

The Preservation
of
The Olive Branch

A Novel by
Brendan Gisby

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To Alison, for her help this time round,
and to Bill again, for last time.

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The Manuscript

They say that everyone has a novel inside of them, just waiting to be spilled out. He had spilled his one out more than thirty years ago. He had come across the typewritten manuscript of it recently in an old box file. The manuscript was among some other papers, other things that he had written back then. He remembered thinking that the box file was like an unwanted heirloom: something which was of neither aesthetic nor practical use to him, but which he could never throw out because of its strong attachment to his past. So it had just gone with him from house move to house move over many years, always placed somewhere unobtrusive to gather dust until the next move.

He didn't need to open the box to know that it contained the manuscript. It was his attempt at a first novel; his *only* novel, really. He had once been very proud of that manuscript, his creation, but now he was sure that it would embarrass him. He had convinced himself over the years that it wasn't very well written; the language was too dense, the characters too shallow and wooden, the plot too obtuse. There were those obligatory lovemaking scenes; he had inserted them in order to 'spice up' the story – he was in his mid-twenties when he wrote it, after all – but they were bound to make him cringe now. And there were the political messages, of course; the propaganda. He couldn't help himself; he was further to the right than Attila the Hun in those days, having been converted from a dyed-in-the-wool Communist in the space of a few years. His views had been so extreme when he was young; everything had been either black or white. And then, as he got older, he began to compromise, gradually forsaking the extremes, gravitating towards the middle, until he was neither one thing nor the other. Anyway, whatever the novel's flaws, he knew that he would never destroy the manuscript; it would be such a waste of all that effort, that perseverance.

When he opened the box and took out the manuscript, he noticed that some of the pages had lots of handwritten changes in blue pencil on them, while others were pristine, as if they had been freshly typed. He appeared to have manually revised the manuscript and to have been in the middle of retyping it when he stopped. He didn't know why he hadn't gotten round to finishing the job, but it was all in a bit of a mess now. And then he remembered. He reckoned that he must have been at least twenty-six when he set out to retype the manuscript. That was the time when his first child had been born. It was also about the time when he received his first major promotion at work. It was the time when life suddenly got busier, and when house and family and job all became far higher priorities than writing for pleasure. And it had gone on like that: event after event after event, one tumbling after the other, with no space between them, it seemed, no time to pause. Two more children followed. There were more promotions, bringing more responsibilities, more work. There was the break-up, the divorce, the new relationship with Alison, another marriage, a fresh start. He became the co-owner of a company. He worked day and night to make it succeed. Then he helped to sell the company, enabling him and Alison to retire. And there he was, in that retirement, sifting through the pages of a project from long ago, an unfinished project, a project interrupted.

That was when he decided to complete the job. He had lots of time on his hands now. He would tidy up the papers, retype the whole thing on his laptop and thereby *preserve* the manuscript. But he wouldn't just retype it; he would edit it as well – not so much as to alter the text significantly, mind you, but soft editing to correct the grammar and to remove the worst excesses of his prose. In that way, if anyone read the manuscript after he was dead and gone, perhaps they wouldn't think that it was too awful.

The Title

The manuscript lay beside his laptop on the table below the big, ceiling-high window of the sitting room. The window gave him an unobstructed view of the narrow patio at the back of the house, the raised garden overlooking the patio and the expanse of sky above the garden. There had been talk of an Indian summer, but the sky was leaden again this morning. He would sit here and type and edit over the coming days and weeks – and months, if necessary. He began with the title page.

His novel was called *The Olive Branch*. The title was derived from the headline of an article that appeared in a well-known daily newspaper back in 1975. The headline read: 'Olive Branch from Peking to Kremlin'. The article spoke of an apparent amelioration in relations between the Republic of China and the USSR, and of a metaphorical olive branch being exchanged between the two powers. It went on to warn of the threat that such a development could pose to the West.

He supposed now that the story was just some idle scaremongering to feed to the newspaper's right-wing readers, like him. And he was young enough and politically immature enough to be impressed by the story, to believe in the so-called threat and to be concerned by it. He had wanted his novel to shatter the apathy to the threat that he seemed to see all around him, to act as a warning to the West – a red flag, if you like. It would be set a few years in the future, and it would relate what *could* happen if the two Communist giants did combine and did collude to dominate the world.

But first he had needed somehow to work the title that he had chosen, and the story of the threat behind it, into the novel. His original intention had been to reproduce the newspaper article, including its headline, at the very beginning, in front of a planned prologue. He wrote to the newspaper concerned, but the Managing Editor wrote back, politely

refusing permission for the reproduction of the story on the ground that in some eyes permission would constitute endorsement of the novel. However, the man couldn't have been more helpful otherwise. He suggested a way round the problem for him, he said that the storyline was a very interesting one, and he wished him every success with his book; he even offered to get the book reviewed by the newspaper when it was published. So he had decided to take up the man's suggestion by incorporating 'the sense of the news story', together with the novel's title, into the prologue.

The Dedication

Between the title page and the prologue, there was another page, in the centre of which he had typed the following dedication: To Bill, for all his help.

Bill, of course! How could he forget Bill? He and Bill had been friends since childhood. They had lived practically next door to each other in Queensferry, had grown up together, had gone to the same schools, had shared the same boyhood adventures; they had even worked together during their last school holidays, having lied about their ages to get jobs in a nearby hotel. After they left school, they drifted apart for a while. He went to university, lasted only a year there, obtained his first real job, lived in Edinburgh and got married. Like his father before him, Bill joined the Civil Service. He, too, got married and lived in Edinburgh. They met up by chance one day and went on to renew their friendship, with their wives in tow this time. Then Bill and his wife, Marilyn, moved to the north of England – to Darlington, he seemed to recall, on a Civil Service posting – while he and his wife, Ann, moved over to Ann’s hometown in Fife. That was when he began to write the novel and when Bill agreed to comment on it as it developed. He posted each chapter or couple of chapters to Bill, and Bill replied with his observations a week or so later. They kept up their regular, long-distance correspondence over many months, the four of them getting together occasionally during that period.

He looked out of the window at the greyness of the sky, remembering their correspondence. He had been such an arrogant prat back then. All he really wanted from Bill was his endorsement, his encouragement; to be told how clever he was and how good the writing was. He neither wanted nor welcomed criticisms. If he received any from Bill, he either ignored them or argued against them. Poor Bill. The man was such a saint, always willing to submit his careful, practical and helpful

comments, almost apologetic when he did make criticisms, not flinching at the rebuffs, quietly persisting through the process. When he thought about it now, the truth was that he didn't deserve Bill's input.

He looked away from the window and back to the manuscript. Enough of this gloom, he said to himself. There was a project to get on with, and he had barely begun. He turned the page over. The dedication to Bill would remain; it was well-deserved.

The Prologue

The prologue was in three parts. He retyped the whole of it, pleased that it didn't need any editing.

1

The following routine Intelligence Report was requested by the NATO Watchdog Committee on Sino-Soviet Relations after the appearance in several Western newspapers of unconfirmed stories concerning, amongst other things, the signing of a 'non-aggression treaty' between the two Communist powers:

'Report No: 625J
Code Name: OLIVE BRANCH
Designation: Top Secret
Date: 151075

1. Over the past few weeks, there have been a number of Press reports (copies attached hereto), all of which indicate a normalisation in diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and China, and most of which hint at the recent signing of a non-aggression treaty aimed at the immediate withdrawal of forces from the long-disputed border areas.

2. At the Committee's direct request, every available intelligence resource was asked to investigate the above allegations. These sources have now reported back, and their findings can be summarised as follows:-

- a. there have been no official confirmatory statements from either power;
- b. there have been no significant movements of either troops or tanks along the border areas referred to above;
- c. there has been no known exchange of diplomats between Peking and Moscow in recent months.

3. It must be concluded from 2. above that the attached newspaper stories do not reflect the true state of Sino-Soviet relations as at this date, and it must be further stated that genuine co-existence between Russia and China is still not a feasible prospect, either in the short-term or in the long-term.

4. Nevertheless, strict surveillance of Sino-Soviet relations will be maintained; any significant developments therein will, of course, be brought to the immediate attention of the Committee.'

2

In 1975, after a series of secret negotiations, the USSR and Red China allied, thus ending more than fifteen years of armed confrontation between the two Communist giants. This union (later marked down in history as the Formidable Alliance) went unnoticed to the Western powers as a result of the secretive nature of its formation and of Russian and Chinese efforts to show to the rest of the world that hostilities continued to exist between the two nations. Over the next five years, the combined Communist powers laid down, in fine detail, their plans for the invasion of Western Europe, this being the first step in a stupefying campaign aimed at world domination. In direct contravention of previous SALT agreements, both nations, undercover, amassed vast stockpiles of

strategic nuclear weapons. In addition, Russia, while seeming to balk at successive SALT negotiations over the existence of the American Cruise missile, directed its scientists to take and develop the Tercom guidance system employed in the missile (for information on the Cruise missile, see the author's Technical Note below); after four years, the Soviets devised their own guidance system, far more sophisticated than that of the Americans, with a maximum range of 3,500 miles and an astonishing accuracy of within five feet. More openly, the Soviet Fleet was gradually strengthened and refined in preparation for the coming invasion.

3

It is now the early summer of 1980, and the combined Communist forces are poised for the initial assault. In one fell swoop, more than 10,000 of the new Soviet missiles, each one carrying a high-explosive earth-penetrator warhead that can dig through fifteen feet of concrete, will rain down on the cities of Western Europe, destroying every important dock, airport, arms base, communications centre, factory complex and refinery, and bringing half a continent to a complete standstill within a matter of seconds. The vast Russo-Chinese Fleet, for months strategically positioned around the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, will then close in for the kill, as will those forces of the Warsaw Pact strung out along the western borders of the Communist Bloc.

Clearly, the first part – the 'Intelligence Report' – was his attempt not only to capture 'the sense' of the original newspaper article, but also to convey the general apathy to any Communist threat that he had perceived. He thought that it worked quite well. But he wasn't convinced about his way of incorporating the novel's title into the report. 'Code Name: OLIVE BRANCH', indeed! It was so obscure that it would probably be missed by

the large majority of the novel's readers; it was too clever by half.

But that fault aside, he felt that, overall, the prologue successfully set the scene for the coming story, providing it with a substantial degree of credibility. It seemed to him now that the premise of the novel was *believable*. He noticed that much of the premise relied on further development of the Cruise missile, whose technology at that time was hi-tech and therefore little known or understood – which was why, presumably, he had introduced the technical note on the next page of the manuscript.

The Technical Note

He retyped the technical note, pleased again that he didn't have to make any changes to it.

The American Cruise missile was first developed in 1975. It is fairly light, weighing some 2,000 pounds, and not much bigger than a standard 21-foot torpedo. It is powered by a simple turbo-fan engine, and it flies at a maximum speed of only 500 miles per hour, which would ordinarily make it easy prey for radar-directed ground-defence missiles or guns. But what makes the Cruise missile so extraordinary, and therefore so deadly, is its guidance system: a revolutionary development called Tercom (short for Terrain Contour Matching).

Each missile carries in its body a tiny computer which has been fed with the relief maps and data of a pre-set course. On launching, the missile follows this pre-set course, keeping at pre-selected heights above the ground (normally no higher than 300 feet and no lower than 50 feet). In this way, the missile manages to hug the natural features - and even buildings - of the terrain over which it passes, thus avoiding detection by enemy radar, becoming lost in a confusion of local ground images. Any deviation in the missile's course is corrected in milliseconds by electronic impulses sent out by its computer.

At present, the Cruise missile has a maximum range of 2,300 miles. Because of the inbuilt Tercom system, it can achieve an accuracy of up to 30 feet.

It can be launched from sea and air, as well as land, and it can be fitted with conventional, chemical or nuclear warheads. It can be mass-produced quite cheaply, and it is all in all a truly fearsome weapon.

(The above note was compiled from information that was available in April 1977.)

The note had been pretty much copied word for word from another newspaper article, which this time had been printed in one of the Sunday broadsheets. Looking at the date at the foot of the note, he remembered now that the article appeared well after he had begun to revise the manuscript. It had come like manna from heaven, adding even more credibility to his story.

The First Chapter

He came at last to the first chapter. As in the rest of the manuscript, it was divided into several sub-chapters, each of which was numbered. He retyped the first sub-chapter, correcting grammatical errors, breaking up some of the longer sentences and undoing the results of his penchant back then for inserting unnecessary adjectives. He grew angry when he reached the middle of the opening paragraph. He had originally written 'tall elms and squat sycamores'. Bill had pointed out politely that it should have been the other way round – sycamores were tall and elms were squat – but he had ignored him, as usual. What a tosser he had been! It had taken him thirty fucking years to make that correction! And he was sure that he would come across many other instances like it.

1

The warm midmorning sun sparkled and glistened on the calm, crystal waters of the small bay. The water gently, almost inaudibly, lapped against the near-white beach. Somewhere, far in the azure distance, could be heard the lone cry of a wheeling gull. It was a beautiful June morning! The air felt clean and fresh, and a soft, balmy breeze rustled through the tall sycamores and squat elms around the shore. A drowsy warmth was beginning to emanate from the pale sands, creating an almost imperceptible haze along the opposite shoreline of the estuary.

Jeff Wheeler stretched luxuriously on his elbows on top of a grass-covered dune overlooking the beach, his gaze fixed on the snail-like progress of a tiny tugboat as it made its leisurely way along the estuary

towards the sea. After some time, he turned on his back and stared thoughtfully into the blueness above. Scattered around him on the turf were a number of textbooks and a pile of dog-eared notebooks. Jeff was a second-year Economics student at Edinburgh University. His final examinations for that year were due in early July, and he had decided to evade the hustle and bustle of varsity life for a few days by coming along to this quiet haven on the Firth of Forth to 'enjoy' some peaceful study. Since his arrival there an hour or so earlier, however, he had felt reluctant to mar the fineness of the day with irksome study, and instead he could only marvel at the early summer beauty around him.

Now, as he lay relaxing in the sun, he thought of the coming holiday period, when he would be able to return to London: back to Wimbledon to his parents and Sis' and brother Tom; back to the small semi-detached cottage overlooking the Common; and, most importantly, back to Deborah - sweet, lovable Debbie! He smiled wistfully as he recalled the soft fragrance of her nearness, the bubbling exuberance of her enthusiasm for life. Lightly tapping the breast pocket of his shirt, he felt the reassuring outline of the neatly folded six-page letter which he had received from London that morning.

'Two whole months with Debbie!' he thought happily, rubbing his hands together. 'Two whole months - right after these bloody exams.'

Exams! His thoughts rushed back to the present and to the task that lay before him. Grudgingly, he resolved to tackle it right away - in the next ten minutes, anyway. Then, reaching out for his cigarettes, he lit one, inhaled deeply and blew a long stream of smoke directly into the air above him. Turning back onto his stomach, he again contemplated the vista before him.

After a few minutes, having extinguished the

cigarette, Jeff stood up and stretched out, yawning loudly. At that precise moment, a near-blinding flash streaked through the sky above the sea, like lightning during an electric storm. Seconds later, the quiet air was split asunder by a series of prolonged, booming, deafening explosions, and the ground beneath his feet seemed to shake and rumble momentarily.

Completely startled, his mouth still agape, Jeff glanced quickly along the coastline, trying to pinpoint the origin of the explosions. His eyes finally came to rest at a point on the far left of his vision and opened wide in utter horror and disbelief as they watched the giant superstructure of the Forth Rail Bridge sink slowly and gracefully into a steaming sea; large orange flames licked around those parts not yet submerged.

Believing that he had been caught up in some weird daydream, Jeff closed his eyes tightly for a few moments and then opened them again, only to find that the whole bridge had now disappeared, leaving immense clouds of hissing steam in its place. In the same time, columns of dense black smoke had spiralled far into the sky all along the coast, casting dark shadows over the brightness of the day.

Looking out onto this awesome spectacle, Jeff had grown pale and afraid. His stomach was lurching and his heart had begun to pound; a small muscle below his left eye twitched and jerked.

'Jesus Christ!' His voice sounded hoarse and forced, the words hardly audible. 'Something's gone wrong - terribly wrong.'

What had gone wrong, he couldn't even begin to think about. His mind was in too much of a turmoil to reason out calmly the cause of the wanton destruction that he had just witnessed. The wonderful peace that he had been savouring had been suddenly shattered, leaving him pale and shaken and devoid of any coherent thought. One thing was absolutely clear, however: he

wouldn't find out what was happening by just standing there.

Quickly, he stooped down and gathered up his belongings. Then, as if gripped by uncontrollable panic, he threw them down again and began to sprint away from the beach towards the footpath behind the trees.

The tall pines which grew on either side of the path reached upwards to form a natural canopy, blocking out the sunlight, and seemed darkly menacing to Jeff as he thudded along below them. His breath was now coming in short, sharp gasps, and he could feel the blood pounding in his ears. Suddenly, the muted stillness around him was pierced by the wailing of a siren. Trying to turn towards the source of the noise and at the same time to keep on running, he was taken off balance and sprawled awkwardly onto the footpath. Covering his ears, he attempted to drown out the relentless clamour. But, just as abruptly as it had begun, the siren stopped. Jeff, panting, scrambled up and continued to run.

The steady, rhythmic padding of his footsteps along the dark, narrow pathway gradually began to regulate Jeff's breathing now. The fast pace that he had set himself had slowed to a mere trot. The panic that had fleetingly occupied his mind was gone, and in its place calculated reasoning had taken hold. Answers to the numerous questions he had asked himself were now beginning to form. Who or what had caused the devastation along the estuary? How had it been done? Was this the start of some terrible terrorist revolution? Why had the siren sounded? And into what kind of situation was he running at this very moment?

He guessed that the extent of the destruction was too great to be the work of any of the terrorist groups that he had read about. Was this, then, the first horrendous stroke of another World War? Could it be possible? It seemed ominously likely. And it would

explain the siren.

Jeff's heart began to pound furiously as his logical reasoning reached its foreboding conclusion. Icy fear seemed to chill his very blood, and he shuddered visibly. Sudden panic again seized him, but this time he resisted the impulse to run on as fast as he could. Instead, a cold discipline that he had not known before forced him to remain at the same steady pace.

'Keep cool!' he muttered. 'Christ Almighty! Keep cool!'

Had he but realised the full, horrifying implications of his explanation to the explosions, Jeff might not have wanted to continue with his journey. Instead, he might have decided to remain where he was, safe in the quiet solitude of the woodland, far from death and destruction. If he had been able to witness some of the events that had taken place only minutes before in the heart of the city of Edinburgh, he might have recoiled in terror, shrinking away from any thought or memory of such happenings.

For, at the very moment when he had heard those thunderous explosions echoing around the shores of the River Forth, the thronging thoroughfare of Princes Street was brought to a screaming, tearing standstill. Here also explosions could be heard, but these were much closer and far more frightening: so terrifying, in fact, that shoppers, tourists and businessmen alike were brought to a sudden halt, immediately aghast and speechless. The drivers of the many vehicles which choked the street were affected by this sudden fear, too, and, as buses, cars and lorries came to a screeching, grinding stop, the whole place was filled with the sounds of skidding tyres, blaring horns and metal crashing into metal. In seconds, the formerly well-ordered lines of traffic had been thrown into a melee of crumpled bonnets and shattered windscreens.

Moments later, even more confusion arose as large store windows all along the street suddenly burst apart in one crashing, cacophonous stroke. Long, dangerous spikes of broken glass were propelled into the now panic-stricken crowd. Terrified men and women clawed at each other in an effort to escape these jagged projectiles. Small children began to howl in fear and bewilderment, and many were trampled by the shouting, frenzied mob. One small girl, only six years old, lay writhing and screaming in horrible agony, clutching futilely at the large sliver of glass which protruded from the gaping hole in her face that had once been her left eye.

And, in the midst of the mingled cries and curses of the crowd, the sirens had begun to wail - almost unnoticed.

Soon, Jeff came upon a fork in the footpath. Here the trees grew less closely together. Looking upwards, he could see that bright daylight still prevailed, but, at that moment, as if to serve as a dark reminder, a large cloud of dense smoke passed swiftly across the aperture between the tops of the trees. Here also Jeff paused for a brief respite. He was now faced with the dilemma of which way to turn. To the left of the fork, the footpath ran for a mile or so to the boathouse, where he could be ferried across to Cramond and could then make his way into Edinburgh. To his right, only a few hundred yards further on, lay the gatehouse and the road leading into Queensferry, the apparent source of the explosions. On the one hand, there was an escape route into the relative safety of the city - if, indeed, there was a need to escape from anything - while, on the other, he might be running into some kind of danger. There, at least, however, he might be able to help - if help was needed. Choosing the latter course, then, Jeff resumed his journey with a renewed urgency.

The path, much wider now, ran on downhill towards the sea. Very soon, Jeff was able to discern the shore again and the small cottage which served as a gatehouse for the estate on whose land the path lay. But, as the whole estuary came into view, he stopped short, almost in mid-stride. For the second time that morning, he gaped in horror at an incredible panorama.

The landscape before him was Dali-like in its grotesqueness: a landscape strewn with broken concrete and twisted metal; highlighted by the tall, dancing flames of a multitude of fires; and shrouded in places by black, belching smoke. The immensity of this ghastly sight was terrifying. What had once been one of the most sought-after beauty spots in Scotland was now wrecked and maimed beyond repair. Only mangled girders of steel, jutting wildly into midair at each side of the river, remained to prove that the Forth Rail Bridge had ever existed. Nor had the Road Bridge escaped this maniacal destruction: it now lay in total ruin, dangling helplessly into the sea, as if torn apart by some force so powerful that it was beyond human comprehension.

Completely numbed by this nightmarish spectacle, Jeff began a slow, faltering walk down towards the gatehouse. The distance to the house was a mere hundred yards, but to Jeff it now seemed like a long, torturous and despairing journey. When he eventually arrived at the trim white fence which surrounded the cottage, he paused for a moment, staring vacantly around him. A coldness had penetrated his body, a coldness that made his limbs shake and his teeth chatter. He felt sick and empty inside. The darkness of the sky above him seemed to mingle with the blackness that was forming in his mind, until he was finally enveloped, lost in unconsciousness. He pitched forward, automatically reaching out to grab at the spars of the fence.

He had always been told that the opening – the first one or two paragraphs, the first sentence even – was the most crucial part of any novel. Its job was to grab the reader’s attention, to make him or her want to read on. If that was the test of a good novel, then his one failed miserably. He seemed to have been more interested in describing the scenery and the character in it than in getting on with the story. And his style of writing was so old-fashioned, so melodramatic, so *Victorian*. But perhaps he was being too hard on his younger self: at least the action did come six paragraphs in – before he had the chance to doze off. And he did like some of the descriptions; he thought that ‘Dali-like in its grotesqueness’ was a particularly good phrase.

The beach that he had described was a real one. Known locally as the Shellbeds, it was, and still is, part of the Dalmeny Estate, which is owned by the Earl of Rosebery and which lies a couple of miles to the east of Queensferry, his hometown. He had set that first scene in very familiar territory, therefore.

Jeff Wheeler, on the other hand, was not based on anyone known to him. It seemed to him now that Jeff was unreal, a stereotype – a cardboard cut-out, if he wanted to be unkind. He had no idea why he cast a nice, middle-class boy from London as the central character. What was wrong with a rough, local, working-class lad, like him? Perhaps he had lacked the confidence to base the hero on himself. Or perhaps he had fallen into the same trap as the writers and producers of television dramas in those days (and often even nowadays), making the assumption that London was the centre of the universe and that all stories had to revolve around people in middle-class occupations who lived there. But then again, maybe he had been a lot shrewder than his older self was giving him credit for, creating the type of hero who would be more familiar and *acceptable* to the large majority of the novel’s readers. A commercial decision, then? he asked himself. Who knows? But this Jeff character was coming over as a bit of a wimp so far, throwing down his belongings in panic, tripping over his feet, fainting. Hopefully, he would toughen up before long, developing one of those stiff upper lips that his ilk are prone to show.

How would that first sub-chapter fare today? he wondered. If he

had picked up the novel, unknowing, would he want to continue reading it? He didn't know. He was too close to it, he supposed.

He moved on to the next sub-chapter. As before, he typed and edited as he went along.

2

Robbie Sinclair was sixty-one years old: a soft-spoken, mild-mannered man, who hailed from a small crofting village near Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. When he spoke, there was that wonderful, magical, lilting quality in his voice that was common to the speech of men from the Western Isles. He was small in stature, yet wiry and agile, almost sprightly. His hair was the colour of silver-grey and his eyes were of a soft, misty blueness, set in a wrinkled, weather-worn face, a kindly face that spoke of the experience of great joy and deep sorrow, but mostly of long years of hard work, struggling to mete out a bare existence.

As the son of a crofter, he had had to learn at an early age the importance of arduous labour on a grim and relentless land, which offered up only a meagre subsistence and scant enjoyment. Later, as a trawlerman on the lonely reaches of the North Sea, he had done battle with the unyielding forces of wind and sea, and, later still, as a soldier in the deserts of North Africa, he had learned to master other forces - those of heat and thirst and fear. After the War, he had returned to crofting, had married and had had a family. Again, there was that constant struggle against the inexorability of the elements, that same backbreaking strenuousness that he had known as a lad, until eventually his own family had grown up, in their turn had married and had then gone their separate ways. Left alone, he and his wife had decided to leave the croft and move down to the more climatically favourable

Lowlands of Scotland, where he could gain employment that was less arduous and more suitable to his mounting years.

In this way, he had arrived at the Dalmeny Estate and had taken up residence as the gatekeeper-cum-gamekeeper of the grounds. That was three years ago. Since then, his wife had died; after a long, hard and often harrowing life, she had passed on one calm spring evening, peacefully and contentedly. Now, save for Pad, the wise, old collie that he had brought down with him from the Isles, he was completely alone; alone, certainly, but not unhappy. He enjoyed his life as gamekeeper, with its series of untaxing, routine tasks; he enjoyed the brisk, early morning walks through the woodlands with Pad; he enjoyed the numerous letters he received from his sons and daughters (and grandchildren now), letters from as far afield as Nova Scotia in Canada and from as near as Galashiels down in the Borders; most of all, however, he enjoyed the smell of the fresh sea air, a smell that had been dear to him throughout his years, his very lifeblood.

This morning, like most mornings, Robbie Sinclair had risen at dawn and strode through the newly awakening forest, the sounds of which were, as always, delightful to his ears. On returning, he had breakfasted and was now sitting in the tiny scullery at the back of his cottage, contemplating the prize crossword in yesterday's 'Daily Mail' over a third cup of coffee. By his side on the kitchen table, murmuring softly, was his battered, old transistor radio, and sprawled untidily at his feet was Pad, exhausted by the morning's vigorous exercise.

Laying down his now empty cup, Robbie was on the point of reaching over the table for his pen when the radio began to crackle fiercely and then abruptly went dead. At the same time, Pad leapt out of his slumber and commenced a mixture of yelping and whining.

'What's the matter with you, then, doggie?' asked

Robbie, who by now could hear a loud rumbling outside. 'What's the matter, son?'

The dog began to bark loudly and appeared absolutely terrified. Robbie stood up and opened the scullery door, whereupon Pad bolted out into the backyard, scattering the half-dozen chickens gathered there, and scurried away towards the woodland beyond.

The old man stood on the doorstep, shaking his head in wonderment, until the dog disappeared from view. Then he walked casually round to the front of the cottage, which overlooked the sea. The grim sight that awaited him forced him to stop short. There was a sharp intake of breath, and the expression on his face changed from mild puzzlement to sheer disbelief. Smoke and flames and destruction flashed before his eyes. The devastation that he saw was indescribable, unspeakable.

'No wonder the bloody dog ran for his life,' was all that he could utter.

He walked on towards the narrow pier that jutted out into the sea alongside the cottage, but he stopped suddenly and returned to the house for his binoculars.

For a long time afterwards, he stood silently at the end of the pier, scanning and re-scanning the shattered shoreline. When he could bear the sight no longer, he returned to the cottage, slowly, wearily. His eyes had misted, and bitter tears streamed down his cheeks. It was then that he saw Jeff.

He didn't have any criticisms about that sub-chapter; it seemed to read well. As far as he could make out, the character of Robbie Sinclair wasn't based on anyone he had known either. He did remember a gatekeeper from his younger days, but that man had a completely different disposition. He worked for Lord Rosebery, of course, and, like many underlings of the great and the good, he was full of his own self-importance; a bit of a martinet, really. So Robbie was another stereotype probably, but a less shallow one this time. He liked him anyway.

The age thing did worry him, though. Robbie was referred to as an 'old man' in the story, but he was sixty-one, which was only a few years older than he was now, and he certainly didn't think of himself as an 'old man'. And Robbie's wife, who was probably no older than Robbie, appeared to have died of old age! Either the life expectancy rate had shot up over the last thirty years or his perceptions of age had shifted dramatically during that period.

He continued to the third and last part of the opening chapter.

3

'Up you get, laddie.'

Jeff felt the strong grip of Robbie Sinclair's hands on his shoulders as he was slowly hoisted to his feet.

'What's going on, mister,' he asked tremulously. Consciousness had returned quickly to him and, with it, the reality of that morning's fearful events. He was still very weak and shaken.

'Never mind just now, son,' replied Robbie. 'Come along with me.' And he gently led Jeff towards the cottage.

Once they were inside the small, cluttered living room of the cottage, Robbie pointed to an old, worn and much repaired leather armchair, and motioned to Jeff to sit down.

'I'll give you something that'll make you feel a wee bit better,' the old man spoke kindly.

Reaching into an old, varnished sideboard, he brought out a quarter-full bottle of malt whisky and two small glasses. He poured the pale amber liquid into the glasses and handed one of them to Jeff, saying:

'Get that down you, lad.'

'Thanks,' whispered Jeff, grasping the glass with trembling fingers.

He gulped down some of the whisky and almost immediately felt the effect of the gentle glow that it provided, bringing back some warmth to his numb body.

The old man drained his own glass.

'That feels better,' he said and continued: 'Now, my name is Robert Sinclair. Folks call me Robbie. Perhaps we'd better establish who you are.'

He smiled at Jeff, who had relaxed a little by this time.

'I'm Jeff - Jeff Wheeler,' replied the white-faced, young man.

'English, aren't you?'

'Yes, from London. I'm up here at the University in Edinburgh ...' He paused. 'If it's still there, that is.'

'Aye,' grunted the old man, averting his eyes from Jeff.

For a while there was silence between the two, until finally the young man asked in a trembling, high-pitched voice:

'What d'you think caused that ... that holocaust out there? Who in God's name would want to do something like that?'

Jeff had jumped up from his seat. He was now pointing excitedly at the smoke-filled estuary, which could be seen clearly from the room's small bay window.

'I'm not sure, son,' said Robbie grimly as he stood beside Jeff looking out at the awful panorama, 'but I think that we'll be at war again - probably with the Russians.'

'Christ!' shouted Jeff. 'What if London's like this, too? My whole family's down there!'

Wide-eyed and almost feverish, he cried:

'God Almighty! What the hell am I going to do?'

The old man gripped Jeff by the shoulders and spoke firmly, but soothingly:

'Now, just calm down, laddie. Don't panic. That's the last thing you should do. Tell me, where

about in London do your folks live?’

‘In Wimbledon,’ muttered Jeff despairingly.

‘Well,’ said Robbie, ‘it appears to me that you’ll not have much to worry about at the moment. I’m only guessing, mind you, but if this is another war – maybe even a World War – then what has happened today is contrary to what most people had previously believed about the “next” war.

‘You see, son, almost everyone predicted that the “next” war would be a nuclear one. But if that was the case, then we wouldn’t be standing here talking: we would’ve just ceased to exist.

‘If you look out there,’ he continued, indicating the estuary, ‘you’ll see that all of the explosions seem to have been at what you might call strategic targets. There are the two bridges, of course, and across the water there’s the naval dockyard at Rosyth. That black smoke that you can see away to your left will very likely be from the refineries at Grangemouth. And those flames to your right will be the big gasometers at Cramond. Do you see what I mean, son?’

‘Yes, of course,’ answered Jeff, encouraged by the calm and authoritative voice of the older man. ‘My family should be quite safe, not being near to any targets or things like that. I hope you’re right.’

‘So do I, son,’ smiled Robbie.

‘But what should we do now?’

‘I think that we’ll just need to bide our time here for a wee while,’ the old man answered. ‘So, in the meantime, I think that we should stay as calm as possible. I’ll go and make us a cup of tea. The gas will likely not be working, but I’ve got an old Primus stove somewhere that I keep for emergencies.’

Robbie soon discovered that the supplies of both gas and electricity had been cut off, but that the supply of water seemed intact for the moment. From a cupboard in the kitchen he brought out the dust-laden Primus stove, along with a full bottle of methylated

spirits. He had also to hand a number of candles and an old spirit lamp.

While collecting together these items, Robbie noticed that the previously silenced radio was now crackling intermittently. He turned the volume up full and was about to attempt tuning into some other station when the radio began to emit a loud and constant humming. Suddenly, the humming was interrupted by a strong, clear and grave voice, which declared:

'This is the BBC in London. Please stand by for an important announcement from the Prime Minister. Please remain calm! Do not panic!'

The words were hurled through the air in staccato bursts. They stopped abruptly, and the humming resumed.

'Jeff!' cried Robbie excitedly.

'I heard it, too,' retorted Jeff, equally excited. 'At least the good old Beeb is still alive!'

Forty-five minutes later, the same chilling voice broke through the silence of the radio to proclaim:

'This is the BBC in London. Here is an important announcement from the Prime Minister.'

From deep within the bowels of the Ministry of Defence Buildings in Whitehall, the Right Honourable William Foster, MP, spoke to the nation in weary, bitter and almost metallic tones; gone was the jolly, forceful voice of the ever-smiling politician.

'This is the Prime Minister speaking from Defence Control in London,' he began.

There was a pause lasting a few seconds. Jeff and Robbie stood transfixed.

'At precisely 10:45 am today, June 2nd 1980, the British Isles was subjected to a terrible and unwarranted attack by enemy missiles. The perpetrators of this horrible deed are unknown to us at present, but first intelligence reports confirm that France, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and Spain have also come under

attack. Every major city in Western Europe appears to have been simultaneously paralysed.

'In Britain, communication has been reduced to a minimum, and I am advised that nearly all of our important installations, such as docks, airports, generators, refineries, factories, railway stations and so on, have been utterly destroyed. Since non-nuclear tactics have been used to bring the country to a halt, there is no danger from atomic radiation, but Defence Control has warned me that invasion by our unknown assailants seems imminent. However, do not despair. All hope is not lost. Although we have lost contact with the rest of the world, Control can only presume that, in accordance with the terms of the NATO Alliance, American help is on its way.'

Here there was another pause, and then the voice continued more grimly and bitterly than before.

'I am also advised that, under cover of the recent confusion, certain groups of traitors and saboteurs have joined forces. Indeed, it is very possible that these groups were responsible for much of the destruction, planting highly-charged explosives with pre-set time fuses all over the country.'

Another pause.

'I must, therefore, ask this of you. You, the survivors, must rally together as you have never before done. You must organise yourselves into units of defence, forgetting what pain and grief you may feel, to protect our shores and cities from invasion by the enemy. You must not despair. You must remain calm in the face of adversity. You must conserve supplies and give help to your neighbours.

'I and the remaining members of my Cabinet have brought into force the Emergency Powers Act, and complete administration of the country will now be handed over to the Head of Command of the British Armed Forces. With immediate effect, all supplies of food, fuel and medicines will become the property of the

Ministry of Defence and forthwith will be rationed.

'In conjunction with the Armed Forces, Volunteer Defence Units are at this moment being set up all over Britain. All able-bodied men and women should make their way to the nearest Unit. Those who remain behind are called upon to provide as much help as possible to the already overburdened authorities.

'I must warn you, however, that your efforts may be hampered by the saboteurs, of whom I have already spoken. Individual traitors may attempt to infiltrate your ranks and, indeed, may already have done so. Go cautiously, therefore. If you suspect anyone, report the fact immediately to your nearest Unit Commander.

'May God protect you all.'

With that final, ominous blessing, the Prime Minister's voice faded away and silence returned to the radio.

'Well, that's that, then,' said Robbie almost lightly, as if suddenly relieved of a great burden. 'Now we know.'

'Yes,' agreed Jeff, heaving a long, drawn-out sigh, 'but do you know where we'll be able to find the nearest Defence Unit?'

'I've got a fair idea where it'll be,' replied Robbie. 'Time is getting on, though, and I think that our best bet is to spend the night here and make our way there at first light tomorrow. We'd probably be safer doing that.'

'Anyway,' he continued, smiling now, 'no doubt you'll be hungry. We'll have time to eat something, and then we can get things ready for the morning.'

'All right - fine by me,' Jeff smiled back.

Robbie asked Jeff to collect some eggs from the chicken coop and then set about preparing a meal. When the young man turned to carry out the request, he almost tripped over the soft, panting bundle of Pad. The dog lay stretched out along the length of the doorstep.

'So you're back then, are you?' said Robbie to the dog in gentle chastisement.

Ears flattened back, the dog raised its head and regarded Robbie sheepishly. The old man grinned and returned to his chore.

Long after dark, the two occupants of the cottage sat round a blazing log fire, discussing the events of the day and their terrible implications, until eventually, completely fatigued, they settled down for a fitful sleep.

He had known about that Ministry of Defence complex deep below Whitehall; his first wife's brother had worked in it at the time and used to brag about the place at every opportunity. He quite liked the Prime Minister's speech, but he noticed that the names of only a selection of Western European countries were mentioned in it. Why only those ones? What about the others? What about Germany and Italy and Switzerland, for example? He was puzzled.

More than that, though, he was disappointed. He was disappointed that Jeff was still a wimp; that the dialogue between him and Robbie was stilted; and that the whole thing had begun to read like a 'Boy's Own' adventure. Fuck, he thought, for all the world, it could be the script for one of those 'Ripping Yarns' that he had seen on television. But perhaps he was just being overcritical. Perhaps he had had enough for the day.

He put the manuscript away, closed down his laptop and went out to the patio. The sky was still overcast. It would be dark soon. He felt a chill in the air; he could smell autumn in it. It was probably too late now for that Indian summer.

The Second Chapter

The next morning was dull again. It had rained during the night, and everything was still wet and miserable outside. He felt as gloomy as the weather. He wanted the project to lift some of that gloom, but he wasn't pinning his hopes on it.

The second chapter was in four parts. He began to type and edit the first part. He got annoyed again before he finished the opening sentence. In the original manuscript, he had typed 'a myriad of pools of radiance'. He remembered Bill's suggestion that it might be better to treat the word 'myriad' as an adjective, rather than as a noun. Bill had been right, of course, but his suggestion had been snubbed – until now.

1

Bright shafts of sunlight pierced through the pall of grey smoke, suspended over the estuary like deathly gloom, and laid bare the blackened ruins which scarred the landscape like festering cankers; they bounced back gaily from the leaping, dancing waves, creating myriad pools of radiance on the glistening waters of the morning; they reflected sharply from the whitewashed walls of the small cottage, perched lonely and forlorn at the edge of the sea; and they penetrated into the half-darkness of the tiny living room, cascading over the face of the young man, slouched far down in an armchair and slumbering awkwardly.

The young man awoke with a start. It was some time before he could remember where he was, before the stark memory of yesterday's carnage came shrieking back to haunt him. He closed his eyes and prayed to God

that it was all a terrible nightmare, that he would reawaken refreshed in the small, comfortable bed of his room in the University Halls of Residence. It was not to be. The same strange surroundings and the same painful memory remained when he reopened his eyes. He could feel the warmth of the sunlight on his face and the soft leather of the chair beneath him. He could see the smoking remains of last night's fire in the hearth. This was no dream. But where was the old man?

Robbie Sinclair had risen some time earlier and at that moment was returning from his usual morning walk with Pad. His returning footsteps this morning were not, however, the light, near-youthful strides of yesterday, but instead were slow and deliberate - those of an old man filled with grief and sadness. This morning he had dared not look out onto the estuary lest his eyes welled up with the fountain of grief within him. How dearly he had loved his little home and its beautiful surroundings. How dearly he had cherished his job and the many small pleasures that it carried. And now? Now they were all gone. And for what? What would happen now? Grim-faced and silent, he arrived back at the cottage.

An hour later, the two men and the dog set off for the small fishing village of Cramond, where Robbie believed that they would be able to find the local Defence Unit. On the previous evening, they had collected together all of the remaining supplies of food in the house and they had packed these and a number of other items into two small rucksacks. Jeff had volunteered to carry the heavier of the two loads. In the event of further announcements, the old man had left the transistor radio switched on all night and had discovered this morning that the prolonged use of the batteries had exhausted them, rendering the machine practically useless; this, therefore, they left behind. As an afterthought, Robbie had brought down his small bore

hunting rifle from its usual place above the mantelpiece. He had cleaned and loaded the gun, and he had stuffed several boxes of cartridges for it into his jacket pockets. He had only used the rifle before for pest control in the woods, but he was terribly aware that at close range a bullet from it could penetrate a man's skull.

Before finally leaving, the old man gave his chickens a last, plentiful feed and then locked up the cottage. As he made his way through the garden to join Jeff, he turned back momentarily and murmured a sad farewell to his home.

'Perhaps,' he thought dolefully, 'I'll never see the place again.'

At any other time, the walk along the sun-dappled pathway between the cottage and the boathouse at Cramond would have been a sheer delight to either of the two men. Today, however, both men, old and young, pale and silent, were totally unaware of the fine beauty around them. Even the old collie seemed to have lost its usual vigour and playfulness as it padded along behind them. Robbie remained gloomy and despondent as he deliberated on the alarming events of the day before, while Jeff was filled with anxiety over the uncertainty of the future. What if they ask me to kill someone? Will I be able to do it? Do I have guts enough? These questions, he knew, would only be answered in time.

It was only when they reached that part of the woodland, out of which the terror-stricken young man had rushed only twenty-four hours earlier, that the first words were spoken between the two of them.

'You go on, Robbie,' said Jeff, 'and I'll nip down to the beach and get my jacket and things. I'll catch you up.'

The old man agreed.

'Won't be long,' shouted Jeff as he hurried down through the trees.

His belongings were as he had left them. He picked up his jacket and his packet of cigarettes, disregarding the books lying there. Some of the books were open, their pages lightly fluttering in the mild sea breeze, but they were not important to him anymore; they belonged to that part of his life which was yesterday.

Before returning to the footpath, Jeff regarded the still smouldering estuary and thought of how different it had looked such a short time ago. A strange and eerie silence now filled the small bay. The cheerful chirruping of the birds in the trees was gone, and the only sounds that could be heard were the faint swish-swash of the waves on the beach and the ghostly rustle of the breeze through the coarse grass at the foot of the dune. Despite the warmth of the morning, Jeff shivered.

He thought it was funny that the sombre mood of the two men matched exactly how he felt that morning. The sub-chapter seemed fine to him, though; it brought the story along, and it hadn't needed much editing. But the writing still concerned him: it was so verbose, so damn *flowery*. And that first sentence was a corker!

He continued to the next sub-chapter, living in hope.

2

There was no doubt about it: Callum Mackenzie was a coward - a downright, weak-willed, selfish coward. When he heard the three consecutive explosions and realised that the large gasometers a half-mile or so behind him had literally burst apart, he rammed the big oar of his ferryboat far down into the water in a flurry of panic - an extremely foolish act, for the old wooden boat promptly spun round in a full half-circle and commenced to rush towards the bank of the river

from which he had so hastily attempted to flee in the first place. Eventually, however, with the aid of the rudder and a certain amount of luck, the podgy, red-faced Scotsman managed to swing the boat back onto its original course. Perspiring heavily, he reached the opposite bank, moored the vessel with shaking hands, and clambered out of it and up the creaking wooden steps to the boathouse. Once inside the house, he slammed the door behind him and swiftly locked and bolted it. Then, with his back flat to the door, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his jersey and wheezed loudly.

Callum Mackenzie was a frightened man. His first actions had been on reflex, purely for self-preservation, but now he was at a complete loss as to what to do next. For too long - in fact, for all of his life - he had been directed this way and that by domineering women: first, by his mother, until he was twenty-nine years old, and then, and for the last twenty years, by his wife, Agnes. It was they who had governed his every move in life: what he should or should not wear; what he should or should not eat; when he should eat; what should be done in times of crisis. His mother had been dead for the past seven years, and today, alas, Agnes, his protectress and safekeeper, his pillar of wisdom and strength, was not there beside him to advise and direct him. Earlier in the morning, he had ferried her across to Cramond so that she could make one of her rare summer visits to her sister's home in Edinburgh. Worst of all, she was not expected back for another two days. Predictably, Mackenzie's thoughts were not for her safety, but only that she should be there by his side to guide him.

Poor Agnes. Poor, dead Agnes would never be by her husband's side again. Only minutes earlier, suitcase in hand and eagerly looking forward to her short stay in town with Eileen, her spinster sister, she was on

the point of alighting from the Number 26 City Transport Bus at its second stop in King's Road, Portobello, when the blast occurred. A terrible, ear-rending explosion broke loose from the huge, red-bricked building of Portobello Power Station on the other side of the street, tearing down its walls and shooting out vivid lilac flames for twenty feet on all sides. The immense force of the blast whiplashed the double-decker bus, which went crashing over on its side, crushing Agnes to death. Agnes had died instantly, as had all of the other passengers on the bus and all thirty-eight of the residents of the small, drab tenement flats in King's Road.

Callum Mackenzie, almost fifty years old, was a frightened man. With his shock of brown, curly hair, his pained and fearful expression, his oversized seaman's sweater, his baggy trousers, and his big Wellington boots, he presented a pitiful sight. For a long time, he stood wringing his fat, sweaty hands, until finally, summoning up what little courage he possessed, he unlocked the door with trembling fingers, slowly drew back the bolt and stepped timidly out onto the top of the stairs. And, with uncomprehending eyes, he looked out on the miniature Armageddon of the Firth of Forth.

He read over the passage again and smiled. At last, some writing that he liked. Compared with the wishy-washy stuff from earlier, it was so refreshing; Callum Mackenzie came to life in those words. He thought hard for a while, but he couldn't recall ever knowing anyone like the character.

He went on to the third part, keen to know what happened next.

It was a distraught and haggard-faced Callum Mackenzie who shambled along in the early mist of the following morning on the soft, dew-covered sward at the edge of the woodland, only a few yards away from the boathouse. His hair was more dishevelled than ever, and his eyes were red-ringed and bulging with fear. At his side, dangling loosely from his right hand, was his father's old revolver, heavy and rust-laden. He had had very little sleep, and he had not eaten since breakfast the day before. For most of the night, he had sat cowering in the darkness of the boathouse, keeping vigilant watch on the flickering incandescence that was radiated from the numerous fires all along the opposite shoreline of the estuary. He, too, had listened attentively to the Prime Minister's broadcast on the radio, and it was this, with its chilling warning of impending invasion, that had prompted him to seek out the old gun, a relic from the First World War, and to load it ready for use. Although he had never fired the gun before and was not even sure that it still worked, its mere presence seemed to reassure him a little, to provide some small comfort to his ever-jangling nerves.

And now, tired and hungry, confused and afraid, he was on his way to find old Sinclair, the gatekeeper, from whom he was certain to obtain some guidance in this awful situation. His progress was halted abruptly, however, by the sound of heavy footsteps on the pathway ahead of him. He retreated a few paces and slid behind the trunk of a large chestnut tree at the side of the path, calling out timorously:

'Who's there?'

There was no reply, and the footsteps continued. Quivering uncontrollably and raising the revolver with both hands, Mackenzie called out again, this time much louder:

'Who the hell's there?'

Still no reply. The footsteps came closer. There was the rustle of leaves, the crisp snap of a

twig, and Mackenzie's finger pressed down on the trigger. The old gun roared powerfully and leapt out of his hands, throwing him backwards. This was followed immediately by a sharp, agonising cry from the bushes ahead of him. Moments later, his victim came crashing through those bushes towards him. Bent double and clutching wildly with both hands at the large, bleeding wound in his stomach, the man dropped down on his knees at Mackenzie's feet and then rolled over on his back in extreme agony.

Mackenzie drew back in terror when he realised what he had done to his old friend.

'Oh, no!' he cried. 'Oh, Christ, no!'

Biting fiercely on his lower lip, he moved back from the moaning figure.

'Mackenzie, you stupid, little bastard,' the dying man spat out painfully. 'You stupid fu-'

His last words were lost in a sickening gurgle as a torrent of dark blood spouted from his mouth onto the ground. The sandy earth greedily soaked up the blood, and Callum Mackenzie began to sob like a little child.

Poacher Tam was dead, unwittingly murdered by his oldest friend and closest confidant. He had been returning from his customary dawn inspection of the many small snares that he had set at frequent intervals throughout the woodland; the events of the previous day had not deterred him from carrying out his usual, clandestine business. On the footpath, at the spot where he had been shot, lay the small sack containing the proceeds of his morning's work: two young rabbits, a fully grown hare and a fat, juicy pheasant. The pheasant had been intended as a gift for his friends, the Mackenzies; it was, he knew, a particular delicacy of Callum's.

Tall, lanky Tam, known and loved throughout the district as a quiet, kindly man, lay dead, his large hazel eyes staring vacantly upwards and his long silver hair matted with the already congealing blood that had

streamed down his cheek from the corner of his mouth, opened wide in the final, convulsive moments of his life.

Callum Mackenzie stood over the corpse of his old companion and croaked despairingly:

'Tam, Tam, Ah didnae mean it ... Honest, Ah didnae mean it ... Ah didnae ken it wis you ... Honest tae God ... Forgive me, Tam, forgive me ...'

He cradled his head in his hands and wept loudly.

Hours later, when Jeff and Robbie came upon him, Mackenzie was sitting with his back to the old chestnut tree. His head was still bowed low and he was sobbing quietly.

'What in God's name have you done now, man?' asked Robbie angrily.

He had picked up the old poacher's bag and was displaying it accusingly in front of Mackenzie's face.

'It wis an accident, Robbie.'

Mackenzie looked up with pleading, tearful eyes.

'Ah didnae mean it ... A wis feart ... Ah didnae ken who it wis ...'

He blurted out the words, trying desperately to stem the continual stream of tears that threatened to overwhelm him.

Robbie could feel some compassion for the grief-stricken man, whom he had always regarded as a harmless and amiable simpleton. He said more gently:

'Aye, we know you didn't mean it, Callum.'

He patted the boatman softly on the shoulder and turned to Jeff:

'Take Callum up to the house, son, will you?'

Jeff was deathly white. The ghastly sight of the dead body, with its hideous, suppurating wound, forced upon him so suddenly and unexpectedly, had made him retch horribly. Now, his eyes averted from the corpse, he assented feebly to Robbie's request; weak-legged and trembling, he led Mackenzie away towards the boathouse.

Robbie Sinclair pulled his rucksack off his shoulders and stooped down to undo the straps. He reached into the pack and took out a blanket, which he unrolled and draped over the body, already teeming with noisy flies in the early afternoon heat. Then, stepping back a few paces, he offered up a silent prayer for the dead man. Poacher Tam had been a worthy adversary - and a good friend.

Wearily and more saddened than before, Robbie picked up his rucksack and set off for the boathouse. As he trudged along on the soft turf, a dull clunk at his feet revealed the presence of the old revolver. Bending down to examine it, he exclaimed:

'Christ! It's a wonder he didn't blow himself up with this bloody contraption!'

With an angry, disgusted jerk, he tossed the gun far into the bushes ahead of him.

It seemed to him that the 'Ripping Yarns' tone of the first chapter was not being repeated in this second one and that the writing was maturing rapidly. Perhaps that wasn't surprising; apart from essays when he was at school, he hadn't written anything serious before, so maybe it had been a case of him getting into his stride by this stage. He hoped so.

The main thing was that the novel was showing some promise, which was brightening his day. Sadly, he couldn't say the same for the novel's hero. He noticed in this latest passage that Jeff Wheeler had gone 'deathly white', had proceeded to 'retch horribly' and had been 'weak-legged and trembling'. He wondered again why he hadn't based the character on someone like himself; he was certain that his younger self would have been much feistier in the role. Had he begun to despise the weaknesses of his own creation? he asked himself. Or was Jeff simply a victim of his loathing of the bourgeoisie? It was a loathing that he had developed and nurtured and honed over the years, until sometimes he thought that it had become an obsession. It was the voice, really; that public school voice. The haughtiness of it. The arrogance of it. That's what got his back up time and again ...

He had to stop himself. None of this applied to Jeff, he told

himself. It wasn't Jeff's fault that he hadn't been brought up the hard way, that he was young and frightened and probably immature. The character needed time to develop. He should be given a chance, for God's sake! Wasn't that a purpose of the novel?

Thus chastised, he moved on to the fourth and last part of the chapter. It was a short piece, a continuation of the story. Other than the verbosity of the first sentence, it didn't give him any difficulties.

4

The swift-flowing waters of the River Almond, clear and sparkling in the bright afternoon sunshine, gurgled happily as they rushed forward on their perpetual journey down to the Firth of Forth, there to mingle with the limp greenness of the gently rolling tide; they jostled merrily against the hull of the ferryboat, which, gracefully gliding, cut smoothly across their path; and they swirled and eddied around the vessel's large oar as it dipped, glistening, in and out of the silvery surface.

The boat carried three men, two of whom wore grave and solemn expressions; the other, the boatman, was nervous and afraid. Robbie had persuaded Mackenzie to carry on, as far as was possible, with his normal daily routine, and he had asked him to ferry Jeff and himself across to Cramond. He had promised Mackenzie that, on reaching the Defence Unit, he would report the matter of the accident with the poacher to the Unit Commander, who no doubt would send someone over to bury the dead man. He had also promised, though with less conviction, that he would try to contact Agnes for him.

The ferryboat arrived at the low, stone-built jetty of Cramond Harbour. Mackenzie moored the boat and jumped out onto the pier. Then, with outstretched arms, he helped Jeff and Robbie to disembark. As each man offered his hand to him, he clasped it tightly,

silently. Stepping back into the boat, he waved grimly to the two men.

'Guid luck, lads!' he cried out.

Jeff and Robbie returned the wave and walked slowly on towards the village.