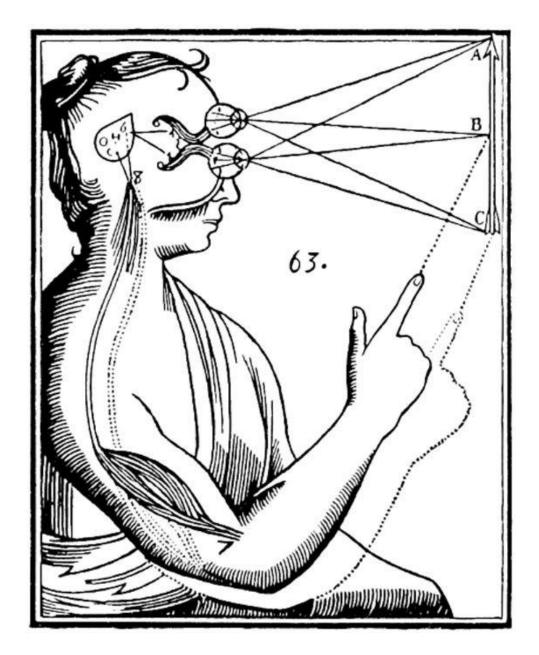
Free Won't



A novel

Drew Wilson

Prospero: A devil, a born devil, on whose nature Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains, Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost...

The Tempest, Act IV Scene 1

My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.

The Diary of William James

1.1

"Scuse me for askin," but are you 'elen Shapiro?" were Joe's first words to Sandra — the first, that is, after he had asked for a plain vanilla cornet, then changed his mind and said, 'Make that a flake."

Given that Wonky Willy ran his ice cream stand with no respect for street licensing or any other trading regulations, the absent proprietor would probably have wanted her to present him the cornet – at least the exclusive touch of the crowning flake – with the compliments of the business. If she did, however, might he not have taken it as a friendly response to *his* compliment – which seemed a little irregular anyway, given that its conferrer looked to be still on duty.

Such thoughts prevented it from softening, let alone melting her heart as he all too obviously hoped. The nervousness with which he had been hanging around, no doubt perfecting the wording, also undermined its effect. He had already walked past several times fiddling with his chin-strap in a way that made her wonder if his helmet didn't fit – it sat as crookedly on his round, reddish head as the flake she had just stabbed rather tentatively into his cornet.

Nor did it did speak much for his powers of observation – surely essential in his line of work. Apart from the fact that the seventeen-year-old singer of the current hit 'Don't Treat Me Like A Child' was a brunette whereas – as long as she kept applying the peroxide – Sandra was blond, the resemblance was more or less limited to the style of the beehive. And as her sometime school-friend, now colleague at *Wonky Willy's Clotted West Country Cornets,* Sally Cobbs scoffed later, having overheard whilst taking a break for a furtive, if flamboyantly wielded fag (which had only partly explained her disparaging cough), 'Aside from that there ain't the faintest bloomin' likeness, since she's got a song at the top of the flamin' 'it parade, an' was on *Juke Box Jury* last week, why the ruddy 'ell would she be sellin' wonky cornets on the flamin' front at West'ampton?'

Sandra had considered all these point, and would only come to value Joe once she had learnt that it is as foolish to judge a book by its opening line as its cover.

When the Hockings (or as they would say, 'ockin's) first moved to Disbury, Joe had rattled the neighbours by listening to Shake, Rattle and Roll whilst mending a shaking, rattling and intermittently rolling motorbike in the drive. Someone worried that the newcomers must have supposed that 'Cliff' in 'Cliff Crescent' referred, not to the view the higher-numbered houses commanded from their back bedroom windows, but to Britain's answer to Elvis, Cliff Richard: What, they wondered, had made a young couple leave the bright lights of Westhampton for a village in which, despite the recent rash of rabbit-hutch housing, the social calendar boasted no events livelier than the ladies' bring and buy sale — meant to raise funds to replace the WI's rusty, tunnel-shaped Nissen hut — and darts competitions at the Smugglers' Arms, the board barely visible through the smoky fug, only dispelled by sharp wafts of ammonia whenever players stopped to used the leaky, lean-to facilities out the back, for the men?

Sandra kept her beehive, if reduced to a less dizzy height, thinking it made her look older; Joe had trimmed his sideburns and quiff in any case to conform to constabulary standards when he'd become a cadet. She played the part of a demure if young housewife

and mother, and he worked hard at being an amiable, even chivalrous neighbour who turned off his music or engine when addressed, helped to search for lost cats, swung a bat – often with one hand, like a baton – for the local eleven, and a pillar of the community and model village bobby, in fact. The Hockings had put their rockier rock n' roll years behind them; now all they wanted was to blend in as a respectable, in no way extraordinary family. The Disbury beat, reaching from Brecon Cove Caravan Park up to the fishermen's cottages at Illcombe, might not promise much in the way of crime-solving opportunities or promotion, but a quiet life was just what Joe and Sandra were after. Above all, they had settled on Disbury as a suitable place in which to bring up the twins. Nothing should prevent them from giving them childhoods of unshadowed happiness, such as Sandra and Joe would have wished for themselves.

Whilst Sandra had never looked much like Helen Shapiro, she was pretty enough. No one, though, had ever compared Joe to Ricky Nelson or Elvis – even if *Jailhouse Rock*, in a rather roundabout fashion, might have inspired his choice of career. He in no sense made an arresting impression, and in spite of his mildly unruly taste in music, soon came to resemble everyone's idea of a conscientious, if not very bright village bobby.

But whilst Joe and Sandra Hocking didn't stand out or wish to, their twins exerted an irresistible, almost exotic spell from the start. They seemed to have their own spotlight. It followed them down the High Street whenever Sandra went shopping, and she had to add an hour to the time it took, just to allow for all the endearments from the staff in the Co-Op, Mrs Bickerton the vicar's wife, and Mrs Wells the Post mistress coming out from her counter to bill and coo at close quarters, and all the other local housewives and mothers she met on the way:

'Will you just look at 'em!' village matrons gushed, 'did you ever see two such pitchers? – like a fairytale prince and princess! Look at them wise blue eyes and pretty pursed cupid lips!'

Such tributes might have pleased Sandra more if one or two had included her just as their mother. Instead she was made to feel like their nanny or some hired home-help. The twins looked so angelic and fine-china-like compared to the humbler clay of their parents that if salivary-lipped Mrs. Clough at the charity lifeboat stall by the Smugglers Arms, having patted and pawed the 'two booties' for all Judy's squirming – Johnny admittedly submitted with a better grace – ever looked up at Sandra, her narrow eye seemed to suspect her of snatching them from some landed gentryfolk in the hope of a ransom. If she wanted to supplement Joe's rather meagre housekeeping money, she could do so by setting up a stall herself and selling her 'little darlin's' hugs and kisses, a shilling per twin. The way they petted and molested them with barely a by-you-leave, sometimes made her want to beat off the more persistent, patronising type with Joe's truncheon. Of course she was far too polite and shy to act on such fantasies. When Mrs Bickerton's lumbago struck in the High Street, bending over the pushchair, rather than stranding her there apparently genuflecting to empty air, Sandra helped her up, managing to pull her own sometimes iffy back in the process. She could hardly push the double buggy back up the hill to their house, and couldn't risk taking them out again for a week- in fact hardly wanted to, fearing all the attention.

Later, it would be easy to say that so much admiration had a regrettable effect – on Judy, at least. Johnny simpered and kicked his legs when kissed, but Judy looked regally at her admirers, dropping things from her chair as if to make her subjects bow in picking them up, and if dolls didn't meet with her approval, she would grimace as if suspecting that Sandra had salvaged them from a skip.

At first Johnny was more generous with his affection. He was bright and boisterous and as a toddler, quick with a ball. The rank-smelling seaweed piled up by the high tides on Disbury Beach didn't discourage him from learning to swim and when his dad said 'Johnny is going to 'elp me with the bike,' and Sandra warned 'Alright, my darlin's, but make sure you keep the grease outside!' you could see how his four-year-old chest swelled with pride. But if Judy played with her brother, she would stop when Sandra and Joe tried to join in, then, if he kept playing, pout as if he was being betraying some ancient, aristocratic pact which self-evidently excluded their parents.

When they went to the village primary, stepping through the school gates the twins seemed to have their own exclusive red carpet. In the classroom, the swooning staff forgot to teach, other pupils neglected as their teachers sucked up to their pets.

Eventually, Miss Price, the Headmistress, felt the need to step in. Together, the twins' charms overpowered even seasoned professionals, blinding their better judgment; but apart, she realised, when one of them went to the toilet, or stayed home with a cold, their charisma was less hard to resist. Other of her infants had their attractions, but it was the rareness of the conjunction, forcing you to compare their similarly extraordinary, though not quite identical beauty, Johnny's tawny gold against Judy's lighter spun locks, his dazzling extroversion alongside her equally fascinating reserve, that made people incapable of treating them like ordinary village children. So Miss Price hit on the idea of splitting them between the two classes, making Johnny share a desk with another girl called Holly Mills.

It was like splitting the atom; something exploded in Johnny's head. His teacher, Miss Giles, had to use all her skill to restrain him, whilst Judy regarded Mrs Lyn like a jailor, unsettling her so much that, teaching the days of the week, she forgot to do Thursday – trying to hurry the weekend along perhaps, when she could escape Judy's icily recriminatory stare.

'Constable Hocking? So glad to catch you in! I'm sorry to trouble you,' the headmistress said, phoning him from her office, giving up the experiment after three days, 'only I regret to report that Johnny has been quite uncontrollable lately. Yesterday he stamped on Holly Mill's toes, and today, stabbed her in the cheek with his pencil, only just missing her eye. Her poor parents have had enough to cope with this year without anything else, and now Holly's afraid to come to school. I'm afraid I must ask you to keep Johnny at home for what remains of the week.'

It was as if she thought he should offer to lock his son up. And in a village where a guest stealing bedding from a Brecon Cove caravan, or a case of double parking caused a rumpus that would mean a knifing or a rape in Westhampton, those who didn't know what sharing a desk with bossy, hyperactive Holly Mills was like would certainly see that pencil stab as the sign of poor parenting to the point of delinquency. Joe may be the local bobby, but he was younger and less sure of himself than he looked, and he felt that it almost cast doubt on his professional fitness. 'I apologise profoosly on Johnny's be'alf, Miss Price,' he replied humbly, 'I'll do all in my powers to ensure that 'e never repeats the offense!'

Resolved to resist the twins' occult influence, he steeled himself to do what his father had done to him and was still common enough in the sixties; when Johnny got home, he ordered him to drop his shorts and pants to be spanked. But Judy rushed in to protect him as he squealed and squirmed. 'Stop it, Daddy,' she shrieked, reaching up to grab his raised hand, 'let go of him, Daddy, let *go!*'

Almost as distressed as her daughter, Sandra hurriedly shut the front door as some prying neighbours looked in. 'Joe,' she cried, 'is 'ittin' 'im really goin' to 'elp?'

'We'll see – I 'aven't managed to yet!' Joe persisted, still trying to throw Judy off. 'Let him go, Daddy – let Johnny go!' she stamped and tugged, 'you're horrid, I hate you! You're not even our daddy!'

'Don't you *dare* say that, Ju!' Sandra cried, having swallowed her shock. 'And you're not my mum!' Judy blazed back.

1.2

It was worse than any blow Joe could have landed, had Judy not intervened. How had she guessed – or, at any rate, part guessed – the truth? What could have put the thought in her head?

At first, Sandra blamed it on Joe. Hadn't they agreed not to behave like *their* parents? Joe's dad had used to box with him, and had once knocked him senseless. As a conscientious Catholic, Sandra's stepdad had used his belt on her legs whilst she learned the *Hail Mary* – or the *Ale Mary*, as she had understood it, given his drunkenness, and the beeriness of his breath; the thought that he didn't love her because he wasn't her real dad had always haunted her as a child. Seeing Joe try to punish Johnny, Judy must have had the same thought. And if Joe wasn't really their father, why should Sandra be their real mum? Despite her cherubic looks, Judy had never been exactly affectionate, perhaps because she didn't believe in their love. Johnny had behaved as he had in order to test them, and they had failed, siding with Miss Price, who had tried to separate them at school. But you couldn't treat twins like that. They had a special bond which you had to respect; it could make you feel shut out, but you couldn't blame *them* for it, punishing them as if twinship was a conspiracy, even a crime!

'Oh it's not your fault!' Sandra said, giving Joe a teary hug, a few evenings later, supposing the children safely in bed. 'Maybe you was right to try and take 'im in 'and. Maybe we've spoiled 'em. Sometimes I 'opes they grows out of it – bein' so boodiful, I mean, it never did nobody no good!'

'It didn't do you no 'arm, Sand!'

'Oh sweetie, I were never boodiful like them! And even then, if it wasn't for you, Joe my love..!'

'Shush-shush! What about a sherry and a nice smoochy track from "the King" before we goes up?'

So they sipped sherry and had a consolatory cuddle, serenaded by Elvis, though Sandra heard more of Joe huskily singing along than of the treacly tones from the speakers –

'Let's think of the foochurr Forget the paast You're not my furst love But you're my laast Take the luv that I brin' Then I'll 'ave everythin' As long as I 'ave yoou...'

Joe was crooning, tickling her ear, when the lounge door swung open to reveal Judy in the hall in her Sleeping Beauty pyjamas.

'What's wrong, my love?' Sandra asked.

'The music's keeping me and Johnny awake!'

'Really, princess? We got it so quiet – you can really 'ear it upstairs?'

How long had she been listening? – As unsettled as Sandra by the thought, Joe rose to take off the record. Knocking the sherry over, he tried to rescue it before it all glugged out over the rug, and Judy backed off as quickly as if he were drunk and about to lash out at her with the bottle.

'Ju', my precious, what's wrong?' Sandra asked, bewildered, 'Daddy was only goin' to switch Elvis off! You don't honestly think that 'e'd 'it you?'

She didn't speak, but her glare was so eloquent that she didn't need to; it said *He tried to hit Johnny* – and he's NOT my daddy, and you're NOT our mum!

'You should be 'avin' your boody sleep, darlin' – shall I come up and tuck you in?' Sandra offered shakily. 'Maybe you was only 'avin' a dream?'

'How *could* I be having a dream? I wasn't a*sleep!*' Judy stamped as if wondering how any adult – let genuine parent – could be so obstinately idiotic.

'Alright, my lovely, no need to snap Mummy's 'ead off – ta ta my precious, sleep tight!'

Thinking about how Judy had reached her conclusions, they had more to mull over once they'd seen Miss Price about Johnny's behaviour at school.

'I wish you 'ad on your uniform, Joe,' Sandra whispered as they sat in the corridor outside Miss Price's office, 'I feel like a kid oo's been sent for a tellin' off meself!'

'Constable, Mrs. Hocking? So pleased that you could drop by!' Miss Price said with grand, if bland affability, 'do come in... Of course I dote on them, they're so exquisite, it's impossible not to, they are so wonderfully, bafflingly bright, and always so trimly turned out!' she said, once the parents sat facing her over the regal, report-covered breadth of her desk. 'But now and then their behaviour does cause a teeny bit of concern – for example, the way Judith relates to the other children. That is, doesn't relate... she has an air, you know,' Miss Price said, with an air not unlike Judy's, 'and she knows how to use with it quite unsettling effect! I'm sure Johnny is more more of a joiner-in at heart, but he's so loyal to her that he always follows her lead. Of course the way they stand up for each other is charming, but Judith doesn't seem to want to make friends or – or to want to let Johnny. That's what led to try to split them up, you know, difficult as I feared it would be!'

'We un'erstand, Miss Price,' Sandra flushed, hurt, but willing to grant that, in this respect, the headmistress was right, 'you get through so many children, while us parents probably can't see the woods for the trees! But then, you see, they usually acts so serious like, and Johnny's never misbe'aved in *this* way before..!'

'Indeed, Mrs. Hocking. Even with my experience, children are a constant source of surprise! There I was, patting myself on the back, thinking that I'd hit on the very thing in sitting him with poor Holly!'

'Well I'm not makin' excuses, Miss Price, please don't think that, but I 'ave 'eard as that 'olly Mills can be somethin' of a trial 'erself...' Sandy said tentatively, having seen her behave objectionably, and get no reprimand for it, at the school gate.

'We must make allowances and not cast the first stone, I always say, Mrs Hocking! *All* parents have their trials, haven't they,' the headmistress said, with a sort of arch sympathy which clearly invited a question.

"ow d'you mean, Miss Price?" Sandra obliged with a vague sense of misgiving.

Whilst acting the soul of tact, the headmistress had none. It flattered her to be in the confidence or so many parents, but she also liked to boast of the fact, and being able to gossip behind a mask of lofty discretion was one of the most delectable perks of the job.

In any case, she was somewhat surprised that Constable Hocking didn't already know, for she imagined such matter would come under his jurisdiction – cases of mistaken identity, statements of relatives when children were confused or went missing, that sort of thing. She leaned forward to confide how, at the time that Holly had started school, the Mills had discovered that she wasn't 'their' Holly at all. She had been confused with another little girl in the maternity ward at Westhampton General. In former days, when babies were born at home, such mistakes could hardly happen, but that was progress, they were obliged to suppose!

"Confused?" – you mean they was swapped?"

'More erroneously exchanged, Mrs Hocking,' Miss Price nodded gravely, gratified to see Sandra so aptly aghast, "swapped" could suggest that it was their intention, which who can want to suppose was the case? Still, who knows! — Naturally, they felt as if they had been robbed — then fobbed off, so to speak!' Miss Price said, addressing the constable, as if to his surely greater knowledge of robbery, if not of fobbery. 'But then they considered and wisely took advice...' from her modesty, Miss Price obviously meant her wise advice '...for it would have meant moving schools, and all the added upset, and they believed — until a — ahem! — recent incident, that she was perfectly settled here amongst friends, so, at my respectful suggestion, they and the other parents met, and after some admirably civil discussion, arrived at a rapprochement, deciding to leave things be, to keep the girls they'd been given. "It's like discovering that you've got a sister, isn't it, Holly, dear!" as I said. And, fingers crossed, it will all turn out alright — or so we must all hope, at least...!'

'You mean – you mean the poor little mite knows?'

'Well, why yes, Mrs Hocking! I believe that honesty is the best policy, don't you?' she eyed the obviously honest Joe, 'to deceive children in such situations simply stores up trouble for the future. So it is indeed with Holly's agreement – although I suppose to say "informed consent" at her tender age would be to go a *little* far. She was advised not to prattle about it, but one way or another it's *bound* to slip out, and what benefit is there in muffling it all in an air of skul*duggery*, as if the children should bear any *blame?* They gave her the choice, very sensibly, gently and delicately, I'm sure. Admittedly, if it's *really* the best decision will only be clear in the long run, but then *all* of us can only act according to such lights as we have!'

Throughout there had been a note of insinuation in her voice, of the nod and wink in her manner, and it now seemed so overbearing, that Joe flushed, suspecting some relevance to them as parents of such – as the headmistress had been at pains to stress – extraordinary children. 'And why should – or why *shouldn't* it be for the best, Miss Price?'

'Oh, you know, Constable! – "nature versus nurture", as the old chestnut goes!' 'Ah, un'erstood! – Miss Price, kindly tell me – if you will – which side *you* takes?'

'Well of course, we nurturers must always *hope* that, with skill and persistence, nurture wins out!' she said – with a degree of sympathy which all too obviously couldn't only concern Holly Wells.

'Let's 'ope so, then!' Joe replied stiffly, flushing and standing up. 'Sorry, love, I've just noticed the time, I just remembered, there's a call I 'ave to make out at Illcombe.'

For all her sensitivity, Sandra hadn't quite followed, feeling in the wrong thanks to Johnny's action, not quite following why Joe had become so defensive, but still she took his cue. 'Oh, yes, well, we shouldn't be takin' any more of your valuable time, then, 'eadmistress. Our apologies again for Johnny's be'aviour to 'olly, and thank you for seein' us, Miss Price!'

'Not at all, not at all – so glad we could have this chat,' the headmistress said innocently nonplussed by their – or at any rate, Constable Hocking's – sudden and obvious eagerness to be off.

There was an hour before school broke up and the twins came home, and Joe suggested a walk on the cliffs.

'Din't you say you 'ad a call to make?' Sandra asked.

'Because I 'ad to get out!'

'Why? D'you think she was 'avin' a go at us?'

'Think? She was *playin*' with us, Sand! – Pretendin' she knows more than she does – like – like some bloomin' detective!'

The shocking truth of this suddenly sunk in. 'Yes, yes I s'pose she was! – As long as she was only pretendin'..!'

'Of course she was!' it was now Joe's turn to be reassuring, "ow could she *really* know? – All that slack gossip about "poor" 'olly Mills! What did she think she and Johnny were going to do – compare notes? She's a bloomin' busybody, that woman, a natural born stirrer, hopin' we would confide in her, so she could go off an' tell everyone else!'

'If – if they don't know already, Joe – like with 'olly!'

'Why should they – apart from her gossipin'?'

'You know! - because they're - they're so different, Joe!'

'So are plenty of children. But it don't stop 'em from bein' their mother's kids – or their dad's come to that!'

'They're so – so delicate, Joe, so blond, so blue-eyed!'

'You're blonde!'

'My darlin', it's out of a bot'le, what *are* you like? You compared me to 'elen Shapiro once! – Was *she* ever blonde? Sweetie, they older they gets, the less they looks like me, the more they takes after 'im..!'

They walked as far as the coast guard's old lookout, then sat on the stone bench facing the Yawstone Rock and its neighbouring islets. On clear days there were four further dots like stepping stones to the horizon. Today it was misty, and they could only count two.

'What shall we do, Joe? Shall we tell 'em or not? If 'olly Mills...'

'No, Sand! That's – that's different! And 'ave it blabbed about? – It's just a phase, like her refusin' to sleep 'cept in her princess pyjamas!'

'Oh no, Joe, no – she knows alright!'

'Well there's irony for you – thinkin' that they don't 'ave a mother!"

'Flighty young thing that I was, lettin' my 'ead be turned!'

'That's enough, Sand!' Joe squeezed her hand firmly, 'it's all done and dusted, my luv, we've moved on. They can't do nothin' to us 'ere. You've got the law behind you now, Mrs 'ockin'!'

'Yes, Joe. Only, you know better than I do, the law in't supposed to tell lies!'

'That was just the Inspector, doin' his little 'itler routine. They *don't* know, it's just make believe. And then what would we tell your parents? – Sand, we said nothin' confirmin' that meddlin' woman's guess. Leave things be. Don't let's go thinkin' ourselves into a stew...' Joe tried to lighten the mood. 'You know the only thing which really worries me?'

'What?'

'Them not likin' Elvis!'

'Don't!' Sandra laughed bitterly. 'No more did 'e... With 'im it was all fancy "Jetaimes" an' French poetry, too 'igh falutin' for the likes of me, too fond of 'imself by 'alf!'

'So we don't tell them yet, love, agreed?'

'No, Joe, you're right, there's no use in panickin'. Wait until they've gone up to Secondary. We'll tell 'em all they needs to know then.'

1.3

Judy had not had to hear about Holly Mills being 'swapped'. She had told herself stories about changeling princes, lost princesses, royal children stolen under enchantments and spirited away for as long as she could remember. She longed for a carriage drawn by white horses to appear at the door of 14 Cliff Crescent. A herald would get out with a flag on his trumpet, and the truth of their aristocratic status would get mentioned on the local evening news.

Of course, plenty of children told themselves similar stories, but Judy had more reason to believe them than most; it wasn't just she who had such thoughts, she could see them in the eyes of everyone they met: 'Can these gorgeous, intelligent children really belong to such lowly folk? Compare the way they talk, their refined faces, and Constable Hocking's cauliflower ears and flat feet!'

At first Johnny was less concerned with these theories. He began to like bikes and knocking a ball about with Joe; but after Miss Price tried to split them up, then Joe's determination to spank him in full view of the street – so that all Disbury must grant the even-handedness – or heavy-handedness – of his prosecution of justice, they supposed later – he felt a resentment which Judy nursed into a deep, stubborn grudge, and both agreed to see that nothing so humiliating would happen to either of them again.

They became yet more obsessed by the differences; in appearance, in tastes, in demeanour. Just take the way they spoke; it was as if they had different-shaped mouths! They started referring to 'Sandra' and 'Joe' between themselves, then to their faces. They didn't protest, it could have led to the very conflict that they had resolved to avoid: We're your mum an' dad, darlin's, can't you call us that, please? – No you're not!

For their part, the twins had decided not to discuss it with them again, either. Their denials would only have demeaned their intelligence – superior as it already obviously was. Sandra and Joe might have hoped their obsession would fade with time, but it came to undermine all feelings of family togetherness. Had it been complete fantasy, they might have outgrown it, banishing it with other toys like an uncuddly pink elephant to the attic, but you could see that they pampered and cultivated it, albeit in secret. Even a pet didn't engage their interest for long. It was Sandra who ended up feeding carrots through the mesh, seeing in the lack-lustre rabbit an image of her own neglect. What was a silly, hare-brained rabbit to them? They may have been playing a waiting game, but were proud meanwhile of the precocity of their interests – interests which only added to the evidence that Sandra surely wasn't their mother, and that Joe certainly wasn't their real dad.

One such fad was for local history, born from a visit they made with their class to St Peters, the squat Norman church at the top of the village where the bulging wall caused by the roots of an ancient yew made a bottleneck in the road. It was the height of the national brass-rubbing craze, but there was only one plaque in the aisle at St Peters, so Mrs Lynn suggested they also trace other memorials and carvings on the tombs of other dearly departed top brass in the graveyard outside. The biggest belonged to families who would have employed many who lived in the village, in some cases perhaps they still did.

'Shall I do a rubbin' of my granny's grave, Miss?' a pupil asked, 'she's buried over there, in the corner!'

'Pooh, it's only a titchy one, Miss!' another child scoffed.

Miss had somehow overlooked the chance of her charges competitively comparing the dimensions of their antecedents' graves. Some children, on the other hand, had parents who were still employed, or were tenants 's of landowning families whose remains were marked by graves more like mausoleums, and Mrs Lynn managed to give any competition a more innocuous basis, as she hoped, by asking if anyone knew of any connection to these. Those who wanted could even start a project on a family of interest when they got back to school. They might also visit the local library. Though tiny, it was quite likely to have some record or book on the former or present who's who of the parish.

The Hocking twins had already headed quasi-proprietorially towards the most imposing vault, testifying to past pre-eminence of a clan called the Dearings.

In time, they learned that an early representative had sailed with Francis Drake, that they had lost their land in the civil war, got it back under Charles II, then married into a family appropriately called Money who had owned their own bank. The more the twins learnt about the former grandeur of the Dearings, the more they identified with them. True, they weren't royalty, but by nine years old, they knew that princes and princesses were distressingly thin on the ground.

When they discovered that Pomphlete – the stately country seat of past generations of Dearings – still existed and was open to visitors on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from eleven to four o' clock, on Saturdays until six, they informed Sandra that they needed to see it, to help with their project (though the rest of the class had almost instantly lost all interest in theirs) and Sandra, who had only recently learnt to drive, agreed to take them there that weekend.

After having lost the way, and twice met with tractors in narrow lanes, testing her still less-than-perfect skill at reversing, it was late afternoon before they finally arrived at the house.

Pomphlete had seen better times. Sandra noticed the faded drapes, the marks made by mildew, the stains where pipes had burst or the roof had leaked. Still, it was a world away from the functional boxiness of Cliff Crescent and the twins were awed, even if they took care not to show it. Oak panelled walls – rather worm-eaten – boasted trophies of game, home-grown and exotic. Dark portraits showed ladies as pale as if their blood had been drained out of them with their dowries. Former Lord Dearings flew after their hounds on horses with all four legs off the ground.

Sandra tried to talk about objects that caught her eye, but acting as if they were there by themselves, the twins kept falling behind. Hiding as always how it wounded her, Sandra made an effort to talk to the only other visitor to the house, as it seemed. After blessing her when the other lady sneezed, she observed that it must be the dust, then, having run a finger along the top of a Jacobean buffet, added affably, 'Mr Dearin' might try lookin' for a new 'ousekeeper, I reckon nobody's even touched that sideboard for yonks!'

The lady smiled frostily, dabbing her nose before going ahead.

Sandra followed companionably, coming to a conservatory with a moss-dimmed roof, over tubs of grey fleshy aloes.

'They're never aloes!' Sandra looked doubtfully at the tag on a palm tree whose trunk dangled tentacles like dead snakes, 'it's a sight bigger than the one on the shelf in my kitchen!'

'I think you'll find the label says it's an African Aloe *Tree,* Madam,' the other woman said stiffly.

'Ah,' Sandra laughed blushing, 'and there was me 'opin' that if I added more Epsom Salts, that would 'appen to mine!'

Beyond was a music room, then a gallery with rifles and swords in racks and a pair of stuffed hounds. They looked so pitifully dog-eared that Sandra gave one a sympathetic pat, and would have compared them unfavourably to the mangy rabbit back home if her companion hadn't said sharply, 'Please, Madam, don't touch!' and Sandra realised that she wasn't another visitor, but an attendant, possibly even the housekeeper whose dusting she had tactlessly criticised a moment ago.

Embarrassed by Sandra's gaffes, the twins distanced themselves even more. They slipped back through the music room to the conservatory where, hiding behind the tree with the tangled stem, Judy bumped into a little lean man with thin, once-red hair and a shapeless tweed jacket, apparently reading a book.

'Oops-a-daisy!' he exclaimed, almost dropping it before focusing on her in the way she knew well, that of someone instantly smitten: 'Hello my dear, are you lost?' Then he saw Johnny: 'By Jove! — And hello to you, young man — the Ganymede, one might almost think, to fair Rosalind! Or perhaps I'm seeing double, here under the greenwood tree?' he smiled, to himself more than them — or even his book perhaps, showing skewed, yellow teeth that, despite his rich, genteel accent, reminded him of a tramp's.

'She's called Judy,' Johnny said, wondering if he was quite right in the head, 'she's my twin.'

'So you are, so you are – delightful – delightful!' the man sighed, like someone reminded of a person or persons much missed. 'Well, fair Gemini, welcome to my forest of Arden – formerly known as the orangery,' he said, shaking the remorseful shadow off, 'though "greenery" might be more appropriate, or "gloomery" – thanks to the carpet of moss and mould that will keep growing over the roof!' he looked roofward ruefully. 'May I ask your impression of the house so far?'

'It's jolly big!' Johnny noted discriminatingly.

'Do you live here?' Judy asked.

'I do, my dear, that is indeed my luck, or my curse – only because it's haunted, of course!'

'Do you believe in ghosts?' Johnny asked.

'Why, certainly! Don't you? Come with me, and I'll show you some!'

Johnny gave Judy a lofty look to which hers answered *you'll see!* then they followed the man back through the gallery, amused by his erratic, small steps.

'There, now, what do you say to them? Aren't they a creepy lot! – Take him, the sulky young blade with the musket; sometimes I think I hear something go "pop!" late at night and I'm sure it's gone off, probably because he died in a duel. What about, do you think?'

'In books it's mostly when a black-guard comprises a gentleman's wife,' Judy said carefully.

""Comprised" indeed! Spot on, my dear, very apt!' their guide chuckled, bearing his mustard-coloured teeth, 'tu as tout compris! – the thrill of the chase, or chaste, as the old chestnut goes. My word, but aren't you well read! Only this gentlemen, Horace Clough Dearing, being less so, or not being quite such a blackguard, chose to fight over a fox, or at least about whose hound had caught it!'

'Was it one of those hounds back there?'

'Argos and Baskerville? No, they're deerhounds, my dear, though I'm sure they wouldn't have been too sniffy to snap at a fox or two in their time!'

'Do you hunt?'

'Me? Ooh no, no – very expensive business, very costly – not least for the foxes! – Oh no, I pursue other passions, other prey. And you, what pray, are your passions? – reading, for one, I would hazard?'

'I read a book, sometimes two or three a week,' Judy confirmed, 'it depends on if they're grownups'.'

'I can read four!' Johnny outbid her.

'You mean you read books like grownups, or grownups like books?' the man quailed in awe.

'You never read four!' the girl reproached her brother as if the man wouldn't believe them now.

'I do! - If they're short - Ju just reads too quickly, that's all!'

'Ah, but you're equally quick on the uptake, I'm sure!' their old, but not unchildlike companion suggested reassuringly, or possibly reassured. 'Have you seen my library yet – no? Then the door must have closed again, which it will keep on doing!'

'Perhaps it's a ghost?' Johnny ventured.

'Perhaps,' the man smiled, 'although probably not his' – he pointed back to the picture of Horace Clough with the musket, 'a better-read ghost, I'd wager, hoping to be left to read in peace – or RIP, as they say! Still, I'm quite sure it wouldn't mind being interrupted by visitors as well-read as you! - Do you like books about ghosts – or books written by ghosts? – Oh, you haven't heard about ghost-writers then?' the man asked the boy – whose bemusement showed he cared less about saving face than his sister, 'or maybe you're more interested in twins? – Books about twins, I mean, I'm not sure I know of any by twins. In fact I was reading one when we just met, you know, though in that book it turns out it was only one twin pretending to be two! – On the other hand, I remember reading a book when I was young called Emil and the Three Twins!'

'Really? But three twins would be triplets!'

Stunned by such a pretty piece of precocity, the man felt obliged to pretend to doubt his own memory. 'Hmm, very true, young man, very true – maybe the author was as poor at adding-up as me. I've no head for numbers, just ask my accountant!'

'Are you a count?'

"A—count", ha ha! very quick, very clever! the old fellow chortled, tousling the boy's blond locks. 'And what about you two — any titles, actual or apparent, that I should know about?'

'We don't know, we're adopted,' Judy said solemnly, 'probably orphans.'

'You don't say!' their guide exclaimed, his interested deepened by sympathy – or possibly, more unnervingly, the other way around. 'My condolences, my dear! Only who did you come with then?'

'Sandra – who pretends she's our mum. It's a secret, *she* doesn't know *we* know she's not!'

'Oh? Heavens, yes, I see! *Compris, mes jolies jumeaux!* "Mum's" the word, then!' the old man tapped his nose circumspectly. 'And do you sign visitors' books, or go incognito? – I mean do you hide your identities – like the Scarlet Pimpernel, or Haroun al-Rashid?'

'Why did the Scarlet Pimple hide?' Johnny asked instead of an answer.

'Not pimple, Johnny – Pimpernel!' Judy hissed.

'Because he had spots!'

'Ha ha!' the man laughed exaggeratedly throwing back his head. 'And Haroun Al-Rashid?'

'Because of his rash!'

Judy glowered, afraid Sandra might turn up any minute, but not before Pomphlete's resident aristocrat – as she had begun to suspect – had lost interest in them, thanks to Johnny's embarrassing jokes.

'Not at all, not all!' he smiled fondly. 'Johnny – and..?'

'Judith.'

'Judith, "Ju" as "Johnny" said, of course!' the sadly somewhat tatty aristocrat recalled.

'Though, actually I prefer "Judith" to "Ju" – or "Judy".'

'You do? Or "Jude"?'

Judith considered and didn't reject "Jude" out of hand.

'Well then, "Judith" or "Jude" it shall be! - Judith and Johnny....?'

'Hocking,' Johnny replied, when Judy didn't, liking their surname still less. 'Though actually I prefer "John"!'

'Ah! – but you've never told Judith – or "Jude" – that? – Sorry! It's improper for me to ask, pardonnez-moi! I should know my place, it's none of my business!' the old man teased remorsefully. 'Welcome, Judith and Johnny – pardon me, John! I'm Lord Dearing,' the old lord said ceremoniously shaking hands, 'Harold, among friends, as I should like us to be – "Dearing" as in "dear", not "deer", like our poor old stuffed friend up there!' Lord Dearing said, pointing to a moth-eaten, one-antlered trophy on the wall '– and yes, look, I was right, the door has closed again!'

The panels on the door matched those around it, so that when he had pushed it open, they seemed to pass through a wall.

'If we're quiet, perhaps we'll catch that ghost reading!' Harold Dearing whispered, touching the backs of some books on a nearby shelf. 'Debrett's... Sporting Life... Horse and Hound... I fear I've been rather dismissive about the tastes of my predecessors and forebears at Pomphlete, but the unfortunate Horace Clough Dearing was not an exceptional relative, with his gung-ho, gun-touting habits! Sadly, all too few country gentlemen's concerns went much beyond horses, blood sports and breeding, any more interesting interests would probably have got them hounded out of the Jockey Club! — Good Lord, how did The Hound of Heaven get to be there? Perhaps poor Horace picked it up after all, thinking that it celebrated some legendary Lælaps of the fox-hunting firmament? — Ah, now here's a more promising shelf! — Wilkie Collins, The Moonstone, and dear inexhaustible Dickens! — Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, Bleak House... I expect children as well-read as you — indeed, given some similarity in your situation — though not, thank Heavens, to the point that you must spend your tender years in a workhouse! — will already know and have identified with the plight of Oliver, Pip and others of his poor abused waifs?'

'What's a "waif"?' Johnny asked.

'An orphan,' Judy said learnedly. 'There are lots of orphans in books!'

'So there are, so there are – and in myths,' the man said, tapping on the back of a *Bullfinch Mythology,* 'or waifs who've strayed from their parents, like Romulus and Remus – who were also twins! – and Oedipus – who was an orphan, at least he was after he'd killed his own – er... well, never mind, we needn't go into too much detail about *him* – and *Tom Jones,* and *Tom Sawyer,* and Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin...* all in "Tauchnitz" editions, I'm afraid, having been poached by pirates!' Lord Dearing winked like a pirate with a patch on

one eye. 'Yes, it *does* seem as if orphans crop up rather *orphan* in books!' he grimaced at his own joke, raising a bitten-nailed index finger towards another shelf of leather-bound classics published by *Pleiades*, 'and that's even before we get to *les orphelins français* such as in Balzac and Beaumarchais – or *de* Balzac and *de* Beaumarchais, as they liked to be known – a *de* for Frenchmen with social pretentions being quite *de rigueur...* Tum *tidlididli*-um! *tidlididli*-um! – That's from *Figaro*, you know, who thinks he's lost his parents until they turn up like bad pennies in the Third Act... You've not heard the opera by Mozart? Perhaps the Beatles are more to your taste – eh Jude?'

Judy frowned, not liking to be made fun of, even if it was by a lord.

'She *does* like 'em really,' Johnny said treacherously, 'she was singing *Yesterday* only yesterday!'

'Only to stop Joe – our dad, but not really – who keeps whistling Elvis! – He says nobody, not even the Beatles, can beat "the King",' she explained contemptuously, to indicate the sort of thing they had to put up with.

'Ah, but I fear Joe is right, my dear — if his throne is shaken, it'll be because he won't stop twitching his hips! — Now, over there, look, more spooky old relatives of mine. That fellow on the left is Henry, the seventh Lord Dearing. To the right is his sister, Letitia, both from the school of Van Dyck — as in Anthony, not that other sham Englishman, Dick! — caught at just the right time, before the high life went to their heads — and their livers, no doubt,' Lord Dearing said, ruefully rubbing his. 'Alas, Henry is another whose life was cut tragically short. But don't they make a beautiful pair? Sometimes, I take my book across to that, I'm afraid, rather shabby chaise longue — it's seen better days, like its most frequent recumbent — and read aloud — quietly, of course, this being a library — and I'm convinced that they're listening! On a dark, dreary evening, they're far better company, any way, than all those haughty lords and pale, but uninteresting ladies outside!'

He led them up for a closer look. Until now, the light had shone off the dark, crackled varnish, veiling the refined, childish faces.

As they approached, Dearing gasped in astonishment. 'Good heavens, I – I never did! – What did I just say about ghosts..?'

He looked at the twins, then the old pictures, comparing the children at his side with those portrayed above in cracked oils. He steadied himself, fumbling for their shoulders as if to reassure himself that they were real flesh and blood. 'God bless my soul, it's — it's uncanny! It's, it's… *Look*, for goodness sake! — oof! — excuse me, I do declare, I — I'm all of a twitch and a dither! I think I'm going to have to sit down! — Let's — let's *all* sit down, phew! — let's f-fetch our breaths… Oh, by Jove, what a shock…!' He wiped his face shakily, then took their hands, his damp handkerchief in the one that clasped Johnny's. 'Julie…!'

'Julie? I'm Judith!'

'Judith! – silly me – or Jude, of course! – and you, Johnny, look! – No, I mean, really look!' he begged when they were sitting to either side of him on the chaise longue – which seemed to them to be simply a faded old sofa with half the back missing, 'are you looking?' They looked. 'Well? – Do you see?'

'See what?'

'The resemblance, dear boy!'

Johnny compared them objectively. 'I suppose they are quite alike...'

'No, my dear! – their resemblance to you! It's – it's simply extraordinary, it's – it's as if the centuries have simply m-melted away..!' Lord Dearing dabbed his flushed face and mottled neck as if he was in danger of melting away himself.

The slightly smiling girl wore a bonnet, and the young man had effeminate, shoulder-length hair. There might have been no likeness at all, but the twins' heads were turned. What if they were related? They were like Hansel and Gretel in the gingerbread house. That it was mouldy old gingerbread, that the bank had long since gone bankrupt, that Harold had kept so little of the Dearings' old wealth and distinction didn't register as yet, for they weren't yet the cunning researchers they would one day become. A man of a class they thought they belonged to by right had taken them at their own estimation, offering them evidence of the kind they had craved. He had opened his house, less because of the money it would make (though he certainly needed that), than because he was lonely. He was a widower spider with a rundown old house for a web. They sat in a huddle of mutual delusion, the dead children looking down from the wall as if considering the threat from the living pair sitting beside him, who hoped to supplant them in the old man's starved heart.

Sandra, meanwhile, was ever more anxiously searching the rooms. The fleshy Aloe tree with its Medusa-haired stem seemed to draw her in circles. Coming back to it, it looked more ill-intentioned each time. Twice, she met the strolling attendant, but was put off asking if she had seen the twins by her coldly dismissive air. The twins always hated it when she breathed down their necks. Sandra had to keep up an air of indifference, in case she came on them suddenly and offended them with her presumptuous maternal concern.

Sandra had never really overcome her inferiority complex, her children wouldn't allow it. When she had met their father, she had been working at the ice-cream kiosk on the front near Westhampton Pier. Joe had been her first customer and returned more often than could be explained by the front being on his beat, sometimes twice or three times a day, with his helmet always a little wonky, moving on after nervous attempts to chat her up with spots of ice-cream or traces of chocolate flake on his chin. But Charlie Reece didn't need such persistence. Where Joe was square and red of face, Charlie was a sweet-featured Tab Hunter, a blond Ricky Nelson, a budding Montgomery Clift. She had looked up from wiping chocolate flakes off the counter, and his blue matinee movie-star stare had promptly brought her heart to her mouth. He had conquered her even before she had heard his American accent telling her that he was staying at the Grand Plaza Hotel. You had to be rich to stay there, she had ogled naively. As rich as the Rockefellers, he'd agreed laughing. Not wanting to reveal her ignorance, she had guessed that the Rockefellers were a US rock 'n roll band what songs of theirs she would know? - He'd laughed, revealing his even, not yet tobaccostained teeth. Later he stroked her hair and read her poetry by someone called 'Body Lair'. She was a 'jolly angie-noo', he had said and tried to teach her to smoke, but it made her feel dizzy, so he'd held her head to his chest, and later other places as well. He was supposed to be prepping before going up to Princeton that 'fall', as he called autumn. She was seduced by all these new words and places, even if she thought Princeton must be spelt Princetown, as in the little town where the prison stood like a factory or a great grey ship with four chimneys in the middle of the moor, and in fact all through the days that they were together, the West Country Gazette was on the track of a murderer reputedly on the loose. It felt as if Charlie Reece was protecting her, and made those weeks seem even more dreamlike. The breezy way he spent money went to her head like the Gallways and Jetaimes as he called his French cigarettes. One day, he booked a yacht and they sailed down the coast, taken pictures of themselves with a camera which printed the snaps as if spitting out its own tongue. They lunched on scampi and chips in a basket and dined by candlelight in a lead-paned restaurant at a Cornish seaside resort. They'd had steak as red as the face of her besotted officer,

Charlie chaffed, having noticed Joe hanging around the stand, and French wine from a carafe which the waiter had called Mutton Caddy, though Charlie hadn't believed him until he showed him the bottle, after which he said it was corked. It was too late to sail back that night, and they didn't sleep much as the they rocked and the boat rocked, nudging and creaking against the rubber tyre on the quay. Next day, she was late for work and Charlie appeared in time for her lunch break. So had her admiring policeman. He had seen her by now, frankly rather battered blonde beehive propped on her young lover's shoulder, paused, reddened and then walked on. Sally Cobb was sullenly covering for her late return, unable as she was to tear herself from Charlie's arms as they hugged on the b bench. Startled, Charlie had suddenly pushed her off, jumping up and flicking his cigarette away, but it was too late. The woman approaching was a pale, prematurely aged brunette in grating stilettos, the man was broad and short, with a blunt, jutting jaw and a felt hat which he doffed with an irony that even Sandra couldn't help notice. They had already been to their son's hotel, paid his bill and been charged extra for every night she had stayed. The car for the airport would be there in an hour. They had stared at her, then only paid attention to Charlie. Gone was his worldly, independent air. As he had meekly gone off with them he had looked like a truant schoolboy about to be whipped. Three months later, realising that she was pregnant, Sandra wrote to the address he had left at the desk at the Plaza. Knowing that it was his family's home, she had half expected his parents would open her letter, but the scrawled, two-line reply when it came was shocking in a way she had not foreseen; it looked like the hurried draft for a telegram in which the only clearly legible words were accident, painful loss and allow us to grieve. With it were three hundred dollars in crumpled green notes, no doubt meant to pay for a backstreet abortion. It was an ugly little note, as ugly as Charlie's father's expression had been when he'd found them cuddling, she in her Wonky Willy white smock on the bench looking out over the shimmering ocean dotted with yachts and a great white liner on the horizon. It did occur to her that the 'accident' might simply be a way to shake her off, but if Charlie hadn't died, why did he never contact her himself, even once?

Later, having married Joe, she had told herself to forget Charlie. After all, even if he had been her first love, for him, she'd probably been a holiday fling, one lasting hardly more than a fortnight. But as her children grew older, Charlie's face kept coming back to her, for theirs with that touching presumption of privilege, reminded her more of his every day. She knew why they'd really made her bring them to Pomphlete and why they had given her the slip. Probably they had ducked under one of the ropes with the hanging notices saying *Private*, hoping to bump into the owner. Their eyes would shine with that innocent arrogance Charlie's had had when he spoke to her that first day at the stand on the front, and...

'We close in five minutes, Madam,' the attendant's voice broke in on her brooding, 'if you can begin to make your way out!'

Sandra cleared her throat. 'Sorry, my love, only my kids 'uv wandered off, I don't suppose you've seen 'em – blond twins, a girl an' a boy..?'

The woman's pinched disdain gave way to a weary, *not again* look which suggested that she had cause to feel both hope and alarm.

'Have you tried the library, Ma'am? That's usually where they end up!' She led her briskly back through the dim, all too familiar rooms until they came to a panelled wall, then stood aside, and Sandra saw the door she must have passed by six times.

The attendant gestured to it, then left her to discover whatever horrors she'd hinted at by herself.

Sandra went in; her eyes adjusted, and she saw the sofa at the end, and the old man hugging her children.

'Let 'em GO! — Get AWAY from 'im!' she screamed as if they were running in front of a car, or were about to be kidnapped, 'Johnny, Judy, come 'ere NOW!'

Throughout the drive home, she could feel the twins' resentment and disdain burning into the back of her neck.

She had threatened to take Lord Dearing to court. Her husband was a policeman, she could have his Lordship locked up in a minute, she'd said, his title wouldn't save him from that. She had made a scene, in short, robbing her children's victory of its sweetness.

If they'd been honest, they would have admitted to being embarrassed by Dearing's unexpectedly affectionate embrace. Nor had Judy liked the way he had smelled. But all that was forgotten when Sandra had howled like a heifer being torn from her calf or a rabbit being garrotted by a fox. She had forced Dearing to stand on what was left of his dignity as a peer, which he usually only mentioned in self-deprecating jest, professing to feel an affinity with the decayed piers of Bournemouth, Weston-super-Mare and Westhampton. He had tried to make her look and see the similarity with the portraits, but she had seen 'nothin' but 'is lordly takin' of liberties!' and, faced with her feral ferocity, he had crumpled and wept.

Now she felt like a green-eyed monster herself. Probably he was only a sad lonely toper, hungry for human warmth, but she'd had enough of standing by and seeing the twins pawed and petted by strangers who all seemed to think that they had more right to their affection than she did, and fear had filled her lungs like the pains with which, young as she had been, she had borne them; they were *her* children, whatever anyone thought!

And yet there were times when she felt that her right to them was as questionable as her hypocritical parents had said. She would have had to agree to give them up if Joe hadn't offered to marry her and pretend he was the father. Her parents remembered the scandals caused by slick-tongued, loose-hipped Yankee GIs; if they'd learnt that he was only a teenage American tourist, it would simply have deepened her disgrace. But Joe had only just got his commission, and his inspector was a Methodist and a methodical despot who played the detective in all his men's affairs. Sandra had been still underage when fell pregnant. The Inspector had found out, made Joe admit that he'd lied and, rather than praising his decency, distrusted him ever since. Joe was thankful to be offered the Disbury beat, but the Inspector had since become District Superintendent; if the matter was revived. It might be nothing but a pretext, but Sandra was worried that Joe could still lose his job. Johnny might even claim he'd been beaten, and the twins might be taken away. She had little faith in officials. Though Joe represented authority in the village, she knew that he didn't have much. Who'd have thought that, ten years after he'd made her respectable, she would still feel like an outsider and – even as a mother – so insecure?

1.4

The twins moved up to Ramford; pupils were collected by coach Disbury and the countryside around. Until the previous year, it had been a Secondary Modern, and those parents who could afford to, sent their children elsewhere. Gerald Wright, the new head, had promised them that their twins – having passed the Eleven Plus with ease – would be 'challenged', and the school would live up to that promise – if not exactly in the way that he'd meant.

In Disbury, the twins had invariably had their way, but at Ramford they found themselves mocked as toffs by a school full of farm labourers' kids. The phrase *anyone for tennis?* had caught on, thanks to a comedy show being aired on television just then, and the tag followed them wherever they went. If they answered a question in class, it was used to shout them down, and teachers seemed to smile, rather than intervene. In fact, judging their work improbably perfect, teachers accused them of cribbing, and when they tried to protest, Mrs. Killigrew said 'I know when children are lying, don't you get all hoity-toity with me!'

What had happened – was approaching adolescence spoiling their looks? Probably more at fault was their arrogance, their sense of embattled entitlement which in that unpropitious environment, made them obvious targets, whilst their peers asked more forcefully as they too got older, who do they think they are?

There was someone who had moved up from primary school with them who thought that she knew.

'My mum calls their dad PC Plod 'cos 'e's got size 'leven feet,' Holly Wells scoffed. 'Their mum's called Sandra an' sometimes works in our shop. 'e stabbed me in me face with a pencil on purpose once. I could 've been blinded or poisoned 'cos of the lead. 'e did it 'cos 'e always 'as to sit with his sister 'cos they're in love. "Insects", they calls that. Prob'ly it was "insects" which 'ad 'em, which is why they was given away!'

'You can talk!' Johnny retorted. 'Your parents probably didn't want you back, because you're even more of a cretin than them!'

'Cretin yourself, Johnny 'ockin'. You're the loonertick who goes round stabbin' little girls in the face!'

If the twins struck the other kids as being stuck-up and smug, many teachers who had stayed on from the old dispensation thought that Dr Gerald Wright – with his first in 'Greats' from Oxford – was arrogant and out of touch too. His task was to turn a failing Secondary Modern with no sense of identity into a flagship, up-to-date comprehensive – a school that would also cater for children possessing a level of academic ability which the older teachers feared would quite possibly show *them* up. The resentment that the new demands aroused wasn't eased by the kind of reforms the head chose to try to push through first. How was it 'up-to-date' to rebrand Ramford's four houses (previously named, admittedly somewhat unimaginatively, after points of the compass) after four famous, rivalrous families who had once held sway in that part of the county? Perhaps he thought that the children would take more pride in their local heritage by identifying with the historical dynasties of the Wystons, the Bullers, the Crockers and Dearings – in which case, he would only partially, and not all that happily, succeed.

Dr Wright announced it himself at his first school assembly. Pupils who had belonged to North House, would henceforth be Wystons, Souths, Bullers, Easts, Crockers, Wests Dearings, whilst new pupils would be assigned by their month of birth.

When he said 'Crocker', someone had snickered.

Gerald Wright looked insecurely back towards his deputy, sitting behind him onstage. 'It's *Croaker!*' the deputy whispered.

'Ah. My apologies. All former "Easterners" will henceforth be proud members of *Croaker!*'

'Come on you Croak-k-kers!' some – presumably new affiliate – called out.

'Death to all Croak-k-kers!' a wit – quite likely from a rival house – cracked, prompting a flurry of deathbed rattles like a plague of dying frogs.

'Splendid, splendid, that's the spirit!' Gerald Wright chortled, zestfully rubbing his hands, 'I foresee that inter-house matches are going to be lively affairs, if not fights to the death! – Right, now let's check that everyone knows which houses they're in: Hands up Wyston? – Good! – Buller? – Excellent! – Dearing..?' There seemed to be something of a shortfall in Dearings, especially amongst the fresh intake in the front rows. The new head came forward winningly: 'Come my dears,' he stooped, 'which of you is going to stick up for Dearing?'

So close to them, the head's condescending smirk seemed to inspire reluctance from sullenness as much as from shyness. So he was all the more relieved when two arms went up just in front of him, especially seeing that they belonged to twins of such beauty, all the more striking for contrasting with the *Lumpenproletariat* looks of the children around them. Harbingers of a new era, such pupils, he hoped, would be the first of the new breed which would distinguish his leadership, raising the reputation of Ramford school to new heights.

But it was time for the school hymn, so Dr Wright left it to form teachers to continue assigning pupils to the renamed houses at registration.

When not acting as a form tutor, Mr Woods taught elementary Maths, O-level Economics and History, the latter with an animus due, it was thought, to his privately being a Marxist. Whilst marking the register, he tested – with a touch of sarcasm, it might be – his first-formers' grasp of the head's new, or rather, old as in virtually feudal, system of houses.

'Abbott, Christopher?'

'Sir!'

'Month of birth?'

'March, Sir,' Christopher remembered, scratching his head.

'And which house do you propose to honour with your vassalage, Abbott, Christopher?' Mr Woods asked. 'Do you have nits, Christopher?' he asked when Christopher kept scratching. Rather than embarrass him further, seeing Christopher blush to the roots of his unkempt, possibly nit-ridden hair, Mr Woods patiently explained that, a year having on average twelve months, of which March was the third, and Crocker being the third in the order of houses decreed by the new head, Abbott, Christopher was a Crocker for the term of his natural existence, or at least for the twenty terms of his time at Ramford, or twenty-eight, should he opt to progress to the so far, not very numerous sixth form.

Having benefitted from this example, Alsop, Deirdre, whose birthday was in two weeks at the end of September correctly deduced that she was a member of Wyston House, to which Mr Wood declared she would be a boon, having demonstrated such powers of reasoning, especially should be choose to enter inter-house chess games or quizzes. Beasley, Brian was absent with measles or possibly mumps, according to Hobbes, Oliver, who usually shared a seat with Beasley on the school bus. Hobbes was therefore entrusted to remember on his account that Beasley, Brian, being born in July, was also a Crocker.

'Timothy Gough?'

'Sir!' Gough wheezed.

'Are you a smoker, as well as a Crocker, Gough?' Mr Woods joked, though who knew, even with a boy in the first form, at a school with an intake as rough and ready as Ramford's?

'Asthma, Sir!' Gough coughed as if to oblige a doctor, then in earnest, having apparently set off a fit.

'Alright, Gough, no need to choke! If you two and Beasley are anything to go buy, perhaps all aspiring Crockers should to and register down the corridor with the Nurse! – Hobbes, Oliver? – oh yes, I've heard from you! – Birthday, Hobbes?'

'July, Sir.'

'House?'

'Er...' Hobbes struck off the other houses before reaching 'Dearing!'

'Now we're hitting our stride. - Hocking, Johnny?'

'Sir!'

'Judith?'

'Yes, Mr. Woods. We're in Dearing House, too, Sir.'

'How d'you work *that* one out? You're down as being born in February here. January, Wyston, February, Buller – are you following?'

'Yes, Sir, but in assembly, the headmaster asked for volunteers to join Dearing. So we *did* volunteer!'

'I see. With emotions running high after that strenuous rendition of the school hymn and Dr Wright's Oxford-honed oratory, you felt eager to please, and perhaps a mysterious affinity towards the House of Dearing, Hocking, Judith and possibly Hocking, Johnny? I understand and sympathise, my dears, but the rules...'

'Yes Sir, but he *set* the rules, didn't he — Mr Wood, Sir?' Judith pointed out, smiling sweetly, kicking Johnny to make him do the same.

'Well, I can't imagine what reasons you have to prefer Dearing to any other bunch of defunct overlords, but if you wish. Only please, the rest of you, no more exceptions without a signed note from the right-honourable Dr Wright, or there'll be anarchy, as there was in the interregnum, and the peasants' revolt. Hughes, April?'

'Sir!'

'Birthday?'

'Second of April, Sir.'

'Ah, yes. Well at least that's straightforward – Dearing! – Inch, Simon?'

'Sir!'

'Month?'

'January, Sir.'

'No mystery there either, Inch, a Wyston every inch!' Mr Woods twitted the shortest boy in the class.

They played out their new rivalries at the first break. Bullers bellowed at Crockers who croaked at Wystons who jeered at the Dearings.

'Just as well! – We don't want no "insects" in Crocker!' Gough sneered wheezily, spotting the twins.

'Neither do we, so buzz off!' buzzed some newly dubbed Bullers.

'You buzz off!,' Johnny retorted. 'You're not real Bullers – or Crockers, or Wystons!'

'What 're you on about? - Do you think you're real Dearin's, then? Your dad's only PC Plod with the cauliflower ears an' big feet!'

'Only 'e's not their *real* dad neither, they was adoptid!' Holly Wells couldn't resist letting slip.

"ow d'you know that?"

'Miss Price said!'

'You can talk, you were swapped!' Johnny snapped back.

'At least I know 'oo my real mum an' dad are!'

'So do we!' Johnny vaunted foolishly, although Judy was trying to pull him away.

'Oh?' oo is it then?'

'D'you think I'm going to tell you?' Johnny jeered, going red.

'Oh my GAWD!' Holly twigged, then turned to the others' "e only thinks that they're real Dearin's! They thinks Lord Dearin's their dad!'

Every eye shone with derisive delight.

'Oh yaahh – Jornny 'orcking thinks Lord Dearin's 'is dahd!'

'Uncle Fester, child molester!'

'Dear boy Dearin'!'

'Nonce the ponce!'

"is love-child, tee-hee!"

'My de-ah, we-ah the Dearin's, doan't you knoaw!'

They were pushed and pinched, their toes trampled, dirt was hurled. They were jostled together, egged on by thrusts and gibes.

'Go on, Dearin', give 'er a kiss!'

'Go on, don't mind us, give 'er a smacker, give 'er luv bite, insects, 'ave a good snog!'

It threatened to get even rougher as a tall, heavy boy with a powerful, slouching head approached. It wasn't the first time the twins had noticed him lurking. They quailed, thinking they really were in for it now.

'L-let 'em alone, or I'll s-s-smash yer!' the older boy warned their tormentors, battling with a stammer.

'Coo-er – it's Wr-Wr-Wrigsy. I'm w-w-wettin' myself,' Timothy Gough scoffed, 'where's yer f-f-ferret today, Wrigsy, down yer t-t-trousers or up yer b-b-bum?'

The burly adolescent grabbed Gough's throat; 'I'll s-s-smash yer! I'll s-s-smash anyone 'oo p-p-pests 'em, see?'

'Urggh!' Gough coughed and wheezed, going blue in the face.

'G-go on then, c-c-clear off!'

Despite his size, Wrigsy was only a third-year, and until now had seemed too torpid and gormless to pose any threat. The other children regarded him as a congenital halfwit, so disregarded his threats, until he let go of the coughing and spluttering Gough to offer to 'smash' someone else. Cowed, if only until they had fathomed what had changed, the scornful horde melted away.

'Er, thanks,' Johnny said, peering up at their strapping champion. 'Really. What did you say was your name?'

'B-Ben Wr-Wr-Wrigglesly. I'm a D-Dearin' t-too!'

'You're a Dearing?' Johnny asked, taken aback, 'how come? – Oh! – you mean you're in Dearing House too?'

'We always w-worked for the D-Dearin's..!' Wrigsy said, grimacing at each stammer, his head bowed in deference, it could even be in devotion. For Wriggleslys had been linked to the Dearings, serving them, farming their land, game-keeping, poaching, paying — or not paying — them rent, if not forever, then at least since his great-grandfather's time. Taking Johnny's claim at face value, Wrigsy had come loyally to his and Judy's defence. That Wrigsy also belonged to the house the head had recently renamed 'Dearing' was just a one-in-fo9ur chance, but from now on, he became the twins' willing slave, prepared to do anything they asked, as long as it didn't take much working out.

At first it was a relief, even exciting, to have this powerful vassal at their backs. It was like being awarded a minder, or characters in the *Arabian Nights* with a jinn at their bidding. But Judy soon began to find Wrigsy tiresome. No sooner were they out of the classroom than he followed them doggedly, and all through lunchtime would not be thrown off. 'The one good thing about lessons now is that he has to leave us alone!' she was already grumbling to Johnny days later.

'Only if he wasn't protecting us, they'd be bullying us worse than before!'

'Yes, and then when he does something which shows he's a nutter, we'll get the blame!'

'He's not a nutter, he's just a bit thick. I think it's sweet!'

'Sweet?' Judy stared at Johnny as if he was the nutter.

'He's like – like a big soppy, puppy dog. It's probably in his nature, sort of passed down.'

'Oh I'm sure you're right there!' she agreed caustically.

'Not being thick – alright then, perhaps that as well, but I mean being devoted, you know – loyal. It would mean we really *are* Dearings!'

'How'd d'you work that out?'

'Like – like when dogs know their own master's smell!'

"Smell"?' Judy repeated derisively, 'how can he smell anything the way he pongs? You know what he really wants, don't you?'

'To be patted and told "who's a good little boy, then"!'

'Yes, and "then",' Judy said shrewdly, 'because he's *not* little, is he – except for his brains!'

But she was ahead of Johnny in some ways. He seemed oblivious to her suspicions, so for now, she made do with a warning; 'Be careful, Johnny, for God's sake – don't say things like I could bloody well strangle Gough or I wish I really had stabbed Holly Mills!'

'Why, do you really think he would?' Johnny tried to look worried, whilst almost thrilled by the thought.

Being taken under Wrigsy's wing might stop the bullying for a time, but did nothing to make them more liked. The fact that Gerald Wright had also taken an interest was another mixed blessing; it only seemed to make his jaded staff the more wary. As the terms passed, fresh-faced teachers appeared now and then, but it was like stepping into a paddling pool, only to find that it was full of piranhas. Nursing their injuries, they reported sick and rarely returned. The twins became expert in judging from the first how many days each new recruit would last. Then they were left once again to the unenlightened old Ramford hacks, to whom being 'clever' was a put-down, not praise, and the longer it went on, the more the twins felt the injustice. At eleven plus, they could have applied for scholarships to attend grammar schools in Westhampton, but Miss Price had failed to suggest it, and it seemed not even to have occurred to Sandy or Joe. It was another grievance against them. They were beautiful aliens stranded on a planet inhabited by the dumb and the blind.

Frustrated, feeling unappreciated and unfulfilled, the twins even fought with each other.

The immediate reason was Wrigsy; Judy distrusted him and resented Johnny's pleasure in having this dim-witted Hercules in his thrall. He smelt – according to Judy, was all but illiterate and stuttered, but nothing seemed to put Johnny off. He seemed to delight in

Wrigsy's ham-fisted fealty, even forgiving it when it led to public embarrassment – though, frankly, when this happened, it was as much Johnny's own fault.

The only subject in which Wrigsy had any hope of success was sport. Until now, he'd shown no motivation, but that year, the Dearing House junior team won at rugby. As long as Wrigsy remembered which end to score, he was unstoppable. Braver boys tackled him, clinging like leeches, but thanks to his stubborn weight, he could blunder on like a juggernaut.

'Come on, Wrigsy!' Johnny cheered.

"oo's side are you on?' other Buller House members asked darkly.

- "...Watch it, you better not "pest" 'im, or 'e'll have you duffed up!
- "...Cos 'ockin' can't fight for 'is fuckin' self..."
- "...Fockin' 'ockin' 'as to get j-jumbo d-dumbo out there to do 'is d-dirty work for 'im...!'
- "...Mighty-mouse brain..!"
- '...'is bum-chum..!'
- "...'is pet ferret..!"
- "...wrigglin" up Wrigsy's bum..!
- "...when 'e's not snoggin' 'is sister!"

'Shut up, or you will get "smashed"!' Johnny warned, feeling invulnerable as Wrigsy waded through his midget opponents towards another try.

'Yeah, 'ockin', only not the way *you'll* get smashed when dumbo bum-jo out there stops bein' yer chum!'

Now the whole Buller squad seemed to be on Wrigsy's back. He stumbled and Johnny felt a flutter of fear.

'Bull-er! Come on, Bull-er, get the d-dumb b-bastard d-down!'

'Come on Wrigsy!' Johnny cheered as Wrigsy recovered and, head bowed like a battering ram, lumbered over the touchline. 'Hooray!'

After the final whistle, there were more boos than cheers. It hadn't been a fair fight — with his size, Wrigsy shouldn't have been playing in junior matches at all. Wrigsy wasn't the Dearing team's captain, but the captain knew that he couldn't take much credit for the win, so gave Wrigsy the trophy, and having heard Johnny cheer, Wrigsy looked for him, then held the trophy towards him like a vassal knight saluting his sponsor and lord from the field.

There were derisive hoots from both Bullers and Dearings. Ecstatic reports of the incident spread through the school to be snickered over by everyone who knew of the twins' claim to aristocratic descent. That Wrigsy should fall for it was best of all: if that idiot believed it, what more could you say? Gerald Wright heard of the incident too, but – like Miss Price – being privately of the view that silk purses aren't produced from sow's ears, wondered if there was, in fact, some such mystery about the twins' origins, remembering what nondescripts the parents had been.

And so the *I say I say*, and *anyone for tennis* gibes were aimed at them with new zest: 'De-ah me, how dreadfully cormon this school is. One should be goin' to Heaton, doan't you knoah!'

'It's terriblah de-ahr though and Daddy's only a cormon policeman.'

'No he's nort, 'cos we-ahr Deahrings!'

'Watch it!' Johnny would threaten, once Wrigsy appeared.

'Oah we'd betah cleah orff before we get smarrshed!' the jokers would taunt, meaning to resume as soon as Wrigsy had left.

Soon they had another problem at home.

After a gap of over twelve years, Sandra was pregnant again. Whether or not their parents weren't really their parents, that they would have to share the attention after all this time was a sobering thought. The only benefit that the twins could see, was that there would soon be more support for the theory that they were adopted. What would a child which really belonged to Joe and Sandra be like? The less like them, the more proof it would be of their theory.

The ninth month arrived, nothing seemed to threaten a normal birth and the parents-to-be were discretely euphoric. Joe had offered his love the twins, they – after Johnny's brief initial responsiveness – had refused it; how could he help but want to have his own child? For her part, Sandra had been afraid she would never be able to give Joe his wish, so her relief, too, was immense.

Sensing that the twins might feel pushed aside, they had tried to keep their hopes secret – succeeding no better than the twins in keeping *their* real thoughts to themselves, and when the baby was stillborn, their devastation could not be concealed.

The twins had sat outside the ward, waiting for Joe to appear and take them in to meet their new sibling. Then a nurse had come out to sit with them, break the news and gently ask whether they wished to see their little dead brother. They crept in, and got a glimpse of a small strawberry face and dark hair with a ghost of an Elvis quiff. They saw no likeness to themselves at all.

They felt sorry for Sandra and Joe, but mainly relief. They wouldn't have to endure a slow-witted sibling, no one would challenge their dominance at home. They did show some glimmers of sympathy, but Joe's and Sandra's grief felt like an accusation as the twins failed the test of being the children their newly bereaved, pretend parents deserved.

1.5

Whilst they had grown used to generally holding their tongues at home, Johnny wasn't always so careful at school – especially since Wrigsy was ready to act in their defence.

The worst, most unjust of all the teachers was Mrs. Killigrew. She made English seem the most boring subject in the world, except for RE, which she also happened to teach. Outside the classroom, she always had a cigarette in her hand. In it, she sometimes tried to smoke sticks of chalk, before dropping them in irritation, one end smudged lipstick red, like the cigarette-shaped, sherbet sweets sucked by the younger children back then. Her spelling was faulty (one day, she spelt Tennyson *Tennison* until Johnny corrected her – to cries of *Anyone for Tennison?* from the class – in the morning, and couldn't spell *Buddha* – until Judy enlightened her – in the afternoon) and hadn't read half the books they had, passages from which she'd then accuse them of trying to pass off as their own.

'Yes, John, you've already proved how well you can copy,' she said when he showed her an essay suggesting that Jesus' claim to have a Heavenly Father might have been based on his lack of resemblance to Joseph.

'I didn't copy, Miss!' he objected. 'Where do you think I copied it from?'

'Don't be impertinent! How should I know? Clearly from something you shouldn't be reading. And *don't* answer back – unless you think D is too generous, or I might well agree.'

But Johnny did answer back, and by the time he returned to his desk, his sense of grievance had earned him an E and five hundred lines. I will not cheat, I will not answer Mrs Killigrew back, I will not copy my work from a book.

Her nicotine habit made Mrs. Killigrew as eager to leave after the lesson as any of her aggrieved students. 'Careful on the stairs!' she barked as pupils flew past, too busy rummaging in her bag to be particularly careful herself. No sooner had she reached fresh air, than the flame from her blunderbuss of a lighter licked at her cigarette like a blowtorch. One careless knock and her flyaway, henna red hair could catch too. As she puffed her way off to the staff block and Wrigsy came up to them in his willing way, thoughts of vengeance smouldered in Johnny's mind.

'Damn Mrs. Killigrew! – I *could* kill her, too! I hope she goes up in smoke, the old witch, I hope she breaks a leg on the stairs!'

'Shush, Johnny!' Judy muttered, 'people can hear.'

'Did you hear?' he asked Wrigsy.

'H-hear w-what?'

'About Mrs. Killigrew breaking a leg on the stairs – no? That's alright then,' Johnny winked.

If it was meant as a joke, humour went over Wrigsy's head. Perhaps giddy from his triumph in rugby, he now felt that he could tackle anyone with impunity, pupils or staff.

To Judy, it seemed that Wrigsy brought out something distasteful in Johnny, though the right word still escaped her just then. Later, she'd have said that he was flirting. Still later, Johnny would take a certain cruel pleasure in teasing the snob in her, the jealous protectiveness of the dominant twin. He was just as much of a snob, but he would get a kick out of giving into his instincts, playing with the primitive types to which his sexual tastes always leaned. It would hurt her, until she finally realised that such purely animal affairs were no threat to her. Johnny's libido would never be aligned to the needs of his brain.

Probably this was all still unconscious, for he was less mature than his sister. As to whether Wrigsy was sexually attracted to Johnny, he seemed at any rate to be under a kind of spell. Perhaps Judy could have exercised the same occult control if she'd wanted, but Wrigsy repelled her in a way she didn't always bother to hide, so it was no wonder if he concentrated his doglike devotion on Johnny, keen to fulfil his every wish, explicit or — as he thought — implied.

Next day, Mrs. Killigrew was at the top of the staircase when she tripped, or was pushed: She tumbled down one flight before, dropping her bag, she managed to grab at the handrail, breaking her fall. She escaped with a dislocated wrist, several bruised ribs and a broken nail. She had glimpsed who had shoved her. She had only taught Benjamin Wrigglesly him once, sitting in for an absentee teacher. It made her all the surer that he'd been put up to it, and she thought she knew who by. It proved, in her opinion, why the comprehensive system was wrong. It put types who could be duped at the mercy of budding Svengalis like Johnny Hocking; she remembered Johnny's resentment the previous day — and, equally, Judy's in lessons before, and it was common knowledge how Ben Wrigglesly had attached himself to the Hockings, and how eager please them he seemed.

The head expelled the older boy, hoping to take the heat off the twins, who he would not agree to expel – whatever Mrs. Killigrew had alleged. Promising pupils were still far too rare at Ramford, and he couldn't face losing two at one stroke. The unfortunate incident had happened on Friday. He excluded the Hocking twins for a week and wrote to their parents explaining the suspicions that they lay under, although they hadn't been at the scene of the crime. He explained how Wrigglesly – a hulking lad with little initiative – had apparently attached himself to their children, and was therefore suspected of having acted at their behest.

If he had left it at that, there would have been enough in the letter to upset any parent, but Gerald Wright was keen to address whatever problems had led to such a potential high-achievers feeling out of place at the school, and the house system was of such interest to him, that he assumed that it had the same inflated importance for everyone else. He remembered how quick the twins had been to declare their allegiance to Dearing, and how, thanks to their date of birth, their wish was frustrated. If it would help, he wrote, he would see to it that, however belatedly, they were granted this wish.

The twins had decided not to say anything at home about being excluded. On Monday, they left the house as if to catch the school coach, then spent most of the day skimming stones on a secret beach towards Brecon Cove. Their parents were still preoccupied by the loss of the baby, so the twins thought they might not notice, or ask too many questions, even if they did. They had realised that they should watch for a letter from school, but on Wednesday they overslept; the post came early, Sandra picked it up and found the headmaster's note.

'Jude, Johnny, are you awake?' she called up – agitatedly, as she could hear herself, despite her best attempts to sound calm. 'When you're ready, there's somethin' we 'as to discuss!'

Whispering in Judy's room, the twins considered slipping out of the house again, but something in Sandra's tone had suggested that the fateful moment had come, the time for the long-delayed revelation, and fear and the bother of having to deal with Sandra's distress was outweighed by their desperate curiosity to finally know what it was.

Actually, Sandra hadn't really taken the letter in. She had read it in the muddled light of her own depressed state, always more aware of her failures as a mother than the ungratefulness of the twins. The reason for their suspension, the business with Wrigsy and Mrs. Killigrew, had hardly registered. What had caught her eye most was the paragraph in which Gerald Wright had written, in his misleading, bombastic way, of the twins' publicly affirmed but frustrated relationship to the house of Dearing.

That morning, Joe had already gone out; it might have been better if she had waited to talk it over with him first, but Sandra felt it was now or never. The situation was her fault, not his, it was hers to clear up. She must at last free the twins from the toils of their own invention, these desperate attempts to fill the gap left by the truth about her own original sin.

'Why didn't you tell me you was off school?' she asked as the twins slipped guardedly into the kitchen.

They didn't speak. When asked such things, they never did.

'Maybe you don't want to because you think there are things – important things – we never told you?' she said, trying to see their position through their eyes.

They were flustered, but it was beneath them to show it.

'Well, dears, you'd be right, I can't blame you, my darlin's – not when I've 'eld out on you for so long, but I'm goin' to put that right, loves, right now,' she said, clutching the letter like a script she didn't need to read, so often had she thought through what she must say, when her confession could be put off no longer. 'Years ago, you weren't no more than mites when you first said we wasn't your mum and dad. And I suppose that, though you kept it to yourself, that's what you've thought ever since. I'm sorry if you wish I wasn't, but fact is I am your mother, sweeties, really I am, so I'm afraid you 'ave to make do with me, pets. – Oh, I was clueless, I 'ad you so young! But don't go thinkin' that you wasn't wanted, I was goin' to keep you, whatever they said! Still, you was 'alf right, my loves – right about Joe. He's not

your daddy, or not in the lit'ral sense of it, but 'e's been a sight better as a dad than Charlie would 'ave been, don't you go makin' any mistakes about that! – Charlie, Charlie Reece – that's what your real dad was called, pets, not Dearin' – you were barking up the wrong tree there, my poor loves! I know I can't talk, given how easy I was misled – Charlie may 'ave been 'andsome as an angel, but 'e was only after 'is fun, and I fell for it though 'e was 'ardly older nor no more experienced than me! If only I 'hadn't been so wide-eyed and gormless! – I'd never met anyone so rich an' sophisticated like, so clever an' upper-class. I 'ad a job at an ice cream stand on the front at West'ampton, I 'ad my 'air done up 'igh, like, under a little cotton mop cap – a right silly it must 'ave made me look! – an' Joe was the first man I served – which made Sally Cobbs crack some off-colour jokes, I can tell you, but when Charlie appeared, I thought I'd never seen such a dreamboat! He was stayin' at the *Grand Plaza*, an' I thought you 'ad to be someone grand to afford to stay there, an' I'd only ever 'eard an American in the pop charts and in the films until then, I went all 'ot an' cold and I'm afraid Wonky Willy's cornets with the thrupenny flakes got an 'ole lot wonkier after that!'

'Our dad is American?' Johnny gasped.

'Yes, my love, when 'e wasn't tryin' to make out as 'e was French, callin' me a *jolly angie-noo*, meanin' that 'e knew 'e 'ad me pretty much wrapped round 'is little finger, as I'd 'ave understood if I'd ever got that CSE French! He mightn't 'ave 'ad much more experience than me, but 'e could lay it on as smooth as Rock 'udson! Leastways 'e could until 'is mum and dad showed up. Then 'e went all limp an' 'ang-dog like, like a boy who knows 'e's going to catch it as soon as they get 'im 'ome. *That* opened my eyes – I saw it then, 'is grown-upness was all a big con, 'e was too young by 'alf to marry, even 'ad 'e wanted. It was 'is first time abroad, an' I realised what a nitwit I'd been! An' Joe saw it all, but never let on. Just think of it, 'ow dirty and daft 'e could 'ave made me feel if 'e'd wanted!'

But how dirty and daft Joe could have made Sandra feel if he'd wanted to didn't interest the twins.

'Then what happened?'

'I noo somethin' was up, I was missin' my "monthlies", as they say...'

'No, what happened to Charlie?'

'Oh... I only know what they wrote back after I'ad written to 'im, saying 'e was dead from an accident, an' would I "leave 'em in peace" – no, "leave 'em to grieve in peace", that was it – meanin' I wasn't to bother 'em again! And they sent me... well, never mind what they sent, if they really noo the Rockefellers, it was a slap in the face! I told myself, "Sand, my girl, put 'im out of your mind!" the moment Joe said 'e was ready to swear 'e was your daddy – 'cos I was underage when it 'appened, and 'e'd just joined the force, 'n Joe found 'imself in a spot of 'ot water, 'is inspector bein' the little 'itler type...'

But the spot of hot water that Joe, having just joined the police, had found himself in with the Inspector didn't interest them either.

'And where is he now?' Judy asked.

"e had an early start, my love. Tonight..."

'Not Joe, Charlie!'

'I told you, darlin' - the letter...'

'But what if it wasn't true?'

'Listen, Ju, sweetie, if 'e was alive, 'e never showed no sign, 'e could always 'ave tried to get in touch for 'imself!'

'But maybe he didn't know?'

'Know..?'

'About us!'

'Well 'is parents noo you was on the way, didn't they – or one of you, at least, not knowin' as I was goin' to 'ave twins! Honestly, it's no good dwellin' on it, my loves, there's no point in dredgin' things up. "Think of the future, forget the past" like it says in the song! I 'ad to come clean with you to make things right between us like, not so as to set you chasin' after more rainbows, my loves!'

'Can you prove it, though?'

'Prove what?'

'That Charlie was our dad!'

Did they suspect her of having carried on with other men besides Charlie? – Sandra couldn't let herself be shocked, or to show it, wounded though she was from having had to face the same question put to her, still more bluntly, back then. As a girl, she could have asked the same of them, her own parents, herself having never met her real dad. – She mustn't behave as *they* had, playing the hypocrite to her! – She went upstairs, found the envelope she had kept under the smalls and the stockings and came back with one of the snapshots he'd taken with the gimmicky Kodak that summer, moored off the Cornish cove in the yacht.

The shamelessness of her teenage self was still vivid enough to embarrass her before her own children, but Charlie's image had faded to little more than the cipher of her own young desire. His similarity was hardly clearer to the twins than their likeness to the portraits at Pomphlete. They peered, seeking an adequate origin, one which could help them bear the disappointment of Sandra being their mother – that was if they were even gracious enough to choose to believe that she was.

'Can we keep it?' they asked.

'Oh my darlin's,' Sandra groaned.

But they had already run upstairs with it again, back to their rooms.

They nagged everything out of her that there was to know, but it wasn't much, and Princeton and the Rockefeller connection — even if it was real — meant as little to them as the names had once meant to their mother. America was far away, and they had no way to bring it nearer back then, before the internet was invented. Imagination and ingenuity were needed, and although they had too much of both, it took time to construct a new narrative, and they vacillated in which account they preferred, one linking them to a family of unreachable, if wealthy Americans, or the one that related them to a once noble family, whose faded glories — along with such evidence of their connection as there was — were located rather more conveniently at Pomphlete.

The following Monday, as soon as they boarded the bus, the catcalls, the pushing and the pinching began. If it was this bad already, how much worse would it be without Wrigsy to protect them at school?

'What shall we do?' Johnny whispered in dismay to his sister.

'We'll have to skive.'

'Yes, but where to?'

'We'll.... we'll pretend that we're meeting somebody by the bike shed, hide until everyone's left, then run up that lane past the paper mill. I *think* Pomphlete's that way...'

'Pomphlete? Why?'

'Why! - Have you any better ideas?'

'He was a bit creepy!'

'You like "creepy"!' Judy said, thinking of Wrigsy.

'And smelly!' Johnny said, meaning Lord Dearing.

'Since when did you care?'

'He mightn't even remember us!'

'He will!' Judy snorted, people always did. 'Though it probably doesn't matter anyway.'

'Why not?'

'Because,' 'Judy said wisely.

'Oh!' Johnny pretended to understand. 'And what 'II we say, supposing he's even in?' 'That we can't keep on going to Ramford.'

'You'd have to go to the girl's school, Westhampton Grammar is only for boys!' It was a belated and sobering thought, if only to Johnny.

'Anyway, if we're not related..!'

'He doesn't need to know about Charlie, though, does he – unless you're going to tell!'

'I don't always...'

'...In-sects! In-sects! – Look at the 'ockins snoggin'!' Nicky Johnston jeered over the back of the seat in front, interrupting their tête-à-tête, 'you got Wrigsy expelled, just you wait, you're really goin' to cop it now! – 'ockins snogging! – 'ockin-snockin'..!'

Luckily, there was a distraction when the coach arrived. They had already got out, when a girl who was frequently sick in the winding lanes, but who this time had waited until they reached Ramford, threw up on the steps as if vomiting into a bucket, trapping the rest of the children behind her.

'What's she 'ad today?'

- "...Porridge ..!
- "...Scrambled eggs..!"
- "...Baked beans ..!
- "...with sausages..!"
- "...Yum yum, go on, 'ave some!"

'Be my guest!'

"...After you!" the children said, trying to make each other step in it. A fight broke out, during which the twins ducked behind another bus, then slipped away through the gates.

They turned left as if heading into the village, then took a quick right up the lane that ran past the paper mill. Its machines were already pumping their effluent into the river, running milky white under the bridge whose iron plates rattled whenever lorries and cattle trucks crossed. A sign pointed right that read *Allerton Moor*.

'This way,' Judy guessed.

They kept going for an hour, sometimes in silence. A robin followed them, flirting along a hedge. They thought they saw a hare, fed grass over a gate to a horse weeping crusty runnels of amber, were chased by horseflies the size of sheep's droppings, beat off, then outran them, then came to a lane that led through a tunnel of trees as it started to rain. Heavy drops plopped on the leaves. They sheltered and waited, but soon it penetrated the overhanging branches and started to drip down their necks.

Johnny unstrapped his satchel. 'Bugger and botheration! Have you got my mac?'

'Why should !? Maybe you left it on the bus, or the beach. You were sitting on it, remember?'

They shared Judy's, clutching it over their heads like a broken umbrella. The ridge in the middle of the lane turned to mud, the ruts to babbling streams on each side.

'Oh stink-bums!' Johnny swore as the rain got still harder, 'and we're totally lost!' It sounded more accusatory because he was shouting.

'Why do you always blame me?'

'I'm not blaming you! Only...'

Luckily, the argument was interrupted by barking. A horn tooted at them from behind. A man thrust a red boulder of a head out of the side of a battered Land Rover truck and yelled something in a thick country accent. He appeared to have no teeth – unlike the collie dog which barked out of the passenger's side.

'SHURRUP, YER DUM MUPP!' he shouted at the dog. '— Where's you eadin' too, then?' 'Pomphlete,' they replied.

'Pomphlit? - Then yer bederr jump in.'

The heavy rain made them want to, but the barking dog put them off.

'SHURRUP WILL YER! – BEN!' the driver yelled, apparently calling the collie by name. An unseen hand yanked it into the back of the van, and the twins climbed warily into a smell of muck and damp animal.

'Sh-sh-shush!' someone tried calming the still yapping animal.

Johnny looked around. 'Hullo! Wrigsy, it's you! Is this your dad, Wrigs?'

Wrigsy wouldn't look up, no keener to admit to his parentage than the twins were to theirs. But the similarity was unmissable, down to the battering-ram angle at which father and son held their heads.

Mr Wrigglesly stared, his gaze as heavy on them as the weight of the ham-like hands on the wheel. 'So *yer* the 'ockinses?' he inferred at last. 'Oo-spell-no-an'-all?'

'Sorry?' Johnny asked.

'SHURRUP, DURN IT ALL!' Mr. Wrigglesly yelled at the dog, then repeated his question. But it was as incomprehensible as the muddy gurgle of the gutters outside.

'He w-wants to know if you're exp-p-p-elled t-too,' Wrigsy felt compelled to translate.

'No, we were only suspended for a week,' Johnny said. 'But we're not going back!'

Wrigsy's dad let the engine stall. Perhaps, now he knew who they were, he regretted offering them the lift.

'I'n't yer, naow?' he muttered, eyeing them as if this only confirmed what he'd guessed. 'So-rye-fer-sum!' He throttled the choke as if he'd have liked to choke them before restarting the engine, and finally they jolted forward, bumping over potholes concealed by the rain. The wipers moved fitfully, and he kept leaning out to check the road ahead. He braked as a flock of partridges blocked the lane, blew the horn, then edged forward as the birds dashed madly between the banks and the collie kept barking.

'QUI-ETT, YER DUMM MUPP!' Grating gear, Wrigsys dad grumbled something possibly about some who was meant to have brains having no more sense than them birds out there, before turning his startled bull's stare back on his passengers 'So why i'n't you g'win back?'

'To Ramford?' Johnny guessed. 'Because it's a rubbish school! It was only Wrigs – Ben, I mean – who stopped them from beating us up!'

'A ruddy lot o' good that did 'im!' his dad mumbled, spitting out of the window. The dog growled and scratched behind their seats as if eager to bury its teeth in their necks, and the twins leaned forward, just in case.

'SHURRUP'AN LEAVE EM F'RERTS BE!'

They sat stiffly against the jolts, winded by the rudimentary suspension. Clearly Mr Wrigglesly blamed them for getting his son expelled. Perhaps Wrigsy did too.

'By the way,' Johnny ventured half-apologetically, 'that thing I said about Mrs. Killigrew, Wrigs – you didn't *seriously* think I meant...' then broke off as the van rocked and Judy jabbed him warningly in the ribs.

'We're thinking of trying another school, Mr. Wrigglesly,' she said in her best princess manner, 'maybe Ben should try too?'

Mr. Wrigglesly harrumphed and held down the horn until, finally inspired, the partridges ducked under a gate. 'Whirr too? – Ben ain't no grammery type, 'n yer 'ave ter pay furret, missy.' Accusingly, he stared them into submission, he must have thought. In fact they cringed because, as long as he eyed them, he was steering into the bank on their side. 'An' what do yer want up at Pomphrit, if-fer may asks?' he asked, turning the wheel just in time.

If Wrigsy had told his dad of their purported ancestral link to the house of Dearing, it seemed he wasn't completely convinced.

'Oh, we just thought that we'd visit, that's all,' Judy said airily.

'The 'ouse in't open fer visitin'.'

'The last time we saw him, he told us we were always welcome to visit him. I expect he'll let us in!'

'Will 'e, naow?' Wrigsy's father seemed to jeer.

By now, the twins were heartily wishing they hadn't accepted the lift. The potholes, the smells, the barking dog, Wrigsy's dad's driving, the effort to fathom his accent were making their heads spin. He clearly wanted something from them, but what, for all his affected contempt, he couldn't yet bring himself to say.

The collie kept barking.

'SHURRUP, DUMMIT!'

Finally, Mr Wrigglesly began to mumble something which Wrigsy seemed especially loathe to translate.

'Ben?' his dad prompted.

'My d-dad – an' me – w-we was 'opin' that y-you would – say s-somethin' – somethin' to s-stop us from b-bein' – th-th-thrown out,' Wrigsy managed to say at last.

'Thrown out of Ramford?'

'No! S-somethin' to get Lord D-Dearing to ch-ch-change 'is m-mind about s-s-s-s...' Wrigsy stopped and tried again 'about s-s-sellin' up!'

'Selling what up?'

The father's face crumpled scornfully. Either they didn't know Lord Dearing and had neither a familial or any other connection or weren't understanding on purpose. Crunching gears, he swung the car sharply, cornering a dry-stone wall, just missed a post to which a rakishly leaning *For Sale* sign was nailed, then pitched the swaying car down a muddy rutted drive, past a pile of old tyres, a dead beech in which a flock of starlings flitted like mouldy grey foliage, then abruptly stopped by some tumbledown cottages. Beyond, another gate lead up to the service yard behind Pomphlete House.

'MUPP, GUM-EAR!' Wrigsy's dad shouted in parting, slumping out and slamming the door. The car rocked as the collie leapt down to be seized by the scruff of its neck and led into the only cottage which looked to be in a habitable state. It seemed dolls'-house-sized, compared to both Wriggleslys' height as the father re-emerged, shouted something to Ben, then ducked in again, head still bent to the lowness of the ceiling inside. Given the length of

time they had lived there, it was no wonder if generations of Wriggleslys had apparently been born with cricks in their necks.

'Come on, Johnny, we better hurry while the rain's stopped. – See you, Ben, thanks for the lift!' Judy waved blandly, climbed down and trotted off, trusting Johnny would follow.

She reached the gate and looked back. 'Johnny, come on!'

She climbed the stile, and waited, wondering how long it would take to reach Pomphlete House.

From the back, it looked almost as dilapidated as the Wriggleslys' cottage. Who would buy such a place? What was it worth? She was beginning to suspect that Lord Dearing didn't know much more about money than she did. The 'For Sale' sign at the gate had explained what Mr Wrigglesly had asked: Lord Dearing was selling the cottages and, after what had happened at Ramford, and given the twins' own claims, the Wriggleslys hoped that they would use their boasted connection to persuade him to change his mind. But Judy had no wish to do so, even if it had been realistic to try, for if Harold Dearing needed the money, so did they. They might have to persuade him to sell even more of his property, if he was to pay the fees for them to go to grammar schools in Westhampton.

The sun had gone in again. There were more spots of rain.

'Johnny!' she shouted.

After an age, as it felt, he finally arrived, panting and flushed.

'What were you doing?'

'Nothing.'

She stared.

'Wrigsy showed me his ferret, that's all.'

'His – what?'

'His ferret! He had it in the back. We played with it, shoved it back into the sack then said goodbye. I'm cold,' Johnny shivered, 'I don't think I'm well.'

The spits of rain turned to drizzle, then a shower, then a downpour. Through the lashing grey sheets, the house looked further away. Again they had to share Judy's mac. With no trees to shelter them, the wind kept trying to tear it out of their grip.

'Hold your end properly, Johnny!'

'I feel sick, Ju. Maybe I'll puke – maybe I caught a bug from Wendy Brassington on the bus!'

'It's just being wet, and the horrid smell in their car. We can dry off and warm up as soon as we get to the house.'

But she had to stop as Johnny leaned on his knees. His hair fell in tow-coloured strings when wet. It dangled dripping gloopy beads as he retched and spat. He wiped his mouth and stood up.

'Better now? Here, you put it on!' She pushed his hands away as he fumbled at the mac, zipped it up, pulled the hood up for him, then hurried to scout ahead, passing boarded-up stables and coming to an overgrown path that must lead to the front of the house. But taking it would mean being out in the rain even longer, so instead, she sprinted across the yard, went more carefully down some crumbly steps with a rusty rail, jumped a puddle and tried the door. Such a small door, down such poky steps could only have been for the servants; maids would have answered the bell, now too rusty to work. She knocked, heard nothing, then tried the knob. The rain made it slippery, so she gripped with both hands, and it gave.

She turned, waved to Johnny, then ventured into a musty passage with scuffed lino over uneven floorboards, and rickety heating pipes with stains running down from the screws in the wall. It was early autumn, but she had seen wisps of smoke from a chimney; hopefully the pipes would lead to its source.

'Ju?' came Johnny's wary voice from outside,.

'In here!'

'Is no one at home then?' he asked, having finally dared to re-enter the old lion's den to catch up with her.

'I don't know yet. There was smoke from the chimney...'

'He might think we're thieves... Look at the size of that! It's bigger than the old trough near the church!' Johnny said, still shivering, seeing the great granite sink in a cavernous flag-stoned kitchen whose door stood ajar. 'Do you know where you're going?'

'How can I? I'm following the pipes. There must be a boiler to heat the place with.'

At last it began to get warmer; they came to a stone-flagged basement room with white tiles around the lower walls, taps which dripped into chipped enamel tubs, green copper pipes and a ventilator in a low, cobwebby window which squeaked like a hamster on a wheel.

'This could be the laundry... Johnny, come in here! – Now, we can dry off our things!' 'Take them off, you mean? What if old Harry comes in?'

'What if we die of pneumonia?'

Bashfully, Johnny went further in. 'Golly! – Quick, come here, Sis, look at this!'
Giving off a smell of damp dust and camphor, clothes were draped over the copper
pipes; not everyday clothes – fancy dress, frock-coats with tails and stiff velvet collars, hats
with feathers and dresses of the kind they remembered having seen in the portraits upstairs.

'We could put these togs on while ours dry!'

'It smells like a jumble sale!'

'It's as if he expected us!' Johnny touched the frayed ribbons on the knees on some short, velvet breeches. 'Are they just costumes, or really old? – D'you they'll tear if we put them on?'

Judy examined a silvery gown with sequins, glass beads and a high, belted waist. 'Costumes I think, anyway, better tear them than sit around in our undies! – turn around, Johnny!' Judy ordered him as prissily as she had behaved ever since they had started calling them 'insects' – then took off her soaked uniform, hung it over the pipes, and eased gingerly into the silver sequinned dress. It didn't quite fall to her ankles; it must be for somebody younger, but otherwise it fitted well, in spite of the bra she now wore to keep up with bigger girls at school; physically Judy would long be the little princess, awaiting a blossoming that failed to arrive.

'Maybe these clothes really *are* the ones in the pictures upstairs? – We can dress up just like those children! – I think the girl had a hat... Was it this one?'

'They can't be, they would be really old, and probably all rotten by now!'

The clothes might only be decades old, rather than centuries, but given their state of disrepair, and the fact that many were far too big or too small, there wasn't the choice that had seemed to present itself at first. After their initial excitement, it reminded them of raking through the few items of acceptable fancy-dress which Sandra kept in a suitcase in the loft in Cliff Crescent.

'Now you can look!' Judy said, adjusting a satin sash at her waist.

'Hello, Estella! – or should I call you Miss Havisham?' Johnny joked.

'You're nothing but a common labouring boy!' Judy-Estella replied, 'or you'd know you wear stockings with breeches, not socks!'

'Girly stockings? No fear! – And what about shoes?'

Judy looked. 'There's one!' She pointed to a buckled slipper on a bench.

Johnny tried it on.

'Here,' Judy said, picking its dusty twin off the floor.

'They've got lumpy heels. I feel like a right Charlie now!'

'Whatever you do, Johnny, don't you dare mention him!'

'Course I wouldn't! – keep your hair on! – Hey, Sis, I've just thought – maybe we can look him up in the library?'

'Who?'

'Charlie!'

'Oh! - Only he's hardly likely to keep a phone book for people in America, is he?'

'No, but – but if he's famous..! – Ugh! I think a spider's wriggling up my bum!'

Giggling and squirming in the stiff, itchy fabrics, they crept back through the passage and came to a flight of back stairs which led to a corridor at the back of the house.

Not all rooms had furniture; in those which did, it was shrouded in sheets. Everywhere smelt airless and stale. Maybe Wrigsy's father hadn't only meant that the house was closed today, but that it had been shut for some time. Or perhaps they just hadn't yet come to the part of the house which had been on view to the public.

'I *think* I remember this...' Johnny said as they reached a larger room with a piano – its raised lid decorated with a dark, chocolate-box style painting, embroidered blue curtains and dusty grey chandeliers.

Seeing an elegant lady in eighteenth century dress reflected in a mirror, Judy posed and adjusted the hat.

Johnny combed his hair and stroked his slashed sleeves. 'How are you today, Milady?' he bowed.

'Tolerably well, thank you,' she replied languidly, arresting her curtsy as something caught.

'Has her Ladyship torn her strays?'

"Stays"!' Judy corrected him, gingerly looking for tears.

'Pardon milady for asking, only why is your mi'ladyship not at school?'

'Ladies didn't go to school then, they had gov...' Judy broke off as a telephone rang in a hallway far off.

'Maybe he *isn't* here?' Johnny whispered as it kept ringing. 'Maybe we could steal something, then sell it!'

'Like what?'

Johnny looked around, then pointed to a silver ewer with a plump cupid perched on the lid.

'It's heavy, you'd drop it!'

'Not if it fits in my satchel – after I've dumped my books – which I won't be needing now, will I!'

'And leave them lying about with your name in? Even Joe would know it was us!'

The telephone stopped. They continued on through the high, gloomy rooms.

'Hello, Baskerville!' Johnny said, patting one of the pair of stuffed hounds.

The orangery was even darker than they remembered.

'Here's where we met!'

'I think the tree is dead...'

'It's like someone who's been strangled by snakes!'

'Maybe it's him, like that woman in the Greek myth... that bit looks like a mask or a...'

'Shsh..!' Judy listened.

'What?' Johnny hissed, 'I can only hear rain on the...'

She flapped at him to be quiet.

He was for a moment, then shrugged. 'What did you..?'

'An engine!'

'What kind of en..?'

'A car, of course, silly! – Well I *thought* it was...' Judy went to peer through a window, but only saw puddles on a muddy path and, beyond, a high, ivied wall, the dark leaves trembling with rain.

They came to the even gloomier Great Hall. Once again they walked beneath the alert heads of stags, their moth-eaten ears still cocked for the baying of the dogs now mummified in the gun-room. They looked up at Dearings; arch, ashen-pale ladies, gentlemen with their hands on their hips as if caught in a courtly dance. It made you shiver to think that they had all once lived, danced and breathed here, and that once Georgian and Victorian children had walked past dead ancestors, thinking just the same thing.

'Do you think they look alike?' Johnny whispered.

'Those two, maybe..!'

'He looks just like his horse!'

'She looks sillier than her spaniel!'

'It looks like quite a bright spaniel, mind you!'

'See that globe, the one he's resting his hand on? – America's all the wrong shape!'

'Because half of it hadn't been discovered yet! - Are you looking?'

'For what?'

'For the library! - I swear it was somewhere along here..!'

'Further on – past 'im with the Dick Dastardly moustache an' the feather in 'is 'at!' Sometimes Johnny liked to imitate Joe and Sandra.

They went slower, Judy feeling the panelling with a finger until she came to the tell-tale gap. 'He's *in* there!' she hissed

'How d'you know?'

It was the smell of loneliness and defeat, of self-pity at a drifting and shiftless existence, of someone not bothering to wash.

'Shall we knock?'

'You can.'

'You!'

'Not likely!'

'It's your turn!'

Johnny knocked diffidently, waited, knocked again, then pushed softly.

They'd had a better impression of it. They had remembered it as smelling of leather bindings, linseed, pictures and furniture wax. Now it was as stale as a sepulchre, as dim as a chapel of rest. The only light came from a green-shaded, candle-dim lamp on a table. Henry and his sister Letitia were pallid green shadows, their large eyes veiled with regret and disdain. The room otherwise appeared empty, except that old clothes like those which the

twins were wearing had been dropped here and there on the floor like a paper trail leading up to the broken-backed couch he had proudly called a *chaise longue*.

Then they saw his feet.

It was as if he had been dressing up too, before he fell asleep – drunk, to judge from the bottles lined up on the table, alongside piles of pamphlets and papers, and a portable gramophone with the lid up, silent as a Pandora's Box empty of all hope, if not evil.

Creeping closer, they saw that he was in a fur-trimmed cape and a waistcoat with a ruff at the neck, but his lean, chickeny legs were bare. He must have passed out halfway through trying to take off his trousers; there was an unsavoury whiff, which made even Johnny's tolerant nostrils twitch:

'Ugh! Has he weed himself in his sleep?'

'...If he's asleep..!'

They stared and held their breaths, appalled at his stillness and pallor.

'You're meant to put a feather on their lips,' Johnny said, breaking the deathly hush.

'Or a wet finger...'

'No thanks! Should we ring for an ambulance?'

'They'll ask questions!'

'They'll ask more if we don't – even if we leave now, Wrigsy and his dad knew we've come here!'

'They might send Joe!'

They shuddered at the thought, then jumped as a telephone rang. It was not in the library; Lord Dearing lay with thin lips parted, eyelids not even twitching.

Judy went to the door.

'Are you *ans*wering..?'

'Just finding out where it is. You stay there!'

'By myself?'

'Try to wake him up, then!'

Johnny's appalled face asked How?

'Get – get him some water, or something!'

Hurrying before the ringing stopped, Judy followed it to the desk with the visitors' book near the entrance. She was wondering whether to pick it up when she heard something clunk and a hidden machine came to life.

'You've reached Pomphlete House,' Lord Dearing said slurry-voiced, maybe only because the tape had worn; 'My apologies, either I'm out on my vast estates, or I've locked myself in the dungeon. Please feel free to leave a brief message after the pips...'

Then came a crisper voice in which the exasperation of someone trying to do their best for an employer determined to stick their head in the sand was pretty much overpowering any continued attempt to be tactful: 'Lord Dearing, it's Alistair Crimble again. I was earnestly hoping to have heard from you again by now, Sir. The developers need to be given the go-ahead, as I believe I made clear on Friday. If the contract isn't signed by this afternoon, Weaver's will almost certainly serve us that writ. I'm sorry, Lord Dearing, but the risk is pressing and imminent. I can drop by with another copy of the contract if you haven't got it to hand. I'll be at Allertons' all day, or they can page me if I have to pop out, but in any eventuality, Lord Dearing, please don't ignore this message, it is essential that you get back to me ASAP!'

It wasn't just the irritation in Alistair Crimble's voice that suggested that this was important; Joe being a policeman, Judy had heard about writs. There was a pad by the

visitors' book and a pen on a piece of string. She wrote down what she remembered, tore out the page and, not being in her own clothes, folded it up and stuck into the top of a sock.

Hurrying back down the hall, she paused – was it music she heard?

She had told Johnny to try and wake Dearing, or go for some water. But Johnny hadn't dared to do either. He didn't care to touch what was possibly a dead body, and when he tried speaking, found he had a frog in his throat. Nor was he keen to go too far from Judy, possibly getting lost on the way to the distant kitchen and back. He had got as far as the door, then returned see if Dearing showed signs of life yet, then, passing the table, had noticed the sleeve of the record he must have been playing before he passed out: *Death in Venice – Music from the Film*. The photograph showed a round-shouldered man in a black suit and hat, hands clasped behind his back, as Dearing's had been the time he had led them here to the library, and a boy with longish blond hair and a Mona Lisa smile, not unlike the archly melancholic portrait of Henry on the wall, and so not unlike Johnny himself. Perhaps he had thought that it was a tactful way to try to wake up Lord Dearing – supposing he *was* just asleep. Something, at any rate, had made him place the arm back at the start of record and switch the turntable on.

Before now, he had heard little music apart from the early Beetles and Elvis – nothing to prepare him for the moody magnificence of these sounds. Strange though the situation was, moved by the plangency of the harp notes, the yearning string cantilenas, the shuddering otherworldliness of their forlorn rise and fall – moved too, perhaps by what could prove to be his first encounter with death – apart from their rabbit's, its head and tail apparently left by a fox, and those rubbings made in the churchyard – his eyes pricked with tears. And when he looked up, the dead children in the pictures looked just as touched.

Judy remembered the record player and wondered whether it could be Dearing himself who had got up and switched it back on, but re-entering the library, his wizened feet still protruded beyond the back of the chaise longue, and Johnny was looking down at the table, hypnotised as it seemed by the disc, or as if trying to read the label as it rotated. She was about to ask what he jolly well thought he was doing, when stepping into its ambit, the music swelled, catching her in its ebb and flow, pressing her lungs like a phantom embrace. She felt as if she was floating, though that was also to do with the dress; she existed in another time, her steps were a ghostly gavotte, the silk fabric caressed her limbs like soft bow strokes. She shivered because of the chill in the air, but more from the finger-tip tingle of harp notes, the solemnity of the cellos, the melancholy violas, the swoop and sigh of the violins. She was a dead infanta, her blood was quicksilver, the air she breathed had been breathed by generations of lords and great ladies. She was back in the fairytale world before the demoralising shock of going to Ramford. For a moment, the music made Judy and Johnny forget themselves, raising them to higher, finer levels of feeling. It was only a pity that it couldn't last.

That weekend, urged by his agent, Lord Dearing had at last resolved to make the painful choice of what to do with the house. He was so much in debt, that the properties, the pictures and antiques which he had agreed to sell so far would hardly pay off the interest. Either he sold up and lost all connection with Pomphlete, or accepted one of the schemes devised by agent, Alistair Crimble. But the task was too demoralising to face sober, so he had put on *Mahler's Adagietto*, poured himself a consoling drink, then another, and as he'd got drunk, begun to fantasise about other ways they could balance the books. If only the open-house days had drawn more of the public. Perhaps they would have proved more popular if he and his housekeeper, Miss Wallace had welcomed visitors in period dress, just

as his aunt and uncle had done at parties before the war. Of course it had been mostly for Cynthia, his cousin, with her silly game of getting herself up as Letitia, so he too had been called upon to dress up, though he didn't remotely resemble the portrait of Henry. He had been ten, or eleven then, so the costumes had been mouldering in cupboards for at least half a century. In moments of gin-induced reminiscence, he would take them out, sigh and fondle them, then consign them once more to their mothballs. But he had not done it since getting rid of Miss Wallace because she had asked for a pay-rise, and taking on Mrs. Prynne – a far inferior replacement – part-time.

Aroused from a narcolepsy induced by two bottles of Gordons with barely medicinal splashes of Schweppes, he didn't remember any of that yet, and certainly didn't recognise the two children. Seeing them in front of the paintings, faces lit as if from within by the music, he supposed he was dying, and that they were visions of angels, Henry's and Letitia's bright spirits, descended out of their golden mouldings to take him between them and spirit him away. His head reeled, a gin-y rheum fogged his eyesight. He tried to address them, but all that came out was a crack-lipped, dry-throated sob.

Trying to rise as, hearing the couch creak, possibly also his knees, the twins turned nervously to see Lord Dearing fall entreatingly, as it seemed to them, at their feet. He grabbed at Johnny's hips and the hand Judy held out, not to save him, but rather to ward him off.

Earlier, on their way to the library, Judy really had heard a car — Dearing's new housekeeper Dora Prynne's Morris Minor. The rain being heavy just then, she had parked and smoked a menthol cigarette, waiting until it had eased. Mrs Prynne was still feeling unsure about her new situation, though it was only part-time. Twenty hours a week was not enough to do what was asked of her, and she felt exploited and daunted — on a muddy, depressing day like this most of all. She hadn't warmed to Lord Dearing. Her predecessor, Miss Wallace, had hinted at problems with getting paid, and having since experienced them herself, Mrs. Prynne wondered what other rumours about the man might be true. She was a heavy, suggestible woman who liked to read tea leaves and followed the horoscope — her star sign was Cancer, to which she attributed her own touch of second sight — in *The Westhampton Echo*, and finally entering the house, then hearing the music, her sensitive nerves were already on edge.

She followed the mysterious sounds down the hall to the library, knocked too softly to be heard, took a minty asthmatic breath and went in.

The eerie music, the dim light, the ghosts – as she naturally took them to be at that moment – and the attitude in which she found Harold Dearing made her think she had interrupted a séance, or an unholy orgy between the living – if it was possible (admittedly Dearing looked barely alive) – and the dead. She screamed then, almost colliding with the door which had swung shut behind her, fled as fast as her bumping breasts (in spite of the 'lifts and separates' boast of her girdle) and dragging, menthol-edged shortness of breath allowed.

As Mrs Prynne's departing shout and the shock of his fall cleared his mind, Dearing's drunken imaginings began to fade and a long-cherished dream turned – not for the first time – into a nightmare of being found trouserless. But rather than vanishing, the children remained flesh and blood. If he quailed as he sobered up, it was because their expressions seemed to blend horror and pity with the look of a jury considering its verdict.

As for the twins, his confused, ghastly look seemed to be asking them, What have I done? And that thought suggested to Judy the possibilities of the situation they found

themselves in. Sandra had dropped hints about the dangers of allowing oneself to be hugged by strange men after their previous visit to Pomphlete. The hints hadn't registered until, during the summer, she had overheard Joe discussing a suspected assault by a pervert at the Illcombe Point Caravan Park. Then there had been gibes about Harold Dearing from other children at Ramford. She hadn't set out with the conscious intention of blackmail, but how could they afford not to use any means that, innocently or not, he put into their hands?

'Who was *she?'* Johnny asked, meaning the woman who had just screamed and run off.

'Shush!'

It was the car again.

'She's gone to get help... No, Johnny, don't!' Judy hissed, holding him back as, by now more awake to his shame, the severely overhung aristocrat attempted to haul himself up and see how to make himself decent.

'Oh dear-oh-dear!' Dearing groaned, finding his cast-off hosiery by crawling about on the floor. One leg was still damp from his accident, but shame made him struggle back into them, as the twins watched, appalled.

Meanwhile the record had run on into the even more spectral second track; the music was a glimmering nocturne, a capering shadowy backdrop to Harold Dearing's gasps and moans as he sat with his head in his hands.

'Turn it down, Johnny!' Judy hissed, unnerved in spite of her merciless mounting resolve.

Lord Dearing stopped moaning; his memory stirred by the name: "Johnny"... yes – yes! – and Jul..? no, you don't like to... I remember – "Judith", or "Jude"! – the twins, or "orphans" – f-fair Gemini who came here before! – Please, I – I do hope you'll excuse my – my dishevelled d-dishabille! – oh dear dear dear, I do believe I'm not quite m-myself! I'm so awfully... oof! – I must – please, can you wait? – I'll be b-back in a j-jiffy ...' the old man said, stuttering almost as badly as Wrigsy, then headed for the door. It closed slowly, not before they heard how he paused outside, groaned 'Oh dear God, oh dear-oh-dear!' and limped away down the hall. It seemed that he would be gone for some time.

The twins were left looking at each other. Then Judy turned with a decisive air, and began to search through the plans on the desk.

There was a proposal to convert the house into *Premiere Pensioner Flats*. Another plan was for *A Luxury Hotel with Parking and Conference Suite*. It was a pity that the house must go, but obviously it had to, one way or the other.

'What are you looking at?' Johnny asked.

'The plans for the house. For when he's moved out.'

'Why does he have to move out?'

'Because he hasn't got any money. That's why he's selling the cottages, only it won't be nearly enough and he has to sell the house too, as the man said who rang.'

'You spoke to him?'

'No, I listened as he was leaving a message. He said there's a "writ", which means he could be arrested. Only all he does is to drink himself silly and talk to pictures, the ones of those children. And when he saw us...'

'...He thought we were them! Poor old Harold – no wonder he went all weak-kneed and wet himself, poor chap!'

'Yes, then he tried to make a grab for your knees!'

'Or yours!'

'So even if we didn't want to believe it, it's true!

'Only ghosts don't have knees, he thought, so..!'

'No!' Judy frowned at his slowness. She held up the record sleeve with its photograph of a boy in a sailor suit smiling shyly up at an apparently enamoured old man.

'Oh, you mean...'

"Happy Hands Dearing"!

'His hands are behind his back!'

'He was groping us, Johnny, like the time before!'

'Not us, he was groping them! - Well he didn't grope my knees before!'

'So what? - He was still groping, wasn't he!'

'Dunno, I s'pose depends...'

'On what?'

'What you call "groping"!'

'Like you and Wrigsy's ferret, I expect!'

Johnny pouted and pondered his twin, then the siblings in the two paintings, listening to the music as Judy kept examining the plans.

The arm jerked up as the record finished and rattled back onto its cradle.

'I prefer that, don't you?'

'What?'

'The music – to Elvis! – How long are we going to wait? he asked as Judy kept reading.

'Until he comes back, of course! Look at the books if you want, if you want to be useful, see if you can find one like you said, with famous people in it, like the what's-its-names...'

'Rockefellers?'

'Yesl'

To say *Rockefellers* was a sort of code, for a book which listed the Rockefellers was sure also to mention the Reeses – as they presumed Charlie's family name would be spelt, because a boy at Ramford originally from Wales spelt *his* name like that. So Johnny searched the shelves, saw a set of encyclopaedias and standing on his toes, pulled down the volume for 'R'.

There were the Rockefellers, alright, in several branches and generations, all of whom seemed to be promisingly influential and rich, but not a single entry for someone called Reese.

He examined the spines of books on the shelf below, then to left and right: It was hard to make out how they were organised, given the dimness, the windows being heavily curtained. Were they arranged by title, author, or possibly even size? Several *Almanacs* were followed *The Annals of Tacitus, Historia Augusta* and an *Agricultural Survey of the Diocese of Westhampton*, then *The Compleat Angler*, which suggested some sort of alphabetical order, only if you ignored the words that didn't fit.

'Since when was complete spelt Compl-EAT? Maybe it's oldie English?'

Since Judy didn't reply, Johnny, looked inside, but many pages had never been cut.

'The pages are all stuck together... Maybe Henry dropped it in the river when trying to learn how to fish..! – 'A Poet at the Breakfast Table by Oliver Wendell Holmes... I didn't think "A" counted. D'you think Wendell was any relation to Sherlock? – There's not much poetry in it... Oh, here... To be or not to be, that is the question – except that's not by Sherlock Holmes! – Whether 'tis nob... William shall we have pudding today or flapjacks? –

What the dickens...? Ah, I see! – the Poet at the Breakfast Table is Shakespeare, only he's thinking of his poem and someone interrupts to ask if he wants pudding or flapjack – clever! – or maybe not very... Gosh, I'm hungry, Sis! – I hardly ate any breakfast, then Wendy Brassington boked in the bus, and then Wrigs...' but Johnny thought better of saying how Wrigsy's willy had tasted – salty, sort of like a cheesy fish sausage – even if Ju wasn't listening '...aren't you, hungry? I wonder what they had for school lunch?'

Judy tossed her head to show that he was stopping her from reading or working something out – rather like Shakespeare being interrupted to ask if he wanted pudding or flapjack, whatever that was. Johnny put the book back and moved to another shelf.

'The Autobiography of George Washington – well at least he's American! – Memoirs of the American Presidents in two volumes...' Johnny felt a promising tingle in his fingers such as Mrs Prynne might have suspected of being a sixth sense... 'Sis! – listen, Sis! – Who's Who In America... Bullseye! ...An Alphabetical Almanac of Notable Living Men and Women – oh pooh-sticks! It's only for 1902! – hardly any of them will be alive by now, will they!'

Judy finally raised her head from the papers on the table. 'It's worth a look. We – they, I mean – could have been famous, and it might say if they had any children.'

We meant the Reeses, of which family they had considered themselves self-evidently to be members, ever since they had acknowledge the tenuousness of the likenesses to the pictures, far vaguer than Dearing had tried to make out – not that Judy would let this get in the way of exploiting Harold in any way that she could.

Johnny opened *Who's Who in America* and sneezed. '– I bet nobody's read it since 1902 either!'

The surname for every entry was printed in capital letters like those in the 'Wanted' posters in Westerns, RAFF, RAYLEIGH, REAGAN... he traced the names down the page: '...REECE – with a "c" – Miss Marianne Lester – fiddle-pooh, she was only a "Miss"! – Hang on, there's another "Reece"... Hey, Sis, blinking bingo again! – Charles Morton Wesley, b full-stop Denver 1863, grad full-stop Uni full-stop of VA, 1884, Prof full-stop – all those bloody full-stops! – oh, hang on that means it's short for Professor of whatever – oh, Chem-istry! – pat full-stop Reece's Ammoniac Process, 1900s, much used in France... full-stop, then lots more stuff full of full-stops, then un-m-d full-stop...'

"Unmarried".

'Oh *shit*ty-pooh! – then it says *d* full-stop *1902*. He didn't live very long either, did he, poor chap!'

'Forty-two was old back then! Why do you give up so quickly? *Go* on! – he may have had a nephew or something...'

'Only the print's so small, I can hardly...— You look, I'll look for a window — I bet he only closed them all so he can walk around without any trousers!'

Judy took over the search for not-so-long-dead American connections.

'Reece, Robert Lesley, born 1855 Pawtucket Conn – that's that state – what's it called? – Connect-something! – grad- graduated North Unit – don't know Unit means, maybe a hospital – probably he was a doctor – Col-lege – served Min – or that – Springfield Unit Ch... oh, Church! – Professor of Math-thematics 1876, bro-other of Wil-liam Charlton Reece, q.v.... which means you're to look him up next...'

'Wait, Sis – look what I've found!'

Muffled by a heavy curtain, Johnny had uncovered a casement with a tarnished brass latch. It opened with a creak to reveal a broad window seat overlooking the drive.

'Someone spent lots of time sitting here, anyway, look! – It's like those steps to the churchyard, only you see where their bums went instead of their feet!'

'I expect they were watching for horses and carriages in the drive...' Judy guessed with a spark of the youthful imagination which was rapidly giving way – or at least changing – to a more practical, scientific bent. She twitched her hair as if to shake off this more childish tendency and looked at her watch: 'Twenty-to-two already! – How long did it take us to get here..?'

'Dunno – an hour maybe..?'

'...And *that* was with a lift – this time we'll have to walk all the way in time to catch the bus home!'

'I thought we were waiting for Uncle Fester?'

'Only if we don't get home on time, they're bound to come looking for us. Say it takes two hours – we can wait for fifteen more minutes!'

They sat in the window, where Henry and Letitia might have sat in their time. Looking down from their portraits, their shining oval eyes seemed to have followed them in reproach. It felt rude to search for another family, Johnny thought, with them watching.

Johnny took back, turned the page of the *American Who's Who*, lifted it to the light, and nudged Judy's foot with his. 'Another *Reece! – William Charlton, born Pawtucket Conn...* that state whatever it is again – 1850, Doctor Phil full-stop, Yale Uni-versity...'

'Philosophy.'

"...Doctor of Philosophy, Yale Uni, 1878, author "Inherited Traits of Human Character & Intelligence", 1883..."

"Inherited..."?"

'..."Traits of Human Character and Intelligence". Hey, that's just what we're interested in! – Do you think he'd be our granddad?'

'Our great-granddad!'

'Our *great*-granddad? – if they actually studied Jean-ology back then!'

"Genealogy", silly! Wrigsy's stupidity is rubbing off on you, Johnny – you really need to go to a proper school before it's too late! – Course they did, it just means finding out who your ancestors were!

'Only, what's the earthly use? We can hardly pay to get to a good school, let alone to America!'

'We need to find the money, somehow, that's all!'

'How? How much?'

Judy shrugged. 'One hundred pounds?'

"One hundred..! – Until then, I'd rather live here, than 14 Cliff Crescent, anyway!"

'You wouldn't! - With "Happy Hands"?'

'Oh come off it, Sissy! – he wasn't really...'

'Don't call me Ss..' Judy stopped, thinking she had heard a jingling from outside the library. They froze, but there were no further noises and no one came in.

'He was!' she went on, 'or are you going to turn into even more of a perv?'

'Perv yourself! Takes one to know one!'

'I suppose you want to stay here just so you can go and see Wrigsy and his "ferret" whenever you want?' she tossed her head.

'It's more fun than Alice was, anyway!' Johnny said, meaning the rabbit which had long since been fox-fodder after they'd let it escape.

'Only he won't be living there anymore, will he, not if old Harry sells up!'

'And that woman saw, don't forget!'

'Yes, but she thought we were ghosts!'

'So did he – it didn't stop him from trying to grope us, though, did it!'

'So what do you suggest, phoning Joe?'

'I bet the fat woman already reported it,' Judy guessed, looking down the drive more narrowly than before.

'But if he's not really a "perv"..!'

'Oh *do* stop standing *up* for him, for goodness sake! *You* didn't care when Wrigsy pushed Mrs. Killigrew downstairs!'

'Only she's not a relative!'

'Neither is Harold!'

'How d'you know?'

'How, if our dad's Charlie Reece?'

Johnny pouted, then said, 'Sandra was a "love child", too!'

Judy considered this, then dismissed it. 'Johnny, you read too many silly books!'

"ark 'oo's talkin'!' Johnny grimaced in imitation of Holly Wells. 'You're the one who first thought we were Dearings, now you want to push him downstairs!'

'I don't! – It wouldn't do any good, anyway – unless he put us into his will first, like her uncle did in *Jane Eyre!*'

'Jane H-e-i-r she should have spelt it! — Except I suppose it would have to be Heir-ess! — Giving it away was madder than her in the attic! — We could always push Wrigsy to do it, now that he's throwing them out!'

Judy looked at Johnny as if he was 'madder than her in the attic'.

'I'm joking, Sis! – Can't you ever tell? – You're really going to try and – and blackmail him? – just because you think he's got "happy hands"?'

'He has! – For God's sake, Johnny, do you want to go to a proper school, or are you wanting to go back to Ramford?'

'Course I'm not!'

'Well then. What's your plan?'

'Well... we could er - um...'

He broke off sharply as the door creaked again, looking around as, this time, Lord Dearing came in.

How much had he heard? – Enough to have a true idea of them, if he had managed to clear his head. Because they had been arguing – as they did more, the older they got – they had forgotten to whisper. He had stopped to listen at the door, holding it open a crack with a shaky arm, then taken a minute to steady himself and gather the courage to enter. He had washed and shaved – a blob of cotton wool stuck to his chin – made himself more presentable in a pair of old 'plus fours' and now, on a tarnished silver tray which he hoped would give an impression of ceremony to the snack he had thrown together from odds and ends – some remains of treats which Miss Wallace had laid in for her nephew and niece, he was carrying crisps, a slice of pork pie with a rather green looking egg in it, a jug of blackcurrant drink, biscuits and some gaudy, if broken slices of Battenberg cake.

'I thought you m-might feel a bit p-peckish,' he bustled in, trying to sound cheerful whilst stopping the glasses and crockery from rattling. 'Just a *lit*tle snack, I'm afraid... I'd have prepared a proper p-party – if I'd only known you were going to be kind enough to drop in! – Ah good, you've let in some light! – But please, please – you p-particularly, Judith my dear – I beg you, blot out all memory of my earlier state of – of p-p-peculiar d-disarray from your

minds, will you, please? I wouldn't w-wittingly have subjected you to the sight of my shrivelled shanks for all the tea in China, I sh-shudder to think what impression it made!' he said, really shuddering to judge by the chinking of knives against plates. 'To cause such sweet blameless cheeks as yours to pale, to subject untutored youth to such un-s-savoury sights oh, I can never forgive myself! – "Drunk as a Lord", you must have thought! – Living alone, I admit I sometimes do let my s-standards drop, on this unlucky occasion, even my trousers!' he tried to laugh it off. 'I'd just taken a nap, you see, then half come around, and was past the point of wanting to drag myself up so many stairs, so... Now, where should I I put this..? -Just here, I think... where you can help yourselves..!' Dearing laid the tray on the table, covering the incriminating papers as best he could. '- Now, children, tuck in! No need to stand on ceremony, be just as un-b-buttoned as you like! – Where was I? – Ah, yes – I was just about to say that I saw what happened to your togs down there in the basement, hanging over the pipes – still, sadly, ringing wet to the touch – Golly, but you did catch it, didn't you! How lucky I happened to be airing those things! Miss Wallace used to take care of them, but meantime, I'm afraid, a rat must have spent a – a p-penny – possibly thruppence, or sixpence – on Uncle Jack's breeches – that being the most they're worth, alas, should one try to t-trade them for coin, their value being solely sentimental! – I and my cousin used to dress up in what you're now wearing, but we never looked half so fetching just like Henry and Letitia!— as you... My present attire — apart from the "bloomers", or "golfing gauds" as my ever facetious aunt used to call them – was Uncle Jack's. – He'd dress up as Lord Hugh, Henry's young brother – fourth along on the left, down the hall; the similarity was striking once he'd drawn on a cork moustache like a limp cavalier's - or was it a stick-on job? - I believe it was - in which case I expect it's still in the house somewhere quite likely lining a rat's nest! - They say he left as many ch-children as debts - Lord Hugh, that is, not my Uncle! – though frankly, it was quite likely to have been no less t-true of him,' he conceded, searching their faces as if for traces of his reprobate uncle, then looking – more nervously than Judy had – through the opened curtains and casements onto the drive.

'Did you come to live with your Uncle Jack, then – Harold?' Judy asked, pausing before calling him by his first name – something she had not done before.

Lord Dearing knew he'd been wittering. He was trying to act relaxed so as to convince them that he hadn't overheard them conspiring before he came in. Perhaps he was trying to convince himself as well. He could have confronted them, but had no heart for an argument which he mightn't win. Somehow he would talk them into abandoning their terrifying scheme without letting on that he knew it. In fact, because it involved a kind of seduction, he only ran the risk of deepening the hole he was already in. But now, sensing her ruthlessness, far from being consoled by it, Judy's familiarity sent a chill to his stomach — which gurgled unpleasantly, awash as it was with the soda and Alka-Seltzer he had taken to try and clear his head: 'Did I what, I'm s-sorry?'

'Come to live with your uncle — like Fanny did with the Bertrams?' she added, having happened to see a tooled-leather set of Jane Austen's novels

'The Bertrams? – how out of t-touch I am! – do they live in these parts?'

'No, in *Mansfield Park* – up there, just along from *The Moonstone!*' she pointed peremptorily to a shelf.

'Ah! – yes, yes – of course, silly me, how *could* I forget – and h-how well read you are, my dear!' he said, like Little Red Riding Hood admiring the size of her granny's eyes, ears and teeth. 'Yes, yes it certainly *would* have been very convenient if – if only Uncle Jack had only been a t-tad wealthier! – though he'd have spent it all, very probably, whatever he had...

That wasn't why I came to live here – no, no, that was decided for me, I'm afraid, I had no choice about that!'

'And you don't have any choice now, do you, Harold!' Judy said perceptively after another awful pause.

'A-b-b-bout what?' he quailed.

'About signing the plans!' she snapped, wishing her throat felt less tight.

Lord Dearing needed another gin, but he had drunk it all, as he had noticed – along with how the proposals for the conversion of Pomphlete had been studied and freshly spread out.

'Judith my d-dear girl,' he stammered, his heart throbbing no less than his head, for imperiousness suited her type of beauty, and the more she showed, the better she looked in that dress, 'if only I had the m-moonstone to give you, the moon and stars too, come to that! – But for now, all I can do is apologise for falling so depressingly short in the p-p-pecuniary department – a short-coming which prevents me from acting with the liberality which someone as well read as you would have every right to expect from a I-lord, but I'm afraid it's an ex-p-pectation that must be frustrated in the case of a sadly im-p-poverished peer of the realm like myself! All I can do is offer you my true – if poor – friendship – along with these c-crisps, before they go soft, or – or can't I tempt you with a slice of p-pork p-pie? Come now, Johnny, a growing fellow like you! – it's the type with an egg in it, look, like the "century eggs" the Chinese bur... er...' bury in the earth, he was going to say, until he saw that the egg looked as if it could indeed have been buried for a century. 'Or – or eat some custard creams at least?' he said, offering Johnny some instead.

'Thanks!' – he took several, defying a look from Judy that seemed meant to warn that the biscuits could be as lethal as the pie with the green-looking egg.

'S-sadly the days are gone when one could address the troublesome shortage of pelf by sailing off to capture a galleon or landing a handy heiress! I tried once – landing an heiress, I mean, but far from restoring my fortunes, our s-separation was chiefly regrettable in that her barrister brother succeeded in separating me from such liquid assets as I still had in reserve,' Lord Dearing mourned, returning the plate to the table, glancing at the sadly depleted bottle of gin, wishing he had kept some of *it* in reserve.

'Iv vat why you have to fell Wrigvy'v corrige?'

'Sorry, Johnny, which "college" is that?'

'Sell Wrigglesly's cottage!' Johnny repeated, having bolted two biscuits at once.

'Ah, the *Pom*phlete cottages? – Yes, but you see they'd demanded that I renovate the place, dig new drains, put in a bath and indoor loo and God knows what else, and they only pay a p-penny rent, except that they never even pay that! – *Magnas inter opes inops* – "mid vast possessions poor" – though mine – I stress again – are *very* far from vast! – Property is more of a running sore than an asset, especially when the walls all run with damp! The plumbing at the cottages was condemned by some meddling council inspector or other they'd thought to call in, though mine here's hardly better... *Omnia cum pretio*, and when it came to replacing miles of lead piping, the *pretio* proved pretty eye-watering, I can tell you – which is why I advised 'em – the council, not the Wriggleslys – that I was hoping to open the house. I thought of having a safari park like Lord Longlet – or Shortlet, or whatever he's called. But if lions are going to tempt visitors without cost to life and limb, a raft – if not several life-boat loads – of health and safety measures have to be paid for first. Then I thought of these clothes that were s-simply mouldering away upstairs and wondered if they couldn't help to make Pomphlete p-pay. – What, I thought, if visitors were to catch glimpses

of the ghosts that must – at least figuratively – haunt all such great houses? Surely that would make a bit of a stir? I'd dress up as Lord Hugh, and Miss Wallace – who lately left me, alas – Mrs Prynne, bless her, has even less of a figure, I doubt if even an authentic Caro-l-lingian corset would have helped – could have taken the part of Lady Elizabeth Sarah – Hugh's wife. I imagined she'd have been flattered by such a request, thinking to be so dignified a considerable promotion, even ennoblement, but far from it, she only demanded a p-pay rise to fifty p-pounds a week! – I might have considered it, but when I remembered the nephew and niece she sometimes brought here to drag Baskerville into the orangery like an uncooperative rocking horse, and asked if she thought they'd also be amused to play a d-dressing up game with me, she just about h-hit the roof, so I had to let her go – before she caused even more material damage..! I j-jest, though the roof – all half an acre of it – is another running sore, I assure you!'

'Is *that* why you brought us here that last time?' Johnny asked, hurt to hear that that the former housekeeper's nephew and niece had been his first choice.

'Well, ah – um – yes, but how honoured I would have been to have asked you, if your mother – only adoptive, of course! – hadn't b-burst in before I'd got around to it. It was a missed opportunity, the thought of which has h-haunted me ever since!' Dearing smiled would be endearingly, revealing his stained, gappy teeth.

'Would you pay us to do it, then, Harold?'

'W-w-why er, why not? N-naturally, Ju-Judith, my dear! – Though we'd have to clear it with C-Crimble, my agent, first, or he'd r-rap my knuckles again! An admirable fellow, admirable! – very capable, very c-cool-headed, but sometimes quite – quite f-fearsome with it! Still, he's the person to ask alright, a stickler for balancing profits and loss and all that – I'm sure he'd know the going rates for two t-trainee ghosts – and as far as accommodation goes, I can promise you a four-p-poster each, and your own p-private wing!'

Judy mused, or appeared to. 'We'd still need to go to school, though!'

'B-but of course, my d-dear child – nothing simpler, Ramford's only ten minutes away!'

'No, I mean in Westhampton!'

'West-Westhampton? A-and why's that?' Dearing asked distractedly, looking anxiously down the drive. Having thought he could win them round through his peculiar sympathy and understanding of children, and because – still being one himself at heart – he knew that, to be playful, you had to act as if you were serious, he sensed that it wasn't working, that they were beating him at his own game.

Of course, they didn't know how long they'd got, either; any time now, if Mrs Prynne had gone for help, they would see the flashing light of a Panda, or hear the crunch of Joe's motorbike on the drive, and first they had to get Harold to promise to pay them off – which he would only do if he thought they really were prepared to accuse him.

'We can't go back! They bullied us at Ramford,' Johnny said, obliged to by Judy's expectant expression, 'Wrigsy used to protect us, but he – Ben, I mean – was expelled, and...'

'...and we didn't learn *anything* there!' Judy said, fearing that Dearing might think them weak, 'most of the teachers there are afraid of the pupils...'

'My goodness! – I w-wonder why?' Lord Dearing asked faintly.

- "...and Joe and Sandra can't or won't pay for us to go to a better school, and we thought, if you were our uncle..."
 - "...since we look like them and everything..." Johnny looked up to the portraits.
 - "...like when Uncle Bertram helped William..."

```
"William" ..?"
```

"...then you could help us instead!" Judy managed to blurt at last, only wishing that her cheeks weren't so hot.

Harold seemed to struggle for words to express his delight: 'I see! – by J-Jove!' he stammered at last. 'Well, well – r-really, dear children, I – I'm flattered – I – oh good Lord! – I – I can't say how... Oof, my goodness me, if – if only! – if only..!' Turning a still ghastlier white, he groaned, peering fearfully past their heads. His dizziness had returned, together with a buzzing in the ears and a bilious taste to his tongue. 'But you d-d-do understand,' he begged when he'd swallowed it, 'don't you, Judith? Johnny? – why, as much as I'd love to, I simply can't help? 'I'm sure you must, being so c-clever, so very quick to learn! I'd have been delighted, delighted to assist, it would have been a pleasure and a p-privilege, it would have warmed my poor d-dried-up cockleshell of a heart, no longer having any family to speak of – not living, at least! – but no money put by for a rainy – or even in-t-termittently sunny day ccome to that,' he stuttered, 'you do see, don't you? – True, there was once, once one of us even married a "Money"! – but that was, oh how many years ago! How marvellous it would be if I really were a proper, rich uncle! But apart from the property – which isn't a boon, but a worry and b-burden, as I s-s...'

'Which is why you have to sign the *plans*, Harold, isn't it!' Judy practically pounced. 'The p-p-pl...'

'Yes, Harold, the plans! – on the table – under the tray!'

'Oh, those p-p-plans! – Ah... oof, dear girl, you really are most f-f-forceful, most d-delightfully f-forthright! Sorry, but, I on the other hand, am feeling rather f-faint! – You've looked through them? – I can only hope you found them a more delightful read than me! Such valued visitors as yourselves are welcome, most welcome to read all the books – all that I still possess, there – there used to be a family missal – mediaeval – much-missed! – d-devoted to it I was, but sadly heavenly wealth doesn't pay the rates, does it! – to read all the books that you haven't already read, of course! – But those plans, which are confidential, only s-suggestions for – for e-econo—economono…' he was wittering again, losing the thread as he always did when money matters came up '...those were only proposals, not plans, for my information, my – my private consideration only, you know! – And I have looked at them – and – and slept on them too! – But that's not to say that you have the, the...' his nerve faltered again, faced with their beautiful, baleful, blue stares '...that's to s-say, that we have to – to rule out all the alt-t-ternatives, is it?'

'What alt-t-ternatives, Harold?' Judy stuttered, finally finding it catching, though it sounded like mockery.

'Well the the – the s-safari park business, for a start! Or – or there's the – the other scheme we were considering, you know, that you c-come here, and – and we all dress up, me in breeches and hose, not these b-bally ridiculous bloomers, of course! – and you help me to give the visitors a g-good scare! – d-don't you think *that* would be fun?'

'Do you believe in ghosts, Harold?'

'Oh, without the slightest ghost of a doubt, my dear!' he tried to cajole her her.

'If we were living here, we wouldn't be afraid of ghosts...'

'You? Not you, of course not! – I wouldn't have imagined it for a minute!'

"...It would be you!"

'Me, Judith? Me scared..?'

^{&#}x27;Fanny's brother...'

^{&#}x27;Ah – yes, yes – in Mansfield Park..!'

'No, Harold, us scared of you!'

As she said this, Johnny shook – more in trepidation at his sister's awful resolution than anything, but Lord Dearing, who until now had thought him less desperate, took it to mean that he was just as resolved as his sister.

'B-but w-why on earth..?' Now, through the rush of blood in his ears, Dearing thought that he could hear a car turning in. It was just as well that he'd thought to lock the doors which had not been locked, all the time he'd been drunk. Mrs Prynne hadn't a key; they were safe for the moment. Surely there was still time to win them to his side. 'Judith — Johnny, my dear d-dear...' he stopped, chilled to realise that, given his situation, to repeat how dear the children were to him was not going to help. 'S-surely ch-children, you can't be frightened of me..?'

Judy looked at Johnny, willing him to act the terrified minor. He had always been better at 'let's pretend', even if he lacked her steely determination. 'We can't go back to Ramford, Harold,' Johnny said desperately, it seemed on the brink of tears, 'if you don't want to help, I'm really sorry, honestly, but we'll have to...'

'...to tell!' Judy completed the threat, about whose method of execution Johnny hadn't been at all clear. Neither, in fact, had she. But now, as Dearing entreated them, his hands trembling, both backed off with expressions of terror. Judy ran for the window-seat, preparing to jump up and scream as an engine stopped and a door slammed outside.

'Quick,' she wailed, 'make him sign – those plans, look – under the tray!' 'Which plans..?'

'It doesn't matter which..!'

There was a rap on the knocker at the front of the house, for the bell there didn't work anymore than the one at the back.

'A-alright, ch-children, alright!' Lord Dearing stammered, his hangover coming back with full force, 'I'll s-sign whatever you... I'll, I'll – Judith, Johnny – *upff!*' he burped – 'excuse me – p-please, j-just g-give me the p-p-p..!'

Johnny dashed forward so as to push a pen into his fumbling fingers, then stumbled as Dearing lurched, leaning against him, gasping sour breath in his face. 'Help Ju..!' he staggered under his weight, 'I can't...'

'Just make him sign!' she repeated, raising both fists to pound on the window.

Dearing jerked his hand, dashing down a pair of barely legible strokes, then collapsed, dragging Johnny down with him onto the couch. The tray smashed to the floor as Judy screamed as she had when Joe had smacked Johnny – at least the way they remembered it – after he had stabbed Holly Mills with the pencil.

It wasn't a Panda in the drive, or a motorbike, but a dark green Cortina. The man with a hat and umbrella held ready to open must have heard her. Alistair Crimble saw her gape at the window, then hurried up the steps to the entrance, reaching into his coat. Fortunately he had kept the key he had recovered from Miss Wallace, who, not many months before, had threatened to sue Dearing too; he had convinced her that she had no case, pointing out that she had worked there long enough to take more care if she had really believed that he posed such a threat, rather than allow her nephew and niece to roam about the house, knowing her employer's erratic habits when he was drunk. She had given in, in return for her outstanding wages, plus a severance of two extra months'. But Judy was cleverer than Miss Wallace, as Alistair Crimble – who had two savvy children of his own – saw as soon as he took in the scene in the library – clever enough to make an equally rapid and fair assessment of him. It helped that she recognised his voice from the message he'd left on the tape.

'Alright, I've got him!' Crimble said, freeing Johnny from Lord Dearing's awkwardly lolling, rather than very great weight.

'H-he t-tried t-t-to..!' Judy could only choke.

'What did he try to do?'

'...It – it – it was horrible!' was all she could sob.

'You're alright, young lady, you're safe now, calm down!'

'H-he – he – he had his h-hands – on our l-legs!'

'His hand – on *both*..?' Crimble looked confused – perhaps trying to work out how many hands had been laid on how many legs. The twins weren't that much shorter than Dearing – who, certainly too weak to attempt any violence, slumped – or had allowed Crimble to slump him – on the armless end of the couch.

'We s-said w-we'd t-tell if he d-did!' she wiped her eyes, acting younger – not older, for a change – than her years, 'only *that* didn't s-stop him! – it was only when he h-heard the c-c-car..!'

She stopped as the plans for the pensioner flats, teetering on the edge of the table, fell to the floor near the scattered biscuits and broken glass. Crimble grabbed them before they soaked up the spilt lemonade – possibly urine too, as Crimble feared from the look of it and from previous housekeepers' reports – and saw the all-important initials. His client had signed, forced to at the last minute – by who else could it be but these children, now making allegations which, in spite of their beauty and clever acting – the boy did it better than the girl, though she took the lead – didn't really add up?

'Oh... C-Crimble, it's you!' Dearing croaked, coming round, as if glad to find himself on a rock in the deep blue sea, but not that he had been saved from it by the devil.

1.6

Having satisfied himself that he was simply suffering from the after-effects of one of his binges, Crimble dropped the twins off at Ramford in time to catch their coach home, then sped on with the plans, now bearing the crucial signature, to the developer's office in town. In the minutes in the car, before dropping them off, he had convinced them to agree to another plan, one getting Dearing off the hook by promising to help them attend their chosen schools as long as they took his advice. He had said enough for Judy to realise that they'd be unwise to push it, given that he clearly doubted the unvarnished accuracy of their account. They had been to see Dearing before, so like Miss Wallace, would have known what the risk was; they had visited and let themselves in, trespassing of their own free will, and the way they had been dressing up, it seemed to him that they had been going along with a game that showed far more trust in his befuddled employer than befitted their accusations.

On the other hand, Crimble had realised that Mrs Prynne might support their story – as might their mother, which was why he was willing to meet them halfway. What he didn't tell the twins was that he owed them a favour for having made Dearing bow to the inevitable development.

Still, even if he was saved from disgrace and destitution, he had signed the arrangement which made him a co-investor, not the one which involved selling outright. For the present, Dearing couldn't afford the fees for the schools to which the twins were demanding to be sent, without taking on even more debt, and Crimble was too canny to let such undiluted demands be made, if he could help it. In their innocence, the children had thought that, once they'd been sent to rot at Ramford, they had missed their chance to be considered for anywhere better. Their marks at 'Eleven-plus' might have got them into a

grammar school, but since then, despite their own reading, for all Gerald Wright's intended reforms, they had indeed academically fallen quite far behind. Crimble looked into it, and suggested they they try for entrance, and possibly scholarship tests to be sat at 13. They could take them as soon as January after the Christmas break. He appealed to their intelligence and their pride in it, and they – rather gratefully, given Crimble's canny manner, so unlike his employer's – agreed.

Only would they pass, after a year and half lost at Ramford?

Crimble also had to deal with their parents, and phoned them next day from his office at Allertons, inviting them to drop by for a chat.

Joe and Sandra were naturally more than a little suspicious. The twins had been cagey and their story and Crimble's had not agreed at all points. Crimble said that Lord Dearing had been so impressed by their cleverness that, although presently financially somewhat embarrassed himself, he very much wished to help as far as he could. Joe especially had been wary, but Crimble's manner was reassuringly matter-of-fact, and Joe and Sandra were both still wary of attracting unwanted attention. Sandra had more than half recanted of her own knee-jerk accusation made on that previous visit, anyway. It would have needed more evidence from the twins to revive it, which, on the verge of getting their wish, they were not going to give. Sandra knew that the twins hadn't been thriving at Ramford, where they, in any case, stubbornly refused to return. Crimble candidly discussed the risk that they might not even get into Westhampton's best, sadly fee-paying high schools without extra tutoring, then offered to provide help with that too, and, though embarrassed to accept charity, knowing that the twins would become still more distant and resentful should they refuse, they accepted Crimble's suggestions – Sandra with more alacrity than Joe, who kept very quiet at the meeting, and had to be persuaded later. He may only have given way because, finally, they were her children, not his.

The best high school for girls happened to be Catholic. It also held out the better hopes of a scholarship. Sandra, whose early years had not noticeably benefitted from from being Catholic, might have baulked at the choice, if the tutor Crimble had found for Science and Maths hadn't happened to be an alumna of St Hildegard's herself. Her lessons, though she only came twice a week, had a stimulating effect, especially on Judy, whose interest in science was no doubt encouraged by Miss Fulton being feminine, intelligent and elegant enough, though she wore no makeup and wore her hair short.

Their tutor for English, French and some Latin proved a less happy choice. It was one of the novices who had resigned in not much short of terror of the uncouth students at Ramford. He might have been adequate in English and Latin grammar, but he was weak in the parts of English literature where Johnny especially was strong, and after two weeks, thinking he saw his humiliation recalled in the twin's gimlet looks, he cried off. Crimble was deep in starting the development of Pomphlete, but promised to find a replacement. When the hour for the next scheduled lesson arrived, Sandra – who, for the time-being had stopped doing shifts in the village shop – could hardly believe her eyes when she went to the door:

'Well, bless my soul! – if it isn't Lord Dearin'!'

'Good – g-good morning, my dear Mrs – er – H-Hocking!' Lord Dearing stood back to make a little apologetic bow, almost as if she was the aristocrat, and he only a humble visitor to her stately home, not a boxy, pebble- or gravel-dashed little semi-detached. 'I – I t-trust that I find you all in rude health? I sincerely hope that any – ah – ahem! – doubts that I may

have unwittingly aroused on a former occasion as to the unblemished purity and s-sincerity of my intentions and, never mind the nature of my i-interest in the welfare of your charmingly clever ch-children, have abated, if not been entirely dispelled? - Crimble, with whom I believe you've had some conversations of late, now being much absorbed in affairs relating to the sack and plunder of my ancestral home, was unable to take on the task of finding another tutor to replace the one who I gather proved unsuited to instruct two students of such already proven aptitude in the artes liberalis. I offered, but I fear found myself puzzled as to how to locate and assess the sufficiency of a substitute, and since the peace of my poor direpta domus is about to be shattered by engines of siege and destruction, I ventured as a onetime Blundellian and baccalaureus oxoniensis to think that I might escape the frankly dismal scene by daring to offer my humble self for the rôle. Coram, quem quaeritis, adsum! – although, naturally, if I fail to accord with your idea of a promising pedagogue, I will retire without murmur, and pursue the search through the back pages or or the yellow book, or whatever publication it was that Crimble – a man of formidable resource, if small patience at times – recommended!' Dearing said, bowing his head like a penitent seeking entry into a sanctum of innocence under the jealous eye of the mother, if possibly only adoptive.

Sandra could hear the stunned silence of the twins in the living room, in which a table and chairs meantime took pride of place in order to seat a tutor and his or her students. Joe was not at home. Could she really risk letting Lord Dearing in? He looked old, almost wizened and humble. An old rust-red Bentley was parked at a groggy angle, blocking the Jobsons' drive, with their proudly polished new Mini next door. She would have to get him to move it, or it would stop Mr Jobson from being able to back out. Dearing had needed to ask a developer to help him to start it, but it was the nearest that Judy's old dream of a coach-and-four arriving at the door would come to fulfilment, and Sandra, in spite of her wariness, couldn't help feeling flattered and somehow deeply, if obscurely, moved.

She stood back, politely bewildered, and when he had entered, offered him coffee or tea. He had tried to spruce himself up, but still looked sadly shabby and neglected, his jacket stained and frayed against the bright floral wallpaper, fresh paint and vigorously vacuumed carpets of 14 Cliff Crescent. He could have been living out of a suitcase – which he pretty much was, or was effectively facing having to do, it seemed to him then. Seeing him, the children felt cornered and backed away from the table. Dearing stammered a greeting, which wasn't a very promising start, but when he started reading Keats, in spite of their glowering, he did it with melodious eloquence, that the twins were transported. Johnny felt the hairs prickling on the back of his neck. It was obvious that being an hereditary peer had got in the way of Dearing finding his calling. Perhaps he would have had to teach somewhere like Westhampton Grammar or Eton, rather than Ramford, but coming back with his coffee, Sandra stood in the hallway and listened, bewitched, and by the time he recited in his ripe, mournful tones –

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

- she was blinking back tears. Next day he read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in a salty, sea-shanty accent, pitching and rolling his Rs like a fisherman who had just stepped onto Westhampton docks. Though it wasn't unlike her own accent, Sandra didn't hear any mockery in it. He even managed a cry like a fatally wounded albatross falling from the mast which, far from sounding silly, gave Sandra and the twins goose-bumps. Listening from the

back room behind the sliding doors as intently as if she was about to sit a for a scholarship herself, she was as affected by his tremulously delivered advice at the end, that —

'He prayeth well who loveth well Both man and bird and beast.'

as if she had shot the albatross herself. After that, she tried following the tutor for science and maths, but being unable to see the figures, understood rather less.

Both twins were accepted into their chosen schools. Judy was awarded a scholarship, which meant that her fees would be covered, but Johnny narrowly missed out on his. Dearing told Crimble to pay his fees anyway, but Sandra insisted on offering as much as a third. Even that was a struggle, but it saved her and especially Joe's pride. She went back to working at the village shop to top up Joe's wages, and that was how it was done.

Were the twins grateful? For a few days, even weeks, maybe, but it soon faded, caught up as they were in the excitement of being at their new schools. Perhaps now that Dearing would live in a one-bedroomed flat in the wing set aside for more economical apartments at Pomphlete, the idea of sharing his ancestry had lost its appeal. And yet he clearly had talents which had been dissipated in a state of aristocratic inertia, and if it was an intellectual inheritance for which the twins wished, they could have done a great deal worse. Probably, it was just that, as they grew older, they thought that they were basing their idea of who they really were on reason; logically, Charlie Reece must certainly be their true father, however unattractive Sandra tried to make that option appear. Now their education was devoted to making themselves worthy of the man they pictured Charlie Reece would prove to be, qualifying themselves for the time when they finally met, ensuring that he would be proud to acknowledge them as his children.

1.7

It was hard to separate every day, having spent their lives entirely in each other's company so far; for the first weeks, each of them felt as if they were trying to walk in one shoe. For all her superiority, Judy had depended on Johnny to acknowledge it, and be grateful for her better sense and – however bossy – care for their common interests. In fact, it was Johnny who made new friends quicker and made faster gains academically. So far, both had kept their delicate beauty, even if it had less of an impact, when it no longer appeared side-by-side. Judy thought less about it, drawn less to stories about princesses and handsome heroes, than understanding science, biology and the functions of genes. Despite the intensity of the work they had done with Miss Fulton, she still had a job to catch up. It was Johnny who seemed to have got more from Lord Dearing's tutoring. For the first time, his grades in History, French and English were better than Judy's. He even published a prize-winning poem in the school magazine, a sonnet with the admonitory title *To Hubris* –

Thy eyes are opened but it is too late! Self-blinded*, hobbling to thy unknown Fate!

The asterisk in the last couplet marked a footnote over whose wording he had taken more care than he had over the poem; 'by the expression or epithet *self-blinded*, the poet means the reader to be reminded of the story of *Oedipus Rex*'.

Westhampton Grammar School for Boys had been a military hospital during the Napoleonic wars, built at the same time as Princetown Jail. It was a limestone labyrinth, as

grand as a Piranesi engraving, with turrets and tunnel-dark basements threatening to explode with their unreliable boilers and fumes from the low-ceilinged chemistry labs. It had an arched colonnade that ran the length of the sports fields spreading between the building and the stagnant creek, up whose jelly-green waters the wounded from Trafalgar and Waterloo had been ferried, and in which amputated arms, legs, even dead bodies had once been dumped, or so the admittedly rather gothic school legends alleged. In places the stonework bore rusty grey stains like traces of dribbled putrescence. Soldiers had once sunned their tarred stumps on the balcony, parading on their newly creosoted pegs in the colonnade underneath. The main corridors had an echoey splendour, old cables dangled from beams as if the wiring had last been done in Faraday's times. Dr. Lassiter, the headmaster, a chain-smoking survivor of a Japanese prison camp, limped in his Batman gown like a testy, tubercular veteran, only leaving his smoky study to preside at assembly or to teach lower-school Latin and Greek. Johnny excelled in these subjects simply to please this new alarming task-master, dropping back, once the lessons were handed over to the tedious but more amenable Mr. Gibbs.

These were years in which everyone was junking their little black and white tellies in favour of vast colour cabinets, and when Johnny remembered them later, it was as if his thoughts had previously all been in monochrome, then suddenly blossomed into psychedelic variety. The bland diet of platitudes and perfunctory facts fed them at Ramford was suddenly enriched by a cornucopia of pungent experiments in chemistry lessons and sex, rat dissections and human biology, alcohol frothing out of retorts and bottles of smuggled beer, the smell of oils – instead of primary school poster paints – in the art class, tuck-shop treats of Wagon Wheels and Sherbet Bombs, classical music, compulsory choir, school plays and concerts as tuneless as if the orchestra was drunk on the heady Beethovenian brew. Discipline was strict, prefects were to be flattered and feared, one's daring proved by daredevil exploits (the week Johnny arrived, a fourth-former climbed offhandedly out of a window only to crack six ribs sliding off a roof splashed with pigeon shit), but rivalry fed intellectual ambition, friendships were fickle and fierce and his mind was fired, even if desire for some bigger, rugby-thighed boy in the upper school often left him dazed and distracted.

Until the late sixties, St. Hildegard's High had been exclusively Catholic, and few of the teachers were men. There was a chapel with a tower and a bell which rang the breaks between lessons, and since Mr. Herringal – who taught maths – had a stye in his eye and a hare lip barely hidden by a thin moustache, Judy had fewer distractions than Johnny. She worked hard and found that a well-expressed formula pleased her as much as a witty chapter from Thackeray or Jane Austen. She stopped reading fiction, played chess, and learnt about genetics and sexual selection (so far without any personal experience) taught in a cautious way at St. Hildegard's, as befitted the school's Catholic past. Miss Bowers was happier informing her class about Gregor Mendel – presumably because he had been a priest, and sex in his theories was confined to the flowers of a monastery garden. Judy sometimes imagined herself as a prioress-princess, like a latter-day Hildegard (after whom the school was named) practising science like a religion, but knew that she wouldn't really be happy with that; the world must acknowledge her genius, granting her entrée to the intellectual and social elite. Later, she would sometimes pretend that her ambition was driven by feminism, but in that all-girl environment, it simply seemed egoistic. She wanted to be a leader, to dominate others she deemed to be of her own rightful class.

Two of the cleverest girls at St. Hildegard's were the Cresslys, the horsey, red-headed daughters of a rich local businessman. One break, Judy overheard Sara and Louise Cressly bitching about her with friends:

"...We could *all* be here on a scholarship if we'd wanted. She's not the only one to get 'A's in maths and know how to castle in chess. And she isn't *that* pretty. In gym, she's as thin as a rake, only she looks down her nose at you like Lady Muck!"

'Lady Muck-Rake..!'

'On the make!'

'Like butter wouldn't melt in her muff!'

'Except she'd use marge, 'cos it's cheaper!'

'Or lard!'

'Oh Lord!'

'Lady Lard-di-dah!'

'And she doesn't half lay it on thick with Miss Bowers...'

'Do you think she's a lez?'

"...And with Hairy-lip. I have to sit by her in history and maths. The way she keeps swishing her hair, it's like being at the back of a pony!"

'A bony pony!'

'I bet *he'd* enjoy the ride!'

'Don't be rude, Lou!'

'She doesn't ride, remember?'

'They're too skint. Last week, I saw her mum drop her off. She gets out like – like this, look – like she's stepping out of a ruddy Roller, only it was only one of those crummy "Jap" cars!'

'Daddy says we shouldn't let them in!'

'Scholarship girls?'

'Or crappy Jap cars!'

Next time Sandra dropped her off at school, Judy made sure that it was three streets away.

Sandra had to play chauffeur because the buses that ran between Disbury and Westhampton were so erratic. Sometimes one didn't come for an hour. To be safe, the twins would have to be at the stop on the High Street by seven-thirty; on dark and rainy days, Sandra couldn't bring herself to knock on their doors sufficiently early, especially if they'd gone to bed late after doing their homework, playing in chess competitions or concerts or rehearsing school plays. She'd drop them off in Westhampton, then return to work at the shop, dreaming of a different past for herself, an education which would have made her someone of whom her children could have been proud. That Sandra had as good as had to disown her own parents made it even more painful; maybe she was being paid in her own coin, but she'd had good reason to cut herself off, whilst she and Joe had shown the twins nothing but love.

If the twins were embarrassed to be seen in a second-hand Datsun, it was no better when Joe took them in. Had it been the Chief Inspector's black Rover, they mightn't have minded, but a lowly Ford Panda advertised Joe's humble rank, for all the years he had served. The twins stopped their parents from coming to several school events by simply not passing on letters, but when it came to plays, Sandra got to know because she'd been ferrying them to and fro from rehearsals, and then, of course, she told Joe.

Still, the embarrassment of Johnny's part in the Westhampton Grammar production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was in large part self-inflicted. If he'd warned Sandra what to expect, she could have tried to prepare Joe for the shock, but as it was, coming on top of pressures at work, it led to a crisis even worse than which followed the primary school incident when Johnny had stabbed Holly Mills.

Joe was no Fascist, but nor was he exactly a New-Age man. Recently there had been changes in the way that the countryside was policed. Village bobbies could no longer lead sheltered lives in the quiet of some backwoods parish. Now they had to team up to help tackle crimes in neighbouring constables' beats, which didn't suit a loner used to going about things his own way, like Joe.

Recently, there had been an influx of hippies and environmental types into West Country towns; a commune had settled in Hepston-in-the-Moor. They floated around in Indian kaftans and clouds of patchouli. Copies of the Kama Sutra appeared in shop windows alongside tarot packs, handbills offering Thai massage and compost bags widely supposed to be used to grow hemp. Joe had been one of a posse sent to seize evidence from an allotment farmed by a group of queer people who ran a yoga centre and vegetarian cafe on the High Street in Hepston, but the cannabis resin Joe seized turned out to be only some rather pungent type of Indian spice. When the commune's butch female leader appeared before magistrates, she mocked them for not being the sharpest tools of the patriarchal state, and a group of ambiguously male hecklers and women in dungarees helped to laugh the evidence out of court. Before this, Joe hardly knew how the meaning of the word 'gay' had changed, 'hijacked' (as Mary Whitehouse supporters mourned) by an effeminately crimped fringe of the permissive society, but another case was scandalising the area just then, that of a prominent local MP, famously dashing and debonair, who had been conducting a not very secret affair with a groom from an aristocratic friend's estate. Mentally, the stable boy had proved to be anything but, had blabbed despite ever more generous payoffs, then been subjected by heavies employed by the MP or his agent to ever less subtle threats. Recently, the dumped boyfriend's dog had been shot whilst he was walking it on the moor. He claimed that the bullet had been meant for him and the police were again called in, but the team from the MP's ward in the east of the county were so convinced of his innocence that Joe's squad suspected that, like the boyfriend, if more effectively, they too had been bribed. The effect on Joe was that, lately, he was suspicious of anyone who spoke too well, smelt too strongly of aftershave, wore paisley or seemed remotely flamboyant.

So it wasn't the best time for Johnny to make his stage debut dressed as a fairy. Why had he taken the rôle?

Partly, it was because he was continually disobeying school rules about how to dress, turning the collar of his blazer up, wearing trousers with flares, his wide tie knotted like a cravat and his blond hair too long. When warned, his response had been simply to tuck it inside his collar, but his form tutor, Mr Voss, himself as bald and hook-beaked as a vulture, had sent him to the head, who, Johnny saw as soon as he entered his office, already had his tickler (a folding meter rule, not a cane) laid out in its threateningly expanded form on his desk. Lassiter had regarded him coolly, then offered him an unexpected way out: Attempts to collaborate with a local girls' grammar had foundered again on a choice of play, once more the English and Drama department was faced with the challenge of boys refusing to volunteer for the girls' roles on stage. Lassiter offered Johnny a deal; since his hair was nearly long enough for him not to need a wig, he had his permission to wear it as long as he wanted

until the end of the term, provided he accepted the part of Titania. It was either that or detention, six of the best and a short-back-and-sides.

It was humiliating, but in fact, by pretending that it was a punishment, the boys given girls' roles were spared much of the shame. As an old soldier, Lassiter would sometimes tell how, as prisoners of war, men had taken women's parts in camp theatricals as a matter of life and death, but the story was one he kept as a last resort, since it invited even the dullest boy to compare his headship to the way in which Japanese commandants had run Prisoner of War camps in Burma. In Johnny's case, the story wasn't what changed his mind, there were other carrots as well as sticks, for he soon realised that playing Titania would provide him with unparalleled opportunities to grope six-foot-tall Brendan Trevelyan's Bottom.

Still, he had hoped to keep Sandra and Joe away. But Sandra's maternal pride, despite all rebuffs, would not be denied. Worse, she had compelled Joe to come (Judy was playing in a chess heat that evening) and they drove to the school that night in his patrol car, the Datsun having – perhaps presagefully – not wanted to start.

Of course Johnny wasn't the only boy in a frock, and Joe might have got used to it, if Johnny had put as little into his acting as the boys in the other girls' parts; but he was gifted, the experience had even made him wonder if he might be an actor one day, and he was smitten with Brendan Trevelyan, so he had a glow in his cheeks which more than made up for the chaste lack of rouge.

It was just as well that Judy had been taking part in that chess match, for, knowingly or not, Johnny had based his Titania on her, even down to the way she tossed her hair when annoyed. It was like seeing her double on stage. But if Sandra was shocked, it was because Johnny had not thought to warn her. It was his lack of trust that hurt. Gradually, as the audience laughed and clapped, she relaxed, but Joe could not; to him the laughter sounded jeering and crude. Two girls with curly red hair – clearly sisters to the no less red-headed Puck – sat in front of them, finding Johnny's performance a particular scream; Joe saw how their shoulders shook in the effort to stifle their giggles whenever Titania flounced on stage. Joe didn't get the jokes, or find them funny when he did. He blushed for Johnny and coughed so often that the red-headed girls turned to glare. When the curtain fell on the first half, Sandra buried her nose in the programme, whose notes didn't shy away from discussing the problem that a boys' school faced casting plays; students all made excuses like Master Flute's Nay, faith, let me not play a woman: I have a beard coming. But that line showed how plays were performed in Shakespeare's day, women being forbidden to act. It was no disgrace, it made the production authentic, it didn't mean that Johnny was 'that way inclined', she whispered to Joe in the interval, wondering nevertheless if it did.

Then, gathering in the colonnade with the other parents and guests guzzling cheese and wine, they bumped into Lord Dearing, looking more dishevelled, if not disreputable than ever. The builders redeveloping Pomphlete had gone bankrupt, Crimble was looking for another firm to complete the job, and Dearing was even deeper in debt.

'Good – good evening, Constable! Good evening my – ah – my dear Mrs Hocking. By Jove, you know this is quite cheeky for a Chardonnay! – now we know where the f-fees go, eh? – Still, here's to a splendid performance – on Johnny's part at least. I'd say he's pretty much stolen the show, what!' Lord Dearing chortled, raising a congratulatory glass. 'Thou shalt remain, whether thou wilt or no, I am a spirit of no common rate! – poor Bottom, who could resist such noblesse oblige? – She has that poor ass by the tail, and no mistake, I'd say!'

'I 'spect it's all thanks to you 'e knows 'ow to speak 'is lines like that, Lord Dearin'!' Sandra said gratefully.

'Oh no, my dear – no no, very kind, but I believe the – the Thespian in him is instinctive, to give credit where it's due. If anything is instructive, it is apparent through the extraordinary tribute of imitation his Titania pays to his twin – Like as a union in partition, two lovely cherries moulded on one stem! – I grant I may unwittingly have nurtured the seed of an aptitude I had early occasion to witness, being privilege to a private p-performance – quite a costume drama itself, in its way, an auspicious sign, albeit sounding the knell to my solitary enjoyment of the ancestral—but as Crimble insisted — unsustainably ramshackle pile! Well, there we are, there was no getting round it, I fear such hereditary piles are fated to deteriorate with the years! – Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero. Whatever the morrow brings, this evening will be a delectable memory, at least, a consolation, for one's influence – one might even say legacy – is passed on by the most unexpected turns, is it not?' Lord Dearing smiled and seemed to drift off for a minute, contemplating a cube of rather unripe and rubbery Brie. 'Things growing are not ripe until their season... Ripeness is all!' he sighed, moodily twirling the cheese on its stick. 'I fear this Brie isn't quite up to the Chardonnay. Perhaps I'll go and collar a little crumb of that Camembert before it all melts away, if you'll excuse me. My congratulations again, Constable, Mrs Hocking!' Dearing bowed, then melted away himself.

But his compliments (and having not understood the tipsy Lords' Latin tags or the meaning of the word 'thespian') had only put Joe, though off duty, more than normally on his guard. After recent experience, the 'auspicious sign' Dearing had mentioned sounded more like an incriminating hint, and he spent most of the second half mulling over the dubious details of how Dearing had got involved with the twins in the first place. Joe couldn't meet Johnny's eye when he reappeared afterwards, his blazer slung with affected nonchalance off one shoulder, hair still crimped from the pressure of Titania's gold and silver-leaved coronet. Going out with other parents and their sons to the playground being used as a car park, boys chaffed Johnny as he passed. One even stood to attention and tootled *God Save the Queen* into his bunched fist as Johnny got into the back of a Panda, as if saluting an all-too-public arrest.

There was silence in the car as Joe started to drive out of Westhampton.

'Stop, Joe, turn round! — we forgot we was meant to be pickin' Judy up from 'er chess!'

Braking abruptly, Joe swung the car around, almost running into a rusty red Bentley.

'Take it easy, Joe,' Sandra tried to joke, 'you inn't chasin' a suspect now!'

'Maybe I should be, though!' Joe muttered as Dearing swerved and waved.

'Now be fair, Joe, that wasn't 'is fault..!'

'No? And what other offences does he commit when he's squiffy?'

'Well 'e wasn't bein' offensive this evenin', Joe, 'e was perfectly civil. It was nice of 'im to come – and 'e 'ad every right!'

'Why? Because 'e's payin' us off?'

'For what?'

'You tell me!'

'Please, lovey, not now!' Sandra said under her breath, touching the hand with which he was gripping the gearstick as they came to the corner where Judy stood, huffy with waiting.

They dropped the subject and didn't bring it up again, not at any rate in front of the twins. But after that, Joe treated them with more reserve, and not wanting to bump into Lord Dearing, went to no more school concerts or plays. For him, music was Elvis, and

Shakespeare, he bluntly asserted, was over his head. So he excused himself when it was Judy's turn to appear in *The Tempest* – after a year which had seen scenes more tempest-uous than any that had occurred between Johnny and Judy so far.

The tensions had started with Sara and Louisa Cresslys' widely repeated reports on Johnny's performance. They had only gone because their brother was playing Puck. Of course they had known that Judith had a twin – not identical of course, how could he be as a boy? But, oddly, he was, they informed their friends, or as good as – he was more like Judith than Judith was like herself. They'd had to rub their eyes whenever he came on stage. From the moment he'd begun to boss Oberon about, and said *Then I must be the lady, the bouncing Amazon, forsooth,* and tossed his hair, giving it a lift with the back of his hand just as his sister did, they were agog. He'd even stuck his chest out like Judith, as if to make the most of the nothing there was to show.

If Judy had been more secure, and had made friends at St Hildegard's High School as Johnny had at his College, she mightn't have been so hurt. But the Cresslys were right; in part, as Dearing had noted too, it *had* been a parody, if only subconscious, for Johnny too found her overbearing at times. But as he said, 'Why would I want to *mock* you, Ju? I didn't know that you wouldn't be there!'

'You did, I told you I was going to be at that tournament!'

'You didn't – you said that you'd lost the last round!'

'I said that the *school* had. This was the *individual* heat. You didn't listen, because you don't care, and then you go and make a fool of me in front of the Cresslys! – *And* I beat Howard Beazley who was taught by his dad who was the West-country champion once!'

'Gosh, that's brilliant, Sis – well done! But how was I supposed to know the Cresslys would be there?'

'Because their brother was playing Puck, for God's sake! Why couldn't *you* have had a boy's part instead of acting the fairy in front of my friends?'

'Oh, they're your friends now, are they? Then who are your enemies, Ju?'

'You, apparently!'

'Ju-ude..!'

'You can leave my room now. I've got to study, even if you don't.'

'Si-is..!'

'Buzz off, Johnny – you're the sissy, not me!'

They patched things up, but their relationship would never be quite as close and unquestioning again. Johnny went to see Judy perform when St Hildegard's put on *The Tempest*, but she lacked his theatrical talent. It was odd, considering that, for years she had been the more widely read, and had acted the offended princess so well in real life, but on stage she looked stiff. In any case, by now her interests were becoming less literary than scientific.

These interests might even have been behind why the school had persuaded her to play Prospero; they were trying to encourage more girls to take A-level sciences, and someone had proposed to take the campaign to the heart of the drama department, making a scientific debate central to the plot of *The Tempest* by having Shakespeare's mage portrayed as a white-coated Frankenstein, wielding a wand around which the double helix of DNA wound like the two snakes around Hermes' staff. This was why Caliban wore a bunny suit altered to resemble a guinea pig, or giant laboratory rat. The point of these costumes was made clear in the fourth act, when Prospero called Caliban *a born devil, on whose nature, nurture can never stick.* Prospero, it was somewhat heavily hinted, had adopted him

as an experiment, giving him the same chances and education as Miranda; but his daughter had flourished under his tutelage, whilst Caliban, the hereditary savage, had not. It was a debate about Nature and Nurture, in that year's production at least.

And that was how Judy – then Johnny – would remember the line when they came to study the subject later, one which – thanks to their attempts to find out who they really were – had actually always been an obsession. Even as children, it had lead them – or seemed to, Judy acting for both of them – to act with callous calculation, if 'calculation' was the word when it had seemed to come naturally. For how else should they have behaved? They had been defending the father they did not know, yet felt they did, and it had seemed so instinctive that they had hardly considered it to be a decision.

On the other hand perhaps, even as children, they had needed to muffle their consciences, to deny any conscious responsibility, so as to have nothing to reproach themselves with, then or later.

And that led to the paradox which Judy, most of all, came to see as part of the whole Nature and Nurture debate. For if she did not wish to have anything to reproach herself for in relation to Sandra, Joe or Harold Dearing, it was surely better to believe that there had never been any choice, that our actions and personalities are too bound up with our genetic inheritance to leave much, if any room for free will.