boy, show him later. You git on to school now.'

The children rose obediently and their mother too rose from the table and tended to them.

'That's when I like it best,' Sid said. 'At night. It gets a hold over you, so I'll allow it's got a hold over our Stan.'

'What's got a hold?' Leo asked.

'The land,' Sid said. 'The creatures.' He looked out through the window. 'The whistling flight a plovers. Or hedgehogs fightin, makin sounds like the moans a children. Night walkers, I call 'em. They gets to you.'

Gracie returned to the kitchen. She brewed the men more tea and ushered them into the front room, then left them to their conversation or reminiscence. Each man sank into an armchair. There were glass ornaments

on the whatnot. An embroidery sampler, framed and hung upon the wall, held an array of birds and leafy decoration, and was signed in stitchwork: *By Gracie Crump, aged ten.*

‘Mother,’ Leo said, once they were alone. ‘Kizzie. Where are they? Do you know?’

‘I was waitin for you to ask that,’ Sid said. ‘They went over into the Somerset Levels. Old man got a job on a farm there. Still there far’s I know. Mother writes me Christmas time.’

‘And our sister?’

‘You’ll not believe it, Leo. Her’s a teacher.’

‘I do believe it.’

‘And not just with little tykes, in a local school. Her’s up in Bristol now, teachin older ones. Her’s done real good.’

Sid took a cake of plug tobacco from his pouch and with his penknife he cut it. The larger part he returned in the pouch to the pocket of his jacket. The smaller part he rubbed in the palm of his left hand with the palm of his right as he spoke more of their family. Leo rolled a cigarette. He asked how things were on the estate. Where were the Prideauxs?

‘Remember the Wombwell lads?’ Sid asked.

Leo nodded.

‘Their ma, Florence? Had the ducks?’

‘I do.’

‘Miss Charlotte lives in their old cottage.’

Leo was not sure he understood. ‘Why?’

Sid lit his pipe. ‘Don’t ask me,’ he said. ‘The big house is empty most a the year.’

‘I need to see her,’ Leo said. ‘I have to tell her somethin.’

‘She might not be in,’ Sid said. ‘Her’s always vettin on one farm or another, racin round on her motorcycle. It’s her who rents out the shoots. Estate manager, she is.’

Leo nodded. He stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray and said, ‘Well, I better be lettin you get to work.’ He rose from his chair.

Sid stood too. ‘You stayin?’

‘I intend to,’ Leo told him. ‘Hereabouts a while.’

9

Lottie Prideaux rode her motorcycle to the farm of Percy Giffard in the Quantocks. His father had been a friend of her father's. She remembered the bumbling old man from shoots. He was a gun of notorious inaccuracy. Those placed on either side of him begged to change position.

The colonel had died. His son Percy inherited the farm and came home reluctantly from London. He had no instinct for farming and left it to his foreman, but fell in love with horses and spent his time hunting with others or hacking on his own, without learning very much about either the art of equitation, it seemed to Lottie, or the animals themselves. His three children had a pony each. His wife languished in the role of a country squire's wife, and her maids ran the house as they wished.

Percy had a big chestnut mare of which he was particularly fond. She was presently in foal. He escorted Lottie to the stables.

'We've been giving her bran and linseed mashes,' he assured her. 'Three or four times a day.' He paused Lottie with a hand on her arm and pointed to their right. 'And we let her exercise in that field now. Removed her from the small paddock, as you advised, where the ground could get soiled and stale.'

As they came into the yard they saw the Giffards' groom lead an old pony out of the small barn. 'That's the quiet old girl we put in with her,' Percy said. 'Retter there says she's due any day. Her udders are swollen.'

The groom saw them and hitched the pony to a gate and trotted over. ‘Sir,’ he said. ‘Miss. Foaling’s started.’

‘Righto,’ said Percy Giffard. ‘Good timing, Retter. Well done.’

They strolled to the door of the barn and looked in. Percy Giffard gasped. ‘Good God,’ he said. There, well bedded down with straw, the chestnut mare was heaving herself up from the ground, with part of the foal clearly emerging from her.

‘For God’s sake,’ Percy said. ‘Do something, man.’

The chestnut mare lay down again in the straw.

‘Help her,’ Percy ordered.

The groom unbolted the lower door and began to pull it open. Lottie shifted her foot and blocked the door.

‘What do you plan to do?’ she asked the groom. ‘As far as I can see from here, the foal’s forefeet are under its chin, as they should be.’

‘I’ll grab a hold of it, miss,’ the groom said. ‘Give ’em forelegs a good pull.’

‘You are more likely to tear the ligaments or dislocate the bones of the foal than help the mare.’

The chestnut mare once more staggered to her feet. Perhaps the foal was a little further on in the process of its birthing, but not much.

‘We can’t just do nothing, Charlotte,’ Percy said.

‘We watch,’ Lottie told him. ‘She might appear to be in distress but she’s almost certainly not, really, and neither is the foal. Not yet anyhow.’ She nodded to the groom, Retter. He let go of the door and Lottie closed it and slid the bolt back into place.

When the chestnut mare lay back down, the upper parts of the foal fell awkwardly on the straw.

‘She’ll crush it or smother it,’ Percy said, but they could see this was not happening.

The mare lay, breathing hard. Then she once more rose, and stood, and, as they watched, the foal shifted a little further down and out of the mother. Then all of a sudden it came slithering loose and free, with an audible suck and then a plop, and it flopped upon the straw.

‘Thank God,’ Percy Giffard said.

They watched as the mare bent and licked the newborn foal. Lottie asked the groom if he had string. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a coil of brown twine and handed it to her. Lottie took a knife from her own pocket

and opened it and cut two lengths of string, each some inches long. She gave the coil back to Retter, then let herself into the barn, holding the door open for the groom to follow.

‘Mind her for me, will you?’ Lottie asked.

The umbilicus still connected the foal to the mare. While the groom made soothing noises to the horse, Lottie tied the pieces of string tight around the birth cord, an inch apart, some six inches from the foal. Then with her knife she cut the cord in between the ties.

The groom told the chestnut mare what a clever beast she was, and what a handsome colt she had brought forth into the world. The mare seemed to display a certain quiet pride in her achievement, or so it seemed to Lottie. She had noted this often. Perhaps it was an illusion that human admirers ascribed to the animal’s accomplished labour. She knelt on the straw and studied the foal to make sure that his nostrils were clear, not blocked by birth matter, his breathing unimpeded. Having done so, she rose and stepped back, for the foal was already attempting to struggle to its feet.

Lottie let herself out of the barn and stood beside Percy Giffard, watching the foal climb to its feet and stagger then fall back on the straw. He lay there with a look of surprise on his small face, as if things out here were not as he’d expected them to be. Then he attempted to rise once more.

‘Determined little chap, isn’t he?’ Percy said.

Lottie left him watching the newest member of his stable, with his groom, and went to have a look at the others. The ponies were in a field, grazing. Lottie walked among them and studied them and judged them to be sound. Then the groom’s lad came riding Percy Giffard’s chief hunter, a big black horse. Lottie walked across to block his way and the lad slowed the horse.

‘Been exercising him?’ Lottie asked.

‘Yes, miss,’ the lad said.

Lottie stroked the horse as she studied him. ‘He’s a fine animal,’ she said. Then she stopped and said, ‘What’s this blood here at his lips?’ She wiped the horse’s mouth and the blood on her fingers was fresh.

The lad slipped his boots out of the stirrups and lifted the reins and dismounted, carrying the reins to the front of the horse. ‘Mister Retter put the prick-pad on ’im,’ he said. ‘He’s been leanin to the left, see?’

‘What prick-pad?’ Lottie asked, but she knew. They walked the big hunter back to the stable yard. The lad replaced the bridle with a head

collar. Lottie found the home-made device that the groom had placed inside the ring of the snaffle on the left-hand side of the bridle. She studied it. The device consisted of tin-tacks stuck into a small round wad of leather, their points projecting through the leather and pressing against the lips of the horse.

Lottie walked to the barn. Percy Giffard and the groom turned in her direction. She carried the bloodied piece of leather in her palm and held it out to them.

‘Aye, the prick-pad. What I told you, sir,’ Retter said to his employer, ‘to cure his inclination.’

‘That’s right,’ Percy said. He turned to Lottie. ‘The damned animal is leaning to one side every time I ride him.’

‘This is a cruelty, not a cure,’ Lottie said. ‘If your hunter is leaning to the left, Percy, there must be a cause. Possibly in his right foreleg. More likely in his mouth.’

‘Aye, miss,’ Retter said. ‘I’ve studied his leg, like you say. Can’t find nothin wrong.’

‘And his mouth?’

Retter grinned. He held up his left hand. The top of the index finger was curtailed, just above the knuckle. ‘I’m not as keen as I once were on stickin my fingers in a horse’s mouth,’ he said. ‘Them molars can get razor sharp.’

Lottie frowned. ‘That sounds extremely unusual,’ she said. ‘You were unfortunate.’ She turned and walked away. She glanced back once and saw the two men bent towards each other, sharing some wordless communication about her wider knowledge or abrupt manner. Well, to hell with them. From her motorcycle pannier she took certain implements, and walked back to the yard. When she reached the two men, who still stood watching the newborn foal, she held up a metallic contraption and said, ‘This is a mouth-opening bridle.’ To Retter she said, ‘Come and watch, see how it is used.’

The lad had tied the black hunter’s head-collar rope to a ring and removed the saddle, and was rubbing the sweat off him. Lottie said that she would rather study the horse after he had been fed, but she did not have time, they would have to do it now. She asked the lad to fetch salt, and also to light the brightest lantern they possessed.

The mouth-opening bridle consisted of two steel platforms, which fitted round the hunter’s front teeth. She dipped this bridle in the bowl of salt.

When she introduced it, the horse licked the salt, and allowed the strange implement into his mouth.

‘The salt will soothe him,’ Lottie explained, ‘and also numb his gums a little.’ She told Percy that unlike humans’, a horse’s teeth do not stop growing. Fortunately, the grinding of their upper and lower jaws in mastication wears the teeth down and keeps them at a correct level. If a tooth is damaged, however, its opposite number may keep growing.

The horse licked the salt. Then Lottie inserted a ratchet between the platforms and, by turning it, pushed the upper and lower front teeth apart. She asked the lad for the lantern, which he had lit. In the open air its light was negligible, but when she held it close to the horse’s mouth it added a little illumination. She handed it to the lad. Retter stroked the horse. Lottie invited him to step closer and see what she saw.

The groom peered into the hunter’s mouth.

‘Do you see there?’ Lottie asked. ‘On the right-hand side. The upper molar there has grown too long. No doubt the corresponding lower molar has been broken. By a stone in the grass or suchlike.’

The groom nodded, frowning.

‘I don’t doubt the overgrown molar has caused a cut or sore on the inside of the cheek. That is what’s causing his inclination.’ Lottie had laid her instruments in their cloth upon the cobbles of the yard. Now she bent and unrolled the cloth and selected a rasp. This she dipped in salt as she had the bit, and introduced into the horse’s mouth from the side, and let it lie there, holding it by its handle. Again the horse licked the salt, and bit the rasp, and lost his fear of it. Then Lottie filed the tooth down. She told Percy that a horse’s teeth were not hard and could be filed like bone. It took her less than five minutes. When she had finished she asked the groom if he had rasps.

He said, ‘One or two.’

Lottie suggested that Percy let Retter buy a mouth-opening bridle like this one. ‘Care of a horse’s mouth is as important as care of his feet. Something like this,’ Lottie said, taking the prick-pad from her pocket, ‘is more likely to create a fresh vice than cure one.’ She asked the groom if she could trust him to remove the mouth-opening bridle, if he had watched her and was capable of reversing the operation.

Retter tightened his lips and said, ‘A course.’

While he proceeded, Lottie crouched and put her rasp back in the cloth and rolled it up. Percy Giffard invited her to the house for a drink, saying his wife would wish to see her, but Lottie said that she could not. She took the bridle from the groom and walked back to her motorcycle.

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10

When Lottie Prideaux had first ridden the motorcycle across the estate, every animal was spooked, but she fancied that they were growing used to it. Other vehicles with internal combustion engines, with all their snarling racket and sudden loud reports, had appeared. James Sparke at Wood Farm had recently bought the first tractor.

Light showers of rain had settled the dust on the lanes, and now the grey clouds were breaking up, blue sky revealed here and there above them.

Leo Sercombe sat on a bench outside the Wombwells' old cottage. When he heard the petulant whine of the bike, he stood. Soon motorcycle and rider appeared. He watched the rider dismount, yank the bike onto its stand, take off her goggles.

Lottie unstrapped the panniers and lifted them off the bike and carried them up the path. When she glanced up and saw the man outside her home she slowed, and came to a halt some three or four yards away. They stood looking at each other in silence. Lottie studied the man for a long time. Then she said, 'It's you, isn't it?'

Leo nodded. 'It is.'

Lottie shook her head. 'I knew it was.' She smiled. 'I did know you would come back. One day. And so you have.'

Leo saw her turn pale, the blood fading from her face. She stepped past him and sat upon the bench. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Leo

waited. After some time Lottie opened her eyes and sat up.

'For a moment it struck me that you were not real,' she said. 'That you were some kind of visitation. Forgive me.'

'Perhaps I am,' he said. 'And you was right. I mean, I'm alive, but I sometimes wonder if I really is. How I survived. If I am all here.'

Lottie patted the seat beside her and said, 'Won't you sit down?'

'Thank you,' Leo said. 'But I must tell you something first. I have decided. If you wish it, I shall work for you and your husband.'

Lottie frowned. 'I have no husband.'

Leo looked away. Then back. 'I shall work for you and your children.'

Lottie smiled. 'I have no children, Leo.'

He looked at the ground. His hands were clasped together. 'I am might sorry,' he said, 'for your loss.'

'What loss?'

'You had a child.'

'I did not.' Lottie put her hands out to the sides. 'I do not.'

'I saw you,' Leo said. 'I came here on leave from the Navy. Ten year ago. I saw you playin with your child on the lawn.'

'With my father's child,' Lottie said. 'It must have been one of my brothers. My half-brothers.'

Now it was Leo's turn to feel unsteady and so he took up the invitation to sit. Lottie told him how her father had married Alice Grenvil, and with her produced three sons. How he had died, thrown from a horse. How Alice and the boys had moved to London and came down here infrequently, their summer residence a brief visit.

'I imagine she would like to be shot of it,' Lottie said. 'But she has to wait until James is of age. So I manage the estate. I don't do a great deal. The farms pretty much look after themselves, although we had to sell your old one, Manor Farm, to pay death duties after Papa died.'

She asked what Leo was doing. He told her he was living for the moment on the farm of a man called Wally Luscombe. Lottie pondered this information.

'On the far side of Maundown?' she said. 'With three daughters?'

'That's the one,' Leo agreed. 'I've dug me a little smallholding. I thought that might be what I wanted, but it ain't.'

'What do you want?'

Leo looked away. ‘I want to work with horses.’ He smiled, and turned back to face her. ‘Just as tractors is takin over.’

Lottie nodded. ‘I fear the days of the heavy horse are numbered.’

‘And not just them,’ Leo said. ‘I’ve been considerin the fate a sparrows.’

‘Sparrows?’ Lottie asked.

‘Have you noticed,’ Leo said, ‘how they peck oats from out of horses’ dung? Undigested oats. With fewer horses there’ll be fewer sparrows, for sure. All things is connected.’

Lottie said that he was surely right about that. Then she apologised, saying how rude she was, she must offer him something to drink. And food. It must be lunchtime.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘I should get back. I should let you get on.’

‘Will you come again tomorrow?’ Lottie asked. ‘In the morning. Please. I want you to see something.’

‘I shall, then,’ Leo said. He got to his feet. ‘Once upon a time,’ he said, ‘I told you I would work for you. I made a promise.’

‘We were children,’ Lottie said.

Leo made a gesture with his right hand, tilting and holding it upraised and palm open towards her. ‘I came back, like I said, but when I saw you with the child, and assumed he was yours, and that you was married, I turned around. I had ideas, and I was too proud. It’s took me these years to swallow my pride. Now I don’t know what to think.’

Lottie smiled and reached out and took Leo’s hand in both of hers. ‘Don’t think,’ she said. ‘I’m glad you are here. So glad. Come back tomorrow morning.’

Leo nodded. He withdrew his hand from Lottie’s grip and turned and walked away from the cottage.

11

On the day following Leo rose early. After feeding his pig and his chickens he walked back to the estate. He strode fast, but it took an hour and a half. He thought that he had probably walked more miles than was good for a man. A man should have a horse. Or failing that a bicycle.

He walked past the stables and a little further on he heard a horse nicker. He stepped from the lane and walked through a coppice of beech trees and came out on a path. To his right were the stables. He knew where he was. On almost exactly this spot he had once held on to Herb Shattock's rifle against its attempted seizure by his cousin, the maid Gladys, when Lottie refused to let the groom destroy her blue roan. He turned left and walked down through the spinney to the paddock where he'd first observed Lottie suppling the same animal. Now he saw a man leaning on the outside of the fence poles, watching.

Inside the paddock were three horses. A big grey, a bay mare, and a tubby little beast that resembled a moorland pony but was shorter and rounder. It had a long tail and a thick mane, whose forelock half-covered its eyes. Lottie was leading this diminutive animal by a short rope. A boy walked beside her. Lottie stopped and offered the rope to the boy. He did not look at her but at the ground. The pony stood still and made no fuss while the boy tried to make up his mind. The big grey remained on the far side of the paddock, grazing but watching between his legs what was going on. The bay mare had been following the little pony and the two humans at some

dozen yards' distance. The boy made up his mind. He took the rope from Lottie and resumed walking. The pony obediently accompanied him, Lottie walking beside them. The bay mare followed.

Leo stood beside the man watching and after a while he said, 'Is you involved in this?'

The man glanced at him, then back at the proceedings in the paddock. 'That's my boy,' he said. 'Miss Charlotte reckoned the horse might help him.'

'What ails the boy?' Leo asked.

The man glanced at Leo again. His mouth and lips moved, as if he had just discovered some morsels of food, seeds or pips, between his teeth, and was chewing them. 'He don't say nothin, really.'

Leo nodded. 'I was desperate shy at his age myself. Didn't say boo to a goose.'

'He bain't shy,' the man said. 'He don't say nothin. He grunts and growls. He's angry. Don't ask me why. If I could find out what angers him so I'd cast it out and be done.'

Leo asked how often the boy had come here and the man said this was their second visit. He nodded towards the people in the field. They had stopped walking. The boy stroked the pony.

'If you'd wagered me', the man said, 'that our boy would be gentle with that horse, I'd a bet every penny I had against you. 'Twill mean nothin to you, fellow, but to me it's ...' The man frowned and shook his head. "'Tis odd. 'Tis incredible, is what it is, really.'

After the man had taken his boy off, Lottie joined Leo at the fence. She drank from a flask of water and together they watched the three horses. Leo said that the big grey was a beauty. Lottie said his name was Pegasus and he was the most confident horse she had known, with a rare authority, and such was his confidence in himself that he was obedient to her. 'If that makes sense,' she added.

Leo said he thought that it did. He asked what she had been doing with the boy. She said she had an idea that horses, or at least certain horses, gentle beasts, might be more patient with people who were crippled or troubled than other people were. The idea came to her after a blind man she knew had ridden Pegasus. She wasn't sure. It was early days.

'It is an interestin notion,' Leo said. 'Appealin.'

'I wanted you to see,' Lottie said. 'And I wondered too if you might help me with the mare.'

'That bay there?' Leo asked. 'Her looks sound to me.'

'She has a vice,' Lottie said. 'An affliction. I don't understand it.'

Lottie put a halter on the bay pony and led her out of the paddock. Walking up towards the stables, she explained to Leo that the mare was a smooth and comfortable ride. Her mouth was delightfully soft. She broke promptly into a gallop. 'She has a fire inside her, but she's gentle too.'

Leo asked what was wrong with her.

'She attacked me,' Lottie said. 'And I'm not sure why. Perhaps you might work it out.'

Lottie went back to the paddock for her gelding. They saddled up the horses and rode across the estate, Leo on the big grey, Lottie on the smaller mare. On the old gallops they let their mounts have their heads until the mare was wearied. They walked them back to the stables.

In the yard Lottie took her Pegasus. Leo unsaddled the mare and rubbed her down. As he slipped a rope halter on her she nuzzled his arm. He led her into the largest loose box, and held her with his right hand as he began to pull shut the bottom half of the door, which he did by feel, not taking his eyes off her for a moment. Then he felt the door being closed by someone else.

Lottie bolted the lower door. 'How does she seem?'

'Content,' Leo told her. The mare stood quiet. He patted and stroked her, and spoke to her, and rubbed her withers.

'Be careful,' Lottie said.

'I shall,' Leo told her. 'But I can't feel no violence in her.'

'Neither could I,' Lottie said. 'My hope is it was because I'm a woman.' She told him that she would climb to the hayloft and watch from up there. She hung a short, stout riding crop on the door, and told Leo he should keep it handy.

He frowned. 'I seem to recall you do not believe in such chastisement.'

Lottie smiled. 'For self-preservation I'll allow it,' she said.

Leo spoke to the mare, as he spoke to all horses, in his calm, gritty voice. He heard Lottie on the boards above his head. After a while he said, 'I reckon 'tis about time to turn her loose.' He left the halter on the mare, and simply loosened the rope and pulled it through its own loop and free. He

stepped back and grasped the riding crop, and held it behind him, and waited. The bay mare watched him.

'I've seen plenty a horses,' Leo said, 'with everything from mischief to madness, and you can see it in their eyes. Their eyes change. Hers ain't changed.'

'Not yet,' Lottie said. 'Keep on your guard.'

'Maybe you're right, a woman was cruel to her.'

'She does seem content with you.'

Leo looked around the loose box. 'If she do go berserk, she might try to leap over the top half a the door.'

He stepped back and closed it. The morning sun was shut out, light dwindling in the windowless box. Leo could no longer see the mare's eyes, only the dark shape of her form as she walked to the far wall. She whinnied once, quietly. Leo moved towards her. And then it happened.

The bay mare spun away from the wall to face the man. It took Leo a moment of disbelief and hesitation before he began to react, but the horse's turn towards him gave him that moment. He lunged away to the right as the mare, her ears flattened, threw herself at him. He smelled the hot, herby smell of her breath as he twisted away. Her teeth missed his face and sank into his left shoulder.

Leo cried out as he felt the point of his shoulder, the flesh and the bone, crushed in the animal's jaws. The riding crop was held in the hand of that arm and it dropped from his fingers. He felt the mare's teeth slide off his shoulder and down his arm, the sleeve of his jacket tearing apart. Then her teeth got a grip. Before they could rip his flesh Leo regained his balance and, with the fingers of his free, right hand bunched into a fist, brought it down as hard as he could on the side of her nose.

The mare let go her teeth on Leo's arm and swung her head up towards his face again. He side-stepped and punched her a second time. She spun around, and Leo found himself facing her flexing hind legs. A kick would be a bone-breaker for sure, and there was no escape. He darted in towards her flank, and punched her as hard as he could in the belly. The mare recoiled. The man leaped back and away. Just as he reached the door it opened and Lottie pulled him out, then pushed the door shut and bolted both halves.

Leo leaned back against the stone wall, his eyes closed against the brightness of the sun, sweating, gasping, his chest heaving for breath. Lottie

pulled his jacket off and led him to the stable bothy, Herb Shattock's old office, and sat him down. The left sleeve and whole side of his shirt was soaked with blood. She unbuttoned the shirt and took this off too, then she washed the blood from his arm and shoulder. Leo gritted his teeth and stared at a particular brick in the wall opposite and kept his gaze upon it. Lottie said she did not think anything was broken. Maybe the shoulder was torn somewhat, but the pain he must be feeling was mostly from the muscles.

'The bruising's already coming through,' she said.

Leo closed his eyes. 'I can feel it comin.'

'She's cut you, but it's not deep,' Lottie said. 'I don't think you need stitches.' She bathed Leo's arm in antiseptic, and bandaged the wounds.

Leo rolled himself a cigarette with his right hand. Though the fingers of his left hand were not numb, exactly, they felt oddly unwieldy. He rolled the cigarette as tight as he could. It was somewhat misshapen. He licked the paper, and lit it, and smoked with his eyes once more closed. When he opened them he saw that Lottie was watching him. Studying his face, or waiting for his verdict, he was not sure which. He shook his head, and said, 'She did that to you?'

'No. She was still tied up when she went for me, thank God, or I'm not sure I'd be here.'

Leo took a long drag on his cigarette and blew out the smoke and said, 'Well, I think we can rule out her fury bein towards women only.'

Lottie smiled. 'A savage equine demon. I suppose I'll have to sell her. For horse meat.'

Leo frowned. 'Please do not do that. Give me a little time, at least.'

'You'd go back in there with her?' Lottie asked.

Leo considered this proposition. Perhaps it was indeed insane. 'If I might wish to call myself a horseman,' he said, 'time's one thing I should give her. Let me think on it some, and her and me can have another go together.'

They sat in the bothy. Leo finished his cigarette. Lottie waited patiently for him to say more. Did he mean that he was thinking now? Or that he would go away and think about the problem another time, elsewhere, and now was simply recovering?

Leo opened his eyes and stood, wincing, and then he walked back across the stable yard. He opened the upper half of the door and looked in. The

mare stood agitated in the far corner of the loose box. Lottie joined him and they stood together, watching the bay mare.

‘If either of us went in there now, do you not think she’d go for us?’ Lottie asked.

Leo watched the mare. Her breathing was becoming less febrile. ‘I do not,’ he said. He spoke further and Lottie realised he was speaking not to her but to the horse, telling her there was no need for her to be afeared, no one here planned to hurt her. The mare turned and walked across to the door. Lottie took a step back. The horse put her head over the top of the door, and nuzzled Leo’s right arm. He raised his hand and rubbed her neck. Then he unbolted the lower half of the door and opened it.

‘Leo,’ Lottie said.

The man stepped through the doorway, and resumed stroking the bay mare, and speaking to her. She continued to nuzzle him, and rubbed away an itch on her ear against his undamaged shoulder.

‘How can you be sure it’s safe?’ Lottie said. ‘Please be careful.’

Leo turned to Lottie and said, ‘It’s safe. But if I close the top half a the door and cut out the light again, she’ll rip me to pieces, I reckon.’ He patted the mare’s shoulder. ‘I do suspect that someone mistreated her in the dark. In secret, I shouldn’t doubt. Knowin in their heart a hearts it was wrong.’ He scratched the mare’s ear. ‘This old girl here is afraid a the dark,’ he said.

12

Most days were wet, with warm summer rain. Leo walked to the estate each day and rode the bay mare and turned her out in the paddock. After one week he rode the mare to the stable yard as usual where he unsaddled her and rubbed her down, but this day he took her back to the loose box. Inside he hitched her to the wall and gave her a good armful of hay. Then he left her, shutting both sections of the door behind him. He stood outside listening. The mare stopped eating. Leo made no noise. After a minute or two he could hear that the horse accepted that she was alone in the box, and resumed chewing her food.

‘Tomorrow I shall do the same,’ Leo told Lottie, when she returned from her veterinary visits. ‘And the next day. And the next.’

‘You don’t need to,’ she assured him. ‘It’s too much trouble. It doesn’t make sense. I can buy another.’

Leo did not say anything.

‘At least take Pegasus with you,’ Lottie said. ‘If you’re going to go to and fro. It’ll be good for him. Can he graze in your field?’

For a week Leo rode the big grey to the estate and exercised the bay mare and let her feed in the dark, then rode the grey back to his smallholding. One evening Myrtle Luscombe came to gaze upon the handsome horse. Leo let him loose then came and stood beside Myrtle.

‘You’re going to leave soon, aren’t you?’ she said.

Leo said that he probably was.

Myrtle said, 'Will you take me with you?'

Leo looked at her and his expression must have betrayed his surprise, for she continued. 'I can't stay any longer. All three of us clogged up here.'

'You want to skedaddle?'

'Do not tease me.'

'You're the youngest,' Leo said.

'I come eighteen in a month or two.'

'Or ten.' Leo sat on one of the sawn logs overlooking his field. 'Wouldn't one of the others wish to push on first?'

'Agnes won't.'

Leo nodded. He rolled himself a cigarette. 'I suppose your father relies upon her most of all.'

Myrtle laughed. 'You could say.'

'I don't mean he don't rely on you, Myrtle, nor on Ethel.' Leo lit his cigarette. 'Just that Agnes does everythin in the house.'

'She's like a wife to him,' Myrtle said. 'You do know that, don't you?'

'That's what I'm tryin to say. She cooks, cleans. Grows vegetables. Tends poultry.'

'No,' Myrtle said. 'She is like a wife.'

'Do you mean ...?' Leo asked.

Myrtle nodded.

Leo smoked and thought about this. 'I can't rightly believe that,' he said at length. 'Agnes don't seem abused.'

'No. Pa don't beat her. They bicker like some long-married couple, more like. Look, they're welcome to each other. The thing is, I don't want to drive no tractor.'

Leo turned and looked the girl in the eyes. 'You could get work anywhere,' he said.

The rain stopped. The weather grew warm. After a week of leaving the bay mare alone in the dark box, tied by a rope, munching hay, Leo did exactly the same except this time he closed the door from the inside and stood motionless, silent, in the gloom. The mare resumed eating. After a minute or two Leo began to speak, softly. The mare abruptly lost interest in the hay and turned towards the man. Leo stepped slowly towards her. The mare

gave a whinny that became a drawn-out grunt of a sound, from deep in her belly. Then she jerked towards him.

The rope brought her head back with a jolt.

Leo continued to talk to the horse, telling her she was safe, he was no threat to her, there was no danger, but it did not mollify her. She exploded with a wild frenzy at the end of the rope. She lunged forward with a force that Leo feared would rip the tendons of her neck or break the thick rope, one or the other. He doubted the knots he'd tied. Then she changed her mind and swivelled around. Leo stepped back all the way to the door, just out of reach of the stabbing hind hooves that slashed towards him. He opened the door, and let himself out, leaving the upper half of the door open.

For three days Leo shut the horse in and stood in the box with her, and spoke to her, but he did not take a single step towards her before letting himself out.

On the fourth day Lottie lay on the boards above as Leo had once done, looking down upon Lottie and her tortured blue roan. Leo repeated the procedure with the mare then once more took steps in the dimness towards her. Again she lurched and lunged, and strained against the rope in her efforts to attack him, making noises he had never heard before from a horse. Screams and shrieks that faded into tremulous whispers then suddenly resumed as high-pitched wails of terror and aggression combined, before falling again, low and broken. Then the screams swelled once more.

Leo stood and spoke to the horse. The words were drowned out by her cries. Once, in the contortions of her violent struggle, the mare got her leg over the rope. Leo made a move to free her, but Lottie yelled down, 'No,' and he held back. Eventually, when she reared again, the horse freed the limb herself. The smell of her hot sweating body began to smoulder through the stables, overwhelming that of the sweet dry grass. The old chaff dust rose under her hooves in the loose box. Gradually her shrieks began to subside. Either she was tiring or she was losing heart in her wild exertions, for some of the violence ebbed out of them.

Lottie lay on the wooden boards, peering over the edge, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. How insane this was. How foolish she had been. To buy a horse she didn't need with a vice she couldn't cure. Even if the mare was put right, would she ever be able to use her for the plan she had in

mind? And now Leo Sercombe, returned after all these years, was spending his time trying to cure her. Lottie gazed down into the ill-lit box, at the brooding horse, the still man. A tense and compelling spectacle. It occurred to Lottie that she'd never seen such patience. In partnership with such a man, perhaps they might achieve what she was dreaming of.

Leo soothed the horse, and waited. After a long while she finally stood motionless. Only a spasmodic tremor rippled beneath her dusty, sweaty skin. Leo took a step closer. The mare made no move. Scrutinising every twitch of her, the man eased closer, holding his right arm high on her neck as a protection should she swing her head at him. He reached out a hand and touched her withers, and felt her tremble. He smoothed her body and rubbed his hands along her neck and back. Still she did not move. He could feel the muscles beneath her skin soften, as she held herself less rigidly, and after some minutes she turned towards him. But she did not bite him.

Leo continued to talk to the mare and to handle her, and he only left her when she bent her head to resume her meal with the man standing there beside her. He looked up, and said into the space above, 'I don't believe her's cured yet, quite, but her's on the way now, for sure.'

There was no answer. Lottie must have grown bored and left. Leo could not blame her but he was amazed by the disappointment that bloomed like some malignant yeast in his gut. He walked to the door and opened it and stepped outside, eyes downcast from the glare of the sun. He turned and closed and bolted the lower door, and opened wide the upper door, clipping the hook to the wall. The bay mare munched her hay in the light-filled stable.

Leo watched the horse. He did not notice Lottie appear, but there she was, standing beside him.

'I thought you'd gone off,' he said.

'I just climbed down,' Lottie told him. 'I saw it all.'

Leo turned to find her looking at him.

'It is incredible,' she said. 'Your forbearance. After what she did to you.'

Leo did not shift his eyes from hers. Thus they stood. All his life when he'd felt another's gaze see too deep into him, it was unsettling, he had to look away. Yet he did not need or wish to avert his eyes from Lottie's. Did he want her to see into him? It was not explicable. 'Just took a bit a time,' he said.

Lottie shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘No. You really are a horseman, Leo Sercombe.’

They stood looking at each other. Then Lottie reached forward her right hand to Leo’s left arm and leaned into him. With his right hand he pulled her towards him, and they kissed.

In Lottie’s cottage they ate sausages, mashed potato and carrots. She apologised for the plainness of the fare. Leo said that he was used to finer food in her presence, recalling the trays brought to the stables as she tended her blue roan when it lay dying.

So, Lottie said, Leo Sercombe had become an epicurean now, had he? A gourmet? He smiled. ‘No man’, he said, ‘who’s done a whole stint in the Royal Navy can call himself a judge of fine food.’

They ate, and made love again. Lottie said, ‘I knew it was you. Your eyes are still the colour of blackberries.’

‘And you’, Leo said, ‘still have some freckles there, across the bridge a your nose.’ He kissed them.

They spoke more then and in the days to come. Of what they had done, of what had happened to them. In time they reached things that were hard to describe. Leo wanted to tell Lottie how his blood had been frozen, and now she was sending fire through the veins and arteries of his existence.

Was that it?

Or that he had once been thrown into the future. Catapulted. But he did not wish to live there. He wanted to live in the present.

No, that was not it.

He had been away, he had been wandering, now he was home. But to his surprise home was not a field in the West Country. It was not even the estate. It was her.

‘I remember the first time I saw you,’ Lottie said. ‘We must have been no more than five or six. Do you know what you were doing?’

Leo shook his head.

‘You were climbing up the tail of a carthorse.’

Lottie said that when she looked into the eyes of a horse, she acknowledged that it does not see as much as humans do, nor understand much of what it sees. ‘But I have the feeling that I glimpse what is behind the horse,’ she said. ‘What made her.’

‘God?’

‘I don’t know. Is there a need to name it?’

Leo shook his head in agreement. ‘I remember in Sunday School, Reverend Doddrige, he once said to us, “The eye that sees God is the same eye by which God sees me.”’

Lottie nodded. ‘Perhaps that is what I mean.’

Leo softened the bay mare. At his last Sunday lunch with the Luscombes he told them that he could not buy the field. He was leaving. Ethel said she might take over his cabin and his plot, it was time she had some distance from her sisters. Agnes said she was the eldest, if she fancied the cabin it was her right. Leo understood that the two girls were already consigning him to the past even as he sat beside them. Then Wally Luscombe spoke.

‘I’ll decide it,’ he said. ‘The cabin is Myrtle’s. You two’s needed here.’

Lottie began to let it be known that troubled people could visit her and her horses. She met doctors. Some were curious. Intrigued. She visited hospitals in Taunton and Exeter. Their first patients began to come to the estate.

If there was gossip, a local scandal, Lottie and Leo ignored it.

One evening in the early summer of 1929 they sat outside Lottie’s cottage. Leo rolled a cigarette. They drank red French wine. Lottie watched the evening sky. Leo rested a hand on her belly.

‘It may just be late,’ she said.

‘It may,’ Leo agreed. ‘I hope not.’

Lottie stroked the scar on his hand. She asked him how he’d got it. ‘I was bitten by a conger eel,’ he said, and told her of diving among the German wrecks.

Leo smoked, then said, ‘Three times I might a died. Drowned each time. You may just recall the first a them.’ He paused. Lottie waited. ‘Perhaps one a them times I did,’ he resumed. ‘And this is some kind a dream, of what might have been.’

Lottie put her hand over his. ‘Then I must be dead too,’ she said, ‘for I find myself in the same dream.’

Leo frowned. ‘Was there a time you could have died?’ he asked.

‘I considered it,’ Lottie said. She told him of her time as a vet’s assistant and, as she had never told anyone else, of what Patrick Jago did to her.

After she had finished, Leo squeezed Lottie's hand. 'I am glad you did not go through with it.' He smiled. 'And what I said just now? 'Twas bull. Drivel. This is no dream. It is life, my love, our life, and now we shall live it.'

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EPILOGUE

The old man took up his stick and went out of the back door of the house. He turned and put his mug of tea on the windowsill (whose slope brought the hot tea up to the lip of the mug on its lower side) and closed the door. He took the mug and walked around the side of the house and opened the door of his shed, placed the mug on the bench and switched on the electric light. Without this the shed was dim for, though one side had a long window, spiders' webs hung there all engorged with sawdust. Leo studied blocks of wood up on the high shelf while sipping his tea. Some he took down and examined. Each had a date inscribed. He chose a piece not much larger than six inches square.

The old man put the block of wood in the vice, and sawed a section off the side. He loosened the vice, shifted the wood and took off another slice. When he was content with the overall shape he eyeballed the block of ash and, using a bradawl, made a hole in the centre of what he had decreed should be its hollowed top. He placed a screw chuck on the lathe. He then drilled the hole in the middle of the ash deeper, using a bit the same size as the shank on the screw chuck, and screwed the wood onto the lathe.

He set the lathe turning and swung the rest across and used a spear-point chisel to take off the corner. The wood came off in ribbons towards him and in moments amassed like a head of hair or a wig of light brown shavings. He took the chisel off the wood and tossed the trimmings off to the side then resumed, flattening the base with the same chisel.

His tools were hand-forged carbon steel and he had recently ground them. He removed the block from the lathe and replaced the chuck with jaws, into which he placed the base of the wood and clamped the jaws tight.

Now he would hollow out the bowl. He used a half-inch bowl gouge, lining up the bevel of the gouge towards the centre. The lathe turning the

wood created the power. All he had to do was to place his hand on the rest and ease the blade of the tool into the wood. He had done this many hundreds of times in his retirement yet still the pliancy of wood engrossed him. The power of the turning lathe. The subtlety of his handiwork. The sharp sweet scent of sawdust.

Oak was good, if somewhat hard to handle. Cherry was stable. Plum could have odd, appealing green and maroon patches. Laburnum held black wood and white wood in the same tree. Acacia was yellow, and possessed elegant rings. This piece of ash was nicely variegated in both the rings and the colour.

The old man turned the wooden bowl. He'd been born in the previous century. He would not make it to the next. His life had been eventful. His children and his grandchildren had heard one or two of his stories but there were more. They had their own lives to discover. He had seen and done many things, especially in his early years. All would pass with him.

The base had not been carved true. When the bowl spun, it did so in an eccentric manner. He switched the bowl around again and measured and marked the base with callipers. He used a spindle gouge to rough out the base then the half-inch bowl gouge to shape the profile of the bowl, working up away from the base to the rim. What really determined how pleasing to the eye the bowl ended up, was the curve of the wood. Soon he was happy with the smoothness of the surface but he wished to improve it, so he used a one-inch sheer scraper. Then he rolled a spindle gouge over the outer lip of the base to give it a slightly rounded rim. The bottom of the bowl would be rarely seen, but it brought satisfaction to him to render it attractive.

His name was Leo Jonas Sercombe, son of Albert and Ruth, brother of Fred, Sid and Kizzie. He was the son of a horseman, and a horseman himself. He had lived as the slave of a tribe of gypsies, worked on a cruel farm, resided with an old tramp in a Cornish wood. He had served on a battleship in the Great War, and as a sailor and a diver in the Royal Navy for twelve years. Then a further year he had spent as a diver, resurrecting German ships from the deep of Scapa Flow. It was not understood back then that years of diving could affect a man's heart. He was lucky to have got out when he did.

He had known a few horsemen. The best of them was the master's groom when he was a boy, Herb Shattock.

Leo folded over a sheet of one hundred-and-eighty-grit sandpaper and smoothed the bowl further, then did so again with a two-hundred-and-forty-grit paper, finely abrading the wood still more.

The old man had loved but one woman, a meagre portion perhaps but enough for him. She once was beautiful and still was, though he allowed that others might not see it as he did, for when he beheld her he saw Lottie now and as she had always been, since they were children. His father had worked horses into the ground, as had others for hundreds, thousands, of years. Leo had assumed he would do the same. Man's technological ingenuity brought an end to such work, but Lottie saw how man and horse might work together in an entirely new way.

Only now, envisioning Lottie in the sawdusty shed, did he remember that she was two years gone under the ground. She had gone before him. He missed her so much. Death was final yet there was more to it than that, a mystery no man could fathom. And it would be his turn soon enough.

The wooden bowl turned on the lathe, under the light of the bare electric bulb. Outside, the afternoon dimmed into evening. Leo held a lump of beeswax against the bowl. He rubbed it into the wood with a rag. The surplus he wiped off with a clean cloth. This bowl was for their granddaughter, soon to be thirteen years old. She could keep her hairbands, rings, other trinkets in it. The old man could not recall in truth whether or not he had given her one much the same the year before. He suspected that his family had all been inundated with his wooden bowls. Well, he would turn them while he could. He would turn them on the turning lathe. Time proceeds along its ever-onward spiral. We join it for a moment.

We are like horses, turning in the dust of a river bed on a clear morning, turning in the sand as the mist rolls over the water, hooves prancing, bodies steaming in the morning light, their muscled flanks rippling, revelling in their freedom.

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Paul Evans's nature notes in the *Guardian* have been a regular nudge to scrutinise the natural world through which one moves. The books of Fred Archer likewise, a continual inspiration.

Helpful equine books include:

Elementary Lectures on Veterinary Science by Henry Thompson

Memoirs of a Veterinary Surgeon by Reginald Hancock

Healers on Horseback by R.H. Smythe

Fifty Years a Veterinary Surgeon by Sir Frederick Hobday

Handling Horses by Colonel P. D. Stewart

Equitation by Henry Wynmalen

Bracken Horse by Gareth Dale provided the story of the bay mare frightened of the dark.

Leo's encounter with a grey seal quotes from Ted Hughes's encounter with a roe deer as described in a footnote in *Moortown Diary*, while two horses in

a field are borrowed from Melissa Harrison's *At Hawthorn Time*.

The starting point of the Battle of Jutland chapter was my grandfather's experience. Steuart Arnold Pears was a young gunnery lieutenant on the light cruiser HMS *Falmouth*, which was caught up at the centre of the maelstrom. His naval record includes: *Showed great aptitude in Gunnery controlled fire in Jutland Battle with coolness and in other ways, showed marked zeal & ability, good manner with men.*

HMS *Queen Mary* set off from the Firth of Forth with a crew of 1,286. 1,266 were lost. Of the twenty survivors, eighteen were hauled out of the North Sea by British destroyers, two by German boats.

The passage on the Battle is threaded through with excerpts from *Jutland 1916, Death in the Grey Wastes* by Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, a masterly telling of the monumental naval battle through memoirs, letters and recollections of those who were there.

Further detail was given by Alexander Fullerton's fine novel *The Bloodyard of the Guns*.

Able Seamen by Brian Lavery illuminated life on the lower deck of the Navy.

The True Glory by Max Arthur and *Gone a Long Journey* by Leonard Charles Williams were also helpful.

There are many books on Scapa Flow, on the scuttle and subsequent salvage of the German Imperial Fleet. Especially helpful were:

Scapa Flow by Malcolm Brown and Patricia Meehan, another brilliant history book composed largely of the memories of those who were there

The Grand Scuttle by Dan van der Vat

The Wrecks of Scapa Flow by David M. Ferguson

Jutland to Junkyard by S. C. George

Cox's Navy by Tony Booth was particularly rich and extensive.

Salvage of the scuttled ships continued long after the events described in this novel. In the 1930s Metal Industries, a company which had taken over from Ernest Cox, sold much scrap metal from salvaged ships to Krupp of Essen, in Germany. Krupp had constructed most of the ships, and their armour and guns, in the first place. They now bought back this same metal, and began to use it in their building of Hitler's navy.

Later, in 1945, at the moment of the explosion of the world's first atomic bomb, at Hiroshima, the earth's atmosphere was polluted by nuclear radiation. In the process of steel manufacture, enormous quantities of air are sucked in. All steel forged since 1945 therefore contains traces of radiation. Untainted steel is essential for extremely delicate scientific instruments, such as those used in nuclear medicine. The still unsalvaged scuttled ships of Scapa Flow remain the greatest resource of such high-grade, untainted steel to this day. Some of the Scapa Flow steel was used in the Voyager II spacecraft. Salvage continues ...

The wrecks have had other effects. www.scapaflowwrecks.com was fascinating and helpful:

The underwater wildlife is one of the quiet marvels of Scapa Flow. On a seabed comprising mainly of silt and sand, the wrecks have become rich artificial reefs. Each wreck is now a thriving ecosystem – benthic (ocean bottom) animals such as starfish and urchins cover the wrecks and inject vibrancy and colour. The multitude of nooks and crannies provide the perfect hiding spot for crabs and lobsters, while the wrecks teem with fish.

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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Tim Pears is the author of ten novels, including *In the Place of Fallen Leaves* (winner of the Hawthornden Prize and the Ruth Hadden Memorial Award), *In a Land of Plenty* (made into a ten part BBC series), *Landed* (shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award 2012 and the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize 2011, winner of the MJA Open Book Awards 2011) and, most recently, *The Horseman* and *The Wanderers*, the first two books in The West Country Trilogy. He is the winner of the Lannan Award and Writer in Residence at Cheltenham Festival of Literature and Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Oxford Brookes University. He lives in Oxford with his wife and children.

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In the Place of Fallen Leaves

Winner of the Hawthornden Prize and the Ruth Hadden Award

‘A gifted storyteller, steeped in country lore and the beauty of ordinary events. Like Thomas Hardy whose kindred spirit quietly animates these pages, he is concerned with the dignity of work, the force of destiny and the consequences of human passion’ *New York Times*

This overwhelmingly hot summer everything seems to be slowing down in the tiny Devon village where Alison lives, as if the sun is pouring hot glue over it. ‘This idn’t nothin’,’ says Alison’s grandmother, recalling a drought when the earth swallowed lambs, and the summer after the war when people got electric shocks off each other. But Alison knows her grandmother’s memory is lying: this is far worse. She feels that time has stopped just as she wants to enter the real world of adulthood. In fact, in the cruel heat of summer, time is creeping towards her, and closing in around the valley.

‘More perfect than any first novel deserves to be’ *Observer*

‘This is it. This is the real thing. This is whatever I mean by the work of a born writer … Comic and wry and elegiac and shrewd and thoughtful all at once. Please read it’ A. S. Byatt

‘Tim Pears’ beautiful first novel brings just a touch of Macondo to rural Devon in the heatwave of 1984’ Salman Rushdie

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Wake Up

‘Early nineteenth-century France had Balzac, we have Tim Pears’ *The Times*

For John, a potato isn’t just a staple food, it’s also something wondrous, the secret of his success and the key to the future. With his brother, Greg, he has turned his father’s greengrocery business into Spudnik, Britain’s largest dealer in potatoes. Now he wants to change the world by introducing, through potatoes, edible vaccines: plants genetically modified to provide an edible alternative to injections. But as John spins round and round the ring road avoiding his turn off to work he has to figure out how to tell his brother that deep in the Venezuelan jungle, volunteers have died during the latest illegal trials. Deaths that they have to find some way to hide. *Wake Up* is a book about our times, and how we are hurtling, almost silently, into a new age with implications that are unfathomable. Funny, fluent, and provocative it is a major new novel from one of our finest contemporary writers.

‘Haunting and drenched with a dark humour’ *Daily Mail*

‘What excited me was that feeling one only rarely gets as a reader, a kind of prickling excitement. This is it. This is the real thing’ A. S. Byatt

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Blenheim Orchard

‘A brilliantly insightful family saga, full of comedy and sadness’ *Daily Mail*

Ezra and Sheena Pepin live in Oxford with their three children. Ezra has abandoned his calling as an anthropologist; Sheena has found hers running a travel company. They are like everyone else: overworked, worried about their children, trying to preserve their marriage. But when change comes knocking at the Pepins’ door, the family will never be quite the same again. Perceptive and funny, *Blenheim Orchard* is both human drama at its most powerful and an acute portrait of the times we live in.

‘Pears is a master at drawing significance out of the everyday ... A lasting portrait of a family breaking apart’ *Sunday Times*

‘The sudden catastrophe is riveting: its aftermath is dramatic agony’ *Times Literary Supplement*

‘An unflinching portrait of the subtle mechanisms of a modern marriage’
Daily Telegraph

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The Horseman

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