

CHAPTER ONE

To begin before a beginning... I was petrified of my life on earth. Not a common complaint, I grant. You see, it was not the After that got to me Before, it was the During: Before-life was fine; The After-life held promise, but as to that earthling period, no, it simply was not my sort of thing. Most of us feel that way, if only before the event. Then we forget. Deep down, I foresaw a saga of familial horror unfold...

CHAPTER TWO

Later, guided by intuition, I saw the hieroglyphics on the wall. I saw myself enmeshed in the coils of that Snake and her fiery Horse. A mere metaphor? Why unravel it? This is a *cul-de-sac* with which I am only too familiar. An exit does exist on the far side, if you know where to look. Now, when it may be too late, the scales have fallen from my eyes. One must seize every opportunity that offers. That is the line to take. Make a bolt for that gap which can suddenly appear in the most unlikely place like...

...A certain zebra crossing in Paris...

Marlene and I had waited there an age. The traffic flashed past so much faster than elsewhere. We had our wits about us. We knew not to miss a trick. It was noon. I remember onions stinking in the heat. Paris looked solid and dusty, as if hauled from the ground by the Eiffel Tower. A gargantuan crane in its midst. The least professional ghost would reject these circumstances as unpropitious for the raising of even a humble goose bump on suitably susceptible flesh. Marlene was a blonde, dizzier than most, and reputedly the worst actress on both sides of the Great Divide. By this I am talking of earthly existence and the Elysian, not the Atlantic. She was on urgent call for business, so she said, which was why she was staying in the hotel bedroom next door to Papa. To me, aged thirteen, she was veiled in stardust. I felt that way about many of the clients signed up to our family Literary and Theatrical Agency. I was her plaything, a shrimp for her net, to go by her glued-on ogle. I wriggled out of it by performing a sort of spiritual striptease. Her glisteningly cherry lips went O-shaped when I claimed my nightlife was heaps more thrilling than hers. I skated over the *faux pas* saying that the unending stream of pitiless drivers had put the idea into my head! Her curiosity aroused, I confided in her an account of my recurrent nightmare. This is how I have written about it since:

The murky light, it beckoned.

Round and round and round I went, giddily. Sinking down, down, down the spiral stairwell. Inexorably. Stark iron balustrades, black. Stone stairs, gray. The pit awaits. Vertigo, Dread. Down, down, down. I want to

stop, I'm suffocating. I can't stop; a prisoner, I plunge on, and on. A thick and cloudy arc of all-enveloping depression focuses on a tight gray point of pain at the pit of my stomach; the pit I dreaded had become a part of me. But there was another pit, a worse pit below, and, ultimate dread, it would get me. Please, please stop.

I am sucked down...

Dawn was simply too, TOO like birth, Marlene supposed, but so what? Wasn't I making simply TOO MUCH of a meal out of it? Her accent savoured more of ham than upper crust, and her sugary voice was sour at the edges, but her airy reaction had hit the nail on the head. My head it sounded like. An aching groan fetched up from deep within me. I couldn't help it. An allegory of my birth, Marlene had implied. Of course! A floodgate of tears gaped wide, and I slumped down onto the kerb, with sobs coming in wracking bursts. Marlene's forefinger, ever at the quiver to beckon men, wagged. The vigour, but not the direction of the gesture, was characteristic. TOO amateurish, my howling, I was upbraided. With an eye on the main road, she made the onion seller's day, sniffing to him that the din was like a film-set wind-and-rain machine that had jammed at full force. Gallic drivers speeded by, unmoved by the plight of the two distraught pedestrians. We never did get to cross that road.

Time and again, I had had that nightmare. I would wake up, birth-cries death-rattling in my throat, sweating, and feeling I'd do anything for a laugh. After that revelation at the zebra crossing, it did not recur. There was no need. I now had the explanation of it.

Too often, I have not had the courage of my dreams or reveries. Dreaming, meditating, and sex, I was beyond those therapies when the going got stormy. At such times, I slept like a log. Then, day-time visions burned in my mind. In one, I saw my family dance the deadly fandango, scattering my ashes in their wake. It unfolded before my eyes, but I had known it of old. This also I knew before: No matter you crush underfoot the ashes of a Phoenix, it can rise from the dust. He who flies at the last, laughs longest.

*James J. Blotnitz
20th September 2010*

*Letter from Carl Waite to Paul Winterbottom
20th March 2011*

(NB. Carl and Paul are school friends of James Blotnitz. Harvey Dill is a film Producer)

'Dear Paul,

With Harvey Dill's permission, prior to his selling the film rights of James's account of the denouement of James's family, and his theatrical, life,

I am sending you herewith the final draft of my biography of James, as promised.

The story in these pages is accurate, as far as I can tell, save as regards some fanciful details. Extracts of relevant documents appear in the appendix. I have almost completed my research but any further comments of yours as to the facts would be invaluable. Thank you for sending me the statement of the costs of converting the Club out-house and for the bills from theatrical set designers.

Where possible, I have kept to James's own words and descriptions. I kept my eye on that ball though I was torn between loyalty to the objective truth and fidelity to the written word. The book is largely as James wrote it, taken from the papers that I found as his executor. He wrote in the third person but you will see just how thin is his way of disguising his own story, so I use his name throughout.

James had illusions about himself and his family but I have tried to get at the essential truth of what went on - both in his own mind as well as the outside world. At the end of his time at the Theatrical Agency, he represented seven star actors. I have put in some of the anecdotes James told me about his professional life but his public persona and his private preoccupations are often poles apart. Perhaps James would have written more about his life at the Agency if he had been spared so untimely and tragic an end?

I will always remember the last words James ever spoke to me:

‘With my day done, the only action I truly enjoyed was that recollected in tranquillity. The best movies were in my own head. I always had the sensation that the underlying reality of the world in which I lived - the physical world, that is - simmering below the surface, would explode...’

“**RUN ‘IM DOWN!**” Louisa roared. Her knuckles clutched whitely at the car arm-rest.

The double-headlamps flashed over Boot Hill, County York. Fog enshrouded. Trapped in the beam: Jake Randall! The hatchet-faced, cowboy actor. Fear in his eyes. Shaking! His back was to a wall. No way out! The car - no, the stagecoach! - was coming at him. Fast. Very fast! Split-seconds to go. He was going for his gun. Too late! POW! A searing shriek! Planks shattering, bones splintering, flesh spattering. R.I.P. J. Randall! James Blotnitz had braved Red Indians (imaginary) and fog (real) for his parents and now, this! An ape-like barring of his teeth and an evil glow in his eyes fleetingly etched his sadistic spasm on his face. No one, save for a shocked pedestrian who thought his hour had come, saw James's expression. Lucky!

The jaywalker escaped by a whisker. The customised Rolls Royce, two feet longer than a conveyor-belt Rolls - which was how Louisa styled the average model - skewed round, and bowled on its way. "You missed!" she hissed at the chauffeur, who had played his part, before relapsing into her customary hauteur. Jake was nowhere near them at the time. Why, James wondered idly, was he afflicted by these violent, mental B-movies?

James Julian Blotnitz, aged thirteen, only son of the personages occupying the leather seats at the back of the Rolls, was in front with the chauffeur. To Louisa and Tommy, with their scripts and their business letters and their machinations, their son's presence was not as useful as his absence. He was cordoned off in front. It felt to James as if he was in the pay of Wells Fargo, riding shotgun on a stagecoach, on guard duty, with the precious, if unknown, cargo of parents to protect. His head was in a whirl. The next instant, his own predicament overwhelmed him. He would appeal to Mama. But off-loading him at boarding school was her doing! Did she realise the enormity of it? Heresy! To question the leader! It was a spiritual crime!

Rich little poor James. Superficial appearances as to worldly advantage were on his side. The illusion did not permeate as far as his skin. As he was about to discover at school, even his looks were against him. James resembled nothing so much as a watered down Hun. Always tall for his age, his posture sagged as if his spine had been hung out on a wire frame unequal to the rigours of a British wind. He had runny, pale blue eyes. They seemed veiled in a mist, through which they could pierce - usually when no one was looking. Mousy strands of hair bunched in clumps like hastily stacked straw. At Rudyers School, it became settled in his mind that he was plug-ugly. One boy after another would assure him on the point. Meanwhile...

The car was power! Calculated to dazzle, that car, and it did. A car in Mama's image! Painted in bottle-green, it could undergo chameleon-like changes according to differing light conditions. Above the protuberant headlights: the broad, aerodynamical wings. It needed but a button-touch to soar Upwards. Not a car into which to crash with impunity. Such a mistake had been made, once. The music the offending driver had to face! His Mini, compressed like a concertina, wailed like bagpipes. The cacophony was rounded off by Mama's hoot of derision. It made James feel quite at home. It was what he was used to.

James had been told he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Into that orifice had gone the entire set of cutlery - if one believed Mama. Many a year would pass before he realised she had gotten things slightly askew. The orifice in question was his ear. Mama was the first to teach him that his parents were at the pinnacle of society. Celebrated writers, famous actors like Jake Randall, all but worshipped at the shrine of James's Mama and Papa. In their persons were united only the noblest qualities. Little beyond counted. The rock on which was founded their lives, if laid bare, amounted to cut-throat commercial acumen capped by a gloss of culture; it was a leitmotif fluted so insidiously in their fanfare that no one, and certainly

not their son, heard it for what it was. As heir apparent of their business, a role contingent on parental demise and so all but inconceivable, he was destined to learn the ropes on principle: The ‘Softly softly catchee monkey’ principle.

Tommy went along with Louisa’s monkey business. He was consoled by thinking about what ropes, on principle, can do to necks! His own father, Friedrich, had said of James as a baby that he was the Blotnitz who would really make the grade. Well, Tommy was top dog now, and would stay so! Brought up by a string of governesses, James had been so little used as a child to seeing his father that he inquired of one of this floating populace charged with his early upbringing “Who is the big, fat stranger in the house?” She took some time to work out that the man allegedly haunting the place was her employer. James’s words, when reported, resulted in his being dressed up, complete with little bow tie, for presentation to Tommy who, busy with work, glanced up before barking, “*Ach!* Take it out!” There could be no going back. James’s curiosity was whetted.

Tommy was never going to be one for heart-to-heart chats with his son, or anyone else. When subjects, and there were many, not of interest to him were being discussed, he said nix, his mind lost to an unknown elsewhere. But, suddenly, the sun could come out from the clouds. Tommy lit up when Louisa praised him to the skies, betraying the fact that, any time, he might take people unawares by listening to what was going on around him. “*Ja, mein poppet! Ve sack the chauffeur?*” was his knee-jerk to the jay-walker escapade. “...About Clause Five?” Tommy continued in the same breath. The head of this family was one lion that took like a lamb what was said and done by his materfamilias.

The couple were considering the warning from their lawyer that a proposed contract for a film, provisionally entitled ‘*Shooting Stars*’, to be based on an *exposé* of the theatrical metier by Lord Middlemass, a client of theirs, laid them open to actions for libel. They had offered a leading role in the film to Jake Randall in the belief that the drawing power of his name would set the ball rolling in that it would excite the interest of Producers. It had been a premature move but, luckily, Jake was disinclined to fly this kite. He played hard to get. His response to Louisa’s cable ‘How about Shooting Stars?’ had just arrived in telegraphic form ‘Shoot any damn star you like!’ “We can make a start with HIM! Actors need to be taught a lesson!” Louisa growled. Music to James’s ears. “*Ja, Ja, poppet mein, against ze wall ve vill line all our artistes; About zis Clause...?*”

And then we’ll shoot ‘em down like dogs! but why did Papa mix business with pleasure, James thought? ***And surely his accent is put on? Honest In’jun, it looks as if he is going out of his way to sound like an Austrian. Blimey, why does he do it?***

‘Oh-my-Papa!’ the nickname by which James thought of his father, James identified with schmaltzy, heart-warming, *mittel*-European accents, operatically sung on the LP forever on the gramophone at home. The Papa

being warbled of, he was ‘...So very wonderful.’ So much James had read in theatrical memoirs describing his parents. The record, the books selected for him, the occasional sycophantic client to whom he was presented, his Papa and, above all, Mama, all sang to him in their various ways this Blotnitz hymn.

The journey up to Rudyers passed pleasantly enough if only for the chauffeur. All too soon... In the distance, swirled about by fog, was the silhouette of a granite building. It loomed out of the fog, ever closer, more imposing, with battlements, like an illustration for a Grimm’s fairy tale by an illustrator with an aversion to children. James fancied he could pick out a dank dungeon and, at the end of it, the fire, effective only for roasting juniors. The image owed much to ‘*Tom Brown’s Schooldays*’, a copy of which James’s elder sister, Tiffany, had lent him to cheer him on his way. First impressions about his sister were destined to grow on James.

Rooted at parental feet, gazing up, lost in admiration, James did not spot the clay in front of his nose. But then James lived in his own world.

Life in the Blotnitz establishment went on, outwardly almost unchanging, year in, year out, with hardly a problem. Here was a family united, and at peace. And always the expensive hotels. At restaurants: the best food, the best service, and, if it was not of the best, all hell would be loosed off at the head of the unfortunate manager - he always got brought in, at an early stage. It was a belief system above all else, that family, a ship fuelled by faith. The family was right, every time. It was the Moonies, or the Krishnas. Those who dissented were cast into outer darkness. Louisa, her iron grip velvet-encased and with her tongue, forked and silvery. She surmounted all obstacles. None could get the better of the united Blotnitz couple. Better to give in, and straight away, by anticipating their demands. But, for those few souls who dared to take on the combined might of husband and wife, Louisa was ready with her doll: It was dressed up in an item – a hanky, or anything originally owned by the said non-person. Louisa stuck pins in it, her face vicious. Condemnation was not just a private ritual. The thunderbolts that were flung at those, who yesterday were ‘lifelong friends’, but who today had offended against the cannon! Frightening for that ire to strike at one! Their Firm was an encampment. Enemies were everywhere and their handmaidens: Spies! Root them out! Castigate them! Obliterate them from living memory. History could be rewritten in the interests of preserving this greater truth.

Who would have guessed at any of this when meeting that suave, charming, debonair couple, Louisa and Tommy Blotnitz? Ask their victims...

The Blotnitz family was assembled. They sat around the table in the refulgent glory of Ye Summer House, now in the august plumage of its year. And so it would be, throughout July, August and September. That Summer House was

semi-circular in shape, constructed of pinewood, with a flat, pitch-topped roof. It was a fact often overlooked that, from mere commonplace materials, 'Mayfairville', as Louisa had re-named their home, was builded.

Outside the Summer House, Nature was arranged according to the dictates of Louisa, but inside, it seemed to James, the anarchic essence of Nature was more insistent. On a circular pinewood table stood a bowl in which the preternaturally darting movements of the goldfish were magnified by their reflection in an antique silver tea set. Spinach-like, plastic curlicues spiraling gently in the water heightened the contrast of exuberant aquatic life with lifeless artifact. The glass doors on rails were rolled back leaving them all, Tiffany observed, exposed to the greenery, 'from where midges fluttered'. The *bête noire*, a feral mouse she had named 'Pretty Polenta', hinting at Tommy's unfavourite food, though supposedly at bay had a functioning digestive tract of which the floor, allegedly of carrara marble, bore evidence. The mouse droppings were proof against daily scouring. Tiny and grub-coloured, they shone dully in the afternoon sun. Around the family, like incense at church, wafted a current of lilac air-freshener. At the slightest breeze, it lost the battle against fresher air. Louisa might be the overseer of all... but dwarfing the telephone in an alcove whose design called to mind the window-frame of a Moorish seraglio was her 'Orwellian aspidistra'. This plant flaunted leaves on which were visible the path and the nibbling of a slug: Its vast size, and slithering progress, and gargantuan bites all vindicated Louisa's belief that the alcove backdrop, a distorting glass exhibiting this many-faceted insect, added a dimension to the perspective.

Separated by a good acre from the Summer House, was the homestead. It gained much in the Estate Agency blurb, which was on hand as a puff to impress visitors. In fact the house was a genuinely imposing, detached, Edwardian mansion. It was of a piece with the exalted neighbourhood but, even so, it was clearly distinguishable from nearby houses. Barbed wire bristled on the roof, bars fortified the windows; the walls outside were high, and of cement rather than trelliswork, boasting spikes, if small and blunt. When all this was being ordered, one salesman gasped to Tommy "Sir, will you be needing men with machine guns?" For her part, there was no one better than Louisa to tart up Fort Knox. She commissioned specially-designed barbed wire patterned into matching sprigs of flowers. Tommy gave his assent to the purchase of the house but if his stated reasons for this did not add up, it at least could be said of them that they headed off any untoward inference that he had been orchestrated into playing second fiddle to his wife. The house was close to the heart of Mayfair or, in other words, to the office, by a direct and quick journey, being one that any crow could fly, said our Tommy. The doubts he harboured about traffic-congestion in this 'leafy' locale had been assuaged by the strategically positioned lamppost just outside. Off-putting to thieves on the lurk, he said. It was hard to imagine a less likely soldier: A wartime trench with this Tommy in it would make 'No Mans Land' seem the safer option - but the title would be more suitable for the trench. He was one naturalised Englishman living in his own fairytale castle; and the higher up in the clouds it was, the safer he felt from the rest of England.

A photograph taken later that afternoon by cousin Igor shows a seemingly united family. They looked tearful at the happy intelligence they were toasting. It encapsulated what James wanted to believe, capturing in stasis relationships that were unchanged over time. Duly framed, it took pride of place on his bedroom mantelpiece alongside those of schooldays. His parents were unwittingly acting out his fantasy about them. He was an observer of the past he ought to have had. Every day, it was re-enacted for James in the magical hall of mirrors that was his own mind. He dared not upset the apple cart of his family life. What if his parents fell short of his image?

Louisa, Tommy and Tiffany sat on slim, blue floral cushions on bamboo chairs around the table. The butler was marshaled to bring on the food the moment Louisa rang. James, by special dispensation, sat in a deck chair. This, he liked to do. More convenient, said Louisa, for his long legs. Tommy, slightly taller, and much fatter, had no such requirement. He explained this away by saying that he forsook the privilege of seating in greater ease for a strategic advantage in being close to the food. This was a bolt he flung at the head of the family, namely Louisa, with such apparent anger that people unversed in the arcane ways of the Blotnitzs might think he was enraged with hangers-on who were unable to refrain from digging their greedy fingers into his rightful portion. One often knew when Tommy was cross but less often did one know exactly why.

James longed to be almost anywhere else, which was odd seeing as it was all so bloody marvellous there. He ran his fingers nervously through his long hair, coiling stray wisps into knots. No one noticed, he thought. Louisa said nothing. Something had happened to her son while he was a schoolboy at Rudyers but, whatever it was, it was not relevant to business. It was hard for others to gauge his thoughts but she knew there was no-one better than herself to understand him. James gave the impression that, below the surface, some volcanic strata simmered. Odd, in that he was so polite and mild-mannered. No doubt school had helped make a tough guy of him but Louisa took the credit for his being a typical Blotnitz with all the fire-power, or rather 'firework-power', implied. If, in the mix, he had also the look of an otherworldly don in the making, she saw through that camouflage. Her son was a Director of Thomas Blotnitz, let the world take note! He might be got up in the uniform of fashion, wearing orange denim flared jeans, a flower shirt, and a red kipper tie as a prayer mat to an ivory medallion of a Buddha strung round his neck, but he was where he was supposed to be, at twenty-one. Baby Bear was with Mummy Bear, Teddy Bear; and the Black Sheep...

"How nice the lawn is looking today, Mother!" Tiffany was saying.

"Lawn? I see no 'lawn'? A lawn is a thing grazed on by the common herd. The 'lawn' here, my dear, is something else...!" sniffed Louisa.

"Whoops! How twee our rolling acres of emerald look!"

Saying this, Tiffany genuflected.

Lawn! In one of the pastoral fits to which Louisa was prone, those few blades of grass, aloft on the wings of the family upward social mobility, became 'A meadow' then, with the proprietor straddling ever wider bounds than her property, 'The grounds'. Once even, in an alcoholic haze, they were transformed into 'My greensward!'

"Ah, nectar!" Louisa breathed, quaffing Arcadian scents. "...*Quel bliss!*" The embers of Louisa's hopes for her daughter had never turned quite to ashes. They smouldered; and her cherished image of a Tiffany transfigured as if by miracle sharpened daily her sense of disillusion.

"...What are those luscious scents? Have our garden gnomes been at the *Eau Sauvage* again?" Tiffany essayed nostril-dilation à la Louisa. Tiffany's nose, if wrinkled, spelt disgust; realising this a fraction late, she hoisted the dilation up a notch to her eye-level. The wide-eyed expression now mirrored there infused a look of surprised enthusiasm into her sniff, "...It mixes so well with their male musk!"

In the microscopic raise of eyebrows, in the finest shade of a nuance, Louisa could sum up a situation, plumb psychological depths, grasp a whole picture, and react instantly. And here was a girl who, in pig-ignorant smugness - it was written all over her face - believed she had up her sleeve information that enabled her to impress her parents.

It beggared belief. James caught his breath. This was a heavy scene. To a guy or chick plugged into the Beatles, all one needed was love, sure thing but Tiffany intended to ride her hobbyhorse. It spelt Trouble. Advertised in her creamy self-confidence and clothes were warning placards of 'Tiffany in love again'. If even James saw, what did Mama think? Normally, Tiffany strode about, a slovenly tomboy, her mousy hair sticking out, brown calf-like eyes distracted, a pretty waif one day, a tart, the next. 'Will anyone take me home?' was the hope eternally on the tip of her tongue. Clothes did not make this woman but she cut her cloth according to her mood. Out today were T-shirt and jeans, fishnet stockings and frou-frou, and In? A classic, black, pleated skirt! An Omo-white silk blouse rescued from oversimplicity by lacework! Hardly a trace or a trail of dried gravy visible to the undiscerning eye!

This attire featured to disadvantage a chunky brooch of floral design, each petal bisected by onyx veins: a confection surmounted by three glittering bubbles, no doubt diamonds. Louisa did not deign to pass comment on the *bijou* in Tiffany's hearing but had branded it 'a slut's bauble' which, on Tiffany, it was. Vulgar it might be, but that did not make Tiffany look like a slut to anyone who did not know what Louisa always said about her daughter. Tiffany should have seen how her parents would react to the flashy jewelry. It heightened a tension already exacerbated by the fact that their cousin, Igor, was expected to tea. It was imperative today that all was in its appointed place, gnomes, trees, people, with La Louisa and Le Tommy as the twin suns illuminating their world, the beacons to cast their reflected glory on humanity.

A quarter of which, humanity being defined as whoever was in the presence the Blotnitz family at the time, was comprised of ‘brazen *soubrettes*, a dime being too much for a dozen’, to go by Louisa’s view of her daughter and Louisa’s methods of calculation.

James felt his armpits moistening, and he passed his wrist across his forehead to wipe off the perspiration. It was hot today. How come his family looked so cool, though? In the Summer House, with the hot sun shining, it was cool? ***Say man, cool it! Humming ‘sixties pop songs under his breath! How could he do this humming thing, in this place, and with these people?***

“Was that a snatch of bird-song I heard?” Tiffany, eyebrows arched, asked. A pang of embarrassment shot through James. He had been tootling in a *voce* not so *sotto* as he supposed.

Louisa tactfully changed the subject.

“An outstanding singer, grand-mama von Blotnitz. Such taste! And such a dancer! She would dance ‘The Blue Danube’ only with Strauss himself.”

The branches of the family tree, Louisa was hinting, might be a-dangle with performers and musicians but it was best to turn a blind eye to the humming of sprigs. Louisa, that pillar of the family reputation, put it about that her own descent was from Charlemagne. As to this, no scrap of evidence ever emerged save perhaps for their shared imperial airs.

Tommy’s face lit up, enraptured by the beauty of nature. “*Ja! Ze humming-birds in our trees, was a fashionable repertoire they haf!*”

Why DOES Papa speak like that at home? What part is he playing, and why? What IS the mystery, always? James thought.

A line of folded skin - less than a furrow, more than a pucker - was transiently etched on Tommy’s dome forehead. This grim ace, into the creation of which years of rehearsal had gone, was not to be lightly mocked. That thin line engraved on flesh was tantamount to a warning ‘This Genius is Watching You’. Tommy’s mock-professorial mien imbued him with a gravitas whose spuriousness was often lost on the people pierced into by the scimitar-slits of dark eyes gleaming under his silver brush of eyebrows. He had the aura of a Tartar Chieftain, impelling listeners - or, at any rate, the simpler outsiders - to take to heart his pronouncements, gibberish though they might be. To most people not in his profession, and whom he therefore avoided, he would cut an eccentric figure, perhaps of a half-mad, if ferocious, academic, elevated by the exercise of his natural charm to great power in some corrupt Eastern *bloc* backwater, an unfamiliar soft living turning him gross. That was when he wore a suit. Today, he sported a baseball cap. By this, he once implied that he was a jack-the-lad, a sportsman. His idea of gentle exercise was to roll his own cigarettes though, on medical advice, he had given all this up, along with his post-exertion relaxation of chain smoking

them. His headgear, nowadays worn at jaunty angle, had been elevated to an aping of the style of a Hollywood mogul. The silk, paisley cravat tucked behind the gold tiepin, encrusted with rubies, sapphires and emeralds, and a matching cufflinks-with-shirt set, rounded off the statement Louisa pinned in clothes on her husband that his, and of course her, place in the scheme of life glowed above merest followers of fashion.

Charlemagne himself was not spared in Tiffany's debunking of any Blotnitz.

"Hermann von Blotnitz fell in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 but was on the winning side, wasn't he? When his mates were safely dug in, at the siege of Paris? Bit odd, isn't it?" Tiffany asked, the lack of quizzical inflexion in her tone too transparently designed to deflect suspicion that she was taking the mickey.

"Yes, it is true, Tiffany, that Hermann deserted his post in the commissariat. His plea at the Court Marshall, allegedly - and I say allegedly, please note - was 'I have the heart of a patriot, but the stomach for it? Never! It is army rations that revolt..!'" Louisa began. She could not stop Tommy from taking up the tale:

"He vas inspiration to gourmets, vas Hermann! He vent on to say '*...Ze Schwarzwald cake! Zat Rum Baba! Ach!*' *Und* zat prompted *ze obiter dicta* from *der Commandant*: '*Sahne ist für die Franzosen und die von Blotnitzs. Wir brauchen Eisen..!*'"

"That phrase means, 'Cream is for the Frenchies and the von Blotnitz family. Iron is for us!'" said Louisa brightly

"I suppose it did afford the famished Parisians, down to scoffing their domestic pets, some scraps of amusement?" James asked

"Hermann's last words about his Commandant before he was shot as a deserter were - allegedly, I mean, of course - 'The hound! That PIGGG! *Ach!*' Tiffany sniggered.

Louisa's silks rustled, her hard jaw quivered, almost imperceptibly. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again!' Louisa had taught Tiffany but, with Tiffany, every pigeon came home to roost. Then she'd kill it! Two birds, more, one stone, no trouble. Pigeon or peacock, all turned to gristle in her gullet. Keeping the peace, and the flag flying, simultaneously, was beyond even Louisa.

"Hermann's apocryphal words, no doubt, haunted him beyond his defaced tombstone - but I fail to see why you treat Igor as so reliable a source? I did not know you two have been in touch?"

The gleam in Louisa's glacial blue eyes did not penetrate Tiffany.

“Hermann probably just called his Commandant a ‘*Schweinhund!*’ James rationalised.

Tiffany gave James a mock ‘*Sieg Heil!*’ Nazi salute. She got as far as “Seek heilp...!”

“*Nein! Nein! Nein...!*” Tommy expostulated, his deep, sugarplum voice sour, the cream acid.

Louisa got her word in quickly, “Alright, Tiffany, we do know what you think about Friedrich...!”

Dolling up that other skeleton in the family cupboard, Grandpapa Frederick Hohenzollern Blotnitz, a toady who officially applied to re-name his country house, ‘Hitleria’, was no easy task. That request had been given the Thumbs Down. In a rare instance of irony to emanate from the Reich, the official letter had read: ‘We must encourage martial virtues. Call it ‘Luger-Ella’ or ‘Big Bertha’. Like the guns!’ Frederick named his son ‘Adolf’ over a decade before Hitler rose to power. Adolf Blotnitz turned out bad by his father’s lights, making a bee-line for England when war loomed. The last time they spoke to each other was the day Adolf changed his name to Tommy, a nickname of British soldiers, to show solidarity with his adoptive country.

“Say what you like, Tiffany, Grandpapa at least did stick to his own colours!” James muttered.

Tiffany had James over a barrel now. “What would Hermann The Deserter say if he could only hear you?” she whooped.

“Boo!” James retorted, “...Even as a ghost, he’d know how to behave!” Then, finally taking Louisa’s hint to get off the vexed subject, he gushed: “Mama, why don’t we buy some more trees? We have space for more than two. Plenty of space, in fact!”

“Do you mean *Buy* trees?” asked Tiffany, scenting fresh conquest. “...*Two* trees, did you say?”

Division and subtraction might be lost to Louisa’s arts but multiplication and addition flourished as never before. When each of the pair of not-exactly-trees in the garden was a not-exactly-seedling, it was baptised after its donor then imbedded in sod with high ceremonial, and there, ever after, did it shimmer. A chimera of stardust! The grander the star’s Name, the sweeter the scent. No ‘Sean Connery’ yet sent forth latticework of over-arching twigs but, were one planted, the whiff of it would be laden of attar of roses.

“...I can smell a Connery about to be planted!” Tiffany tittered, sweetly.

“A *CONNERNERY!*” demanded Louisa. “...Whatever do you mean, child?”

Beneath the flow of Louisa’s rich, throaty voice, there were stakes with jagged points. Granite-featured, jewel-encrusted, the melody in her voice had a Wagnerian motif. She had an aura of inviolability. Buddha on the warpath.

James saw the signs. It was no wonder Louisa had hated Tiffany from the beginning.

Tiffany had been in hot water since the word ‘Go!’ She had never been a toddler to send to bed early when naughty. A stake thrust into the entrails of the changeling tot would have been more like it. Dandled by Mama, and crooned at by Papa with a lullaby whose drift the tot surely could not fathom, “*Du siehst aus wie ein **STÜCK** von Nichts mit grossen Augen!*” (You look like a **LUMP**, with big eyes!), her **HOW-OW-OW-L**-ing still went on unsoothed. Food was a craving from the moment she was deprived of Mother’s milk. She shot from rotund to globular with not a backward glance at bloated. She gorged herself in an Olympian manner, her cheeks in rapid succession swelling out to the concave, and back into a convex. To make light of her offspring’s table manners to socialite associates, so the story went, Louisa once remarked regally ‘If Tiffany’s jaws were piston rods, the train to whose wheels they’d be coupled would be an Express!’ A half-chewed goblet of spud jetting from between her gap-teeth, Tiffany, feeling herself the object of interest, let off steam upon her sudden thought, “Cor! What colour is your hair, really, Mum?” Louisa had spluttered “Green, dear! **GREEN!**” The effect of this sarcasm was analogous to a Guards’ Whistle on a standing locomotive. A rumble there came from out of the belly and a hissing of escaping flatulence. Tiffany was off again. She had never stopped.

Tiffany had taken the heat off James. He suddenly felt for her. Twenty-five years of age and still she had no idea of how to pander to Mama and Papa. The way she was headed, she would find herself banished for good and all. She would hate that. She believed in her parents, and their love for her. Why did she not cut her losses and stay with her peer group?

“You know, Tiffany, a soldier often has more in common with the enemy soldier facing him across the trenches than with his own Commander - as Hermann von Blotnitz might have thought. Why bury personal empathies in the name of the greater cause for which you fight?”

“Eh? Come again?” said Tiffany, for once speaking on behalf of her parents.

James could scarcely be more explicit given the circumstances. If Tiffany believed that her parents cared about her, that was now her look-out.

Eamonn, retained as the family chauffeur, butler, and foil generally, wheezed discreetly at the entrance to the Summer House. His wrinkles,

overlaid by actor's grease paint, and his wing-collar, gained less of beauty than period authenticity in the brilliant sun. James had a fleeting impression that Eamonn was avoiding his eye. This was surprising in that James had taken Eamonn under his wing. Eamonn had stress-related problems. James had introduced him to the Massage Parlour owned by the divine Scarlett - so sexy, so perfectly proportioned. James liked his woman tall, and blonde, and voluptuous. 'She-devil' was the fitter way to describe her. Had anything unsavoury happened with Eamonn? Impossible! James knew about the stories but Scarlett was a client; Lord Middlemass, who knew her well, spoke highly of her establishment.

Scarlette had been James's first lust-object. *What better setting for those curves of Scarlett than the plush of the office Casting Couch?* James thought. *YEAH!* She had sat on that vast sofa piled high with velvet cushions, naked. James had ogled those hourglass curves. True, he had only a sidelong view. But, the lines of that haunch... *Those delicious hips, that gently swelling flesh* sculpted in the contours of his desire. *That thigh!* The hip bone in perfected slanting, it had a niche ready made in his psyche. So similar yet so different from that of a man, that thigh was a vision to glut his eyes and then drown in the sensational. She had sat there, tantalising. She was not an unconscious instrument of torture - *no, she did it deliberately, exultantly.* To reach out to the sleek sweep of those silken demi-globes... *to the buttocks rounding off that lovely figure*, to paw the half-melon breasts pendulating so ripely above, inviting, begging, *and then...* It had been all over in gasps. There had been just the two of them in James's study at school: James, and the pin-up photograph.

Had a lunatic had taken up bedspace in his mind, James had wondered? A lunatic made normal by the fact that everybody had one of them? Individual women were all very well in their way providing as they did the pretext for the real thing. This had happened in his loins, and Scarlett never knew. Where was the poetry of masturbation, the song of the onanist, James had asked himself? Then he reflected, what was the point of meeting her outside a boudoir or harem? Did he want her as a client? Meeting her in an office called for social intercourse not that more real intercourse. Did he really wish to join the family Agency and come up so starkly against the reality? James, even now that he was older and wiser, would be glad to chat with Scarlett under certain circumstances. Ideally, she would be manacled, and in a dungeon. James would not be manacled. But in the dungeon. Just the two of them. Together. And, after they had talked, he would experiment...

"Miss Igor will be here soon, Eamonn. Go, fetch the tea-things. And then please lay them out on the far side of the table from Mr Blotnitz." commanded Louisa.

'Igor' was a nickname. Her full name was Miss Sigorney von Blotnitz. To write to Igor inviting her to come today, being the hundredth anniversary of the death of Hermann von Blotnitz, Louisa averred that a double-brandy more indispensable than ink.

Eamonn tottered down the path of pink marble to The Mansion. James laboured to get back to base.

“A unique plant, a ‘Sean Connery’, a sort of orchid isn’t it, but doesn’t one pronounce ‘Sean’ as ‘*Schön*’, which is German for ‘beautiful’...?” James said.

Tiffany, not one to tolerate having her effects ruined, however ruinous they were in the first place, swooped. “I suppose you’ll be telling us next that ‘Connery’ is pronounced as in ‘*Connerie*’, which is French for ‘imbecile-like’!”

James, wrong-footed, did his best. “Where are you saying we put this so-called Connery - where d’you say there’s space for it? - what am I saying? - there is masses of space for it - how about the shrubbery?”

“*Shrubbery?*” smirked Tiffany, anticipating in a minor key the fortissimo blast to come from Louisa...

“What was that he said? A ‘SSSSHRUBBERY!’ did he say?”

A Ssshubbery! Into what mire would James blunder next? That platoon of daffodils, drawn up for inspection? Shrubs? With stalks at the ram-rod, in serried ranks, their net effect was best gauged in the expressions of their guards, two luridly-painted terra-cotta gnomes. Noddy and Big Ears were bayoneting each other. Such was the excess of gore, Tommy had spoken of replanting the meadow with poppies. The wee duo was a gift from Scarlett, who was turning her rich, if somewhat seamy, experiences into memoirs. ‘To your sterling, but my efforts, for making sado-masochism tasteful to the paying public!’, her discarded inscription read. It was in keeping with the garden. ‘KEEP OFF GRASS!’ ordained a Tablet, a threat, hewn in stone, backed up by the adjacent wood-cut that depicted guard-dog’s jaws chomping on an erring human toe. Of that trespasser’s remains, no further trace survived. The arthritic family terrier had been renamed ‘Fang’ by James who, in this world of Bubble Reputation, took pleasure in doing his bit in the line of homestead protection. She was the ‘*Canem*’ whose wobbly molar underpinned the warning to ‘*Cave*’ on the towering, iron gateway to the garden. Some shrubbery!

James had become adept at deflecting suspicion from what was going on in his head. It was a family trait. And, like many others, it did not flower in Tiffany. She was about to blurt out how she came by the brooch. Next, she would be onto the creatures she was pleased to call ‘Boyfriends’. As for the latest, Don - a sumo wrestler, was he? Louisa took evasive action.

“What DID you mean about the ‘Connery’, Tiffany dearest?” asked Louisa.

“Me, Mother? I meant nothing...!” - all big eyes and innocence.

“She meant we should plant – in our greensward – a beautiful imbecile! All actors are beautiful imbeciles. That is why I try never to watch our actors perform. To see them act might prejudice me against them!”. Tommy had managed to imply that Tiffany had not just offended against the cannon of parents, but also that against that of theatrical agents. He ended up with the exclamation “...*Tohas!*” tapping his finger on his forehead. James assumed it meant ‘brains’. It meant ‘Arse’!

“Yes, please do, for once, try and use your brain, Tiffany, and do remember our Agency is the Goose that lays our golden eggs!” said Louisa. “...*Mon Dieu!* If your brother can understand it, and everyone else, whyever can’t you?”

“But I never...!”

James eyed Tiffany, her face ruffled, her lips working. Was there something wrong in her genes? He was startled out of his reverie by a combination of an exhaust back-firing and the phone ringing. A glance at his mother, and he took the receiver. It did not do to give his family the idea he was not on the ball. James felt trepidation. The telephone was old-fashioned, solid, black; a collector’s piece. It was uncompromising as if it represented a world that had no truck with the modern ways, let alone with family illusions.

Melissa, James’s Co-Directrice at Thomas Blotnitz Ltd, was on the line. James was all ears. The sudden jerk of activity set his pulse racing, he said, cupping his hands over the mouthpiece, as an aside to his family. He was aware that he was blushing. James might well have turned the colour of beetroot if he had seen that ace grimace at him. It was a trump, in the shape of a scythe-shaped furrow. It was even more transient than usual. Tommy knew where he was, all too well. James had never seen that look of fury on his Papa’s face, and would not have recognised it if he had, nor would he have understood it if he had recognised it.

“Hullo, is that Mr. Blotnitz’s residence? ... Oh, James, hullo!... Didn’t recognise your voice. Yes, I’m fine. Would you tell Mr. Blotnitz that I’d like a word with him... Yes, I’ll wait...Oh...! ...Did you say that Mr. Blotnitz tells you to say that he is not in?... Oh well, that’s OK, tell him Melissa says she didn’t ring...!”

James reported Melissa’s words flatly, without comment, and they elicited none. The games this family played! Melissa had no idea of what really went on behind the closed doors of Mayfairville. Louisa changed the subject, asking Tommy in wintry tones what he might like for Christmas? He was framing the word ‘Hamper’ when Louisa, her eyes luminous, clapped her hands together and breathed “I’ve got it! A parrot, with a mirror for you to look in, at it!” James was too focussed on Melissa to work this out.

The exquisite Melissa; how different from Tiffany! The only point of similarity in their lives was detectable by reference to their respective CVs.

She was thousands of times more successful than Tiffany at the one job they ever had in common, measured in days. They had both worked for the family firm: Melissa for a decade; Tiffany for a week.

Melissa was delicious, efficient; and prim. So prim indeed that, at so much as a hint of indelicacy, those exquisite nostrils, that retroussé nose, flared out to the very limit of horizontal expansion. At a mere mention of the name of Scarlette, uncrowned Striptease Queen of London and Sex Goddess anywhere, that nose went positively flat; Melissa's Cupids' Bow lips pursed into straight and narrow. Thomas Blotnitz Ltd represented Scarlette only as an authoress, but Melissa poured icy water even on her literary talent. On Melissa's say-so, Scarlette's *pensées* like "I shall carry on writing as long as I can take off my clothes!" were shielded from the gawp of posterity. The purple glories of Scarlette's prose style were never to be compromised by translation, if Melissa was to have her righteous way. They were doomed by Tommy's profit motive for secretion in the most dim of corners, to smoulder ever after in porno mags of Soho. Melissa was good at monitoring the smut beyond her nose. She could itemize the sexual attractions of Scarlette in a detail so clinical as to raise up doubts about their very allure. Once, she threw finesse so far to the winds as to calculate just how many unnecessary centimetres Scarlette had between the upper reaches of her legs! It was an unconscious tribute that slender, if feminine, proportions paid to voluptuous curves.

A sudden jolt behind his rib-cage, a shuddering memory, momentarily stopped James's breath as he as he remembered the time, back at Rudyers, when Melissa had come to see him awarded his stripe, signifying promotion to Lance Corporal, in the Combined Cadet force. What a day that had been! James flushed to recall it. Tommy was to have been present as well, but he was laid up, ill, in a nearby hotel. In the circumstances, James had been glad that Tommy had not made it to the parental stand to witness what had gone on. The award of the stripe had been merely the prelude to being stripped of it, as a result of James having perpetrated some infraction of CCF discipline. The spectators were too far away from the action to gain a clear impression of what was really going on. James preferred not to think about it all now. He told himself that he had to forget his churlish thoughts about the way Melissa had made up to James's arch-enemy of the day, Orson Figgis. ***No, Melissa had not been making common cause with that bastard!*** James had merely seen Melissa out of the corner of his eye chatting with Figgis. In what was a deceptively intimate way. Laughing with Figgis, she had been. She had simply been impressed with the way Figgis bore himself, ***with his smart uniform. Probably reminded Melissa of her own father, that valiant, grizzled martinet. And what had Melissa and Figgis been laughing about? Beauty flattering the Beast? Or vice versa? No...***

Melissa was a rose, no, an orchid, ***no.... no***, No, better imagery was needed...

Those almond-shaped, green eyes slice into my... solar plexus; that light olive skin, handed down from some ancestor whose lusts were slaked

in the ... No ...those silken, blonde tresses, they would be the glory of a Norse troll... no, A Scandinavian beauty, ...would kill to have them! No...
James lounged back and, slowly, slowly, his eyes closed... and

....An outsize bluebottle launched itself from the potted aspidistra with a frenetic flapping of tiny, boned wings.

Melissa flinched.

The aspidistra seemed to straighten itself up, as if to say, 'I produced that!'

BUZZ!

-UZZ!

Buzz! Buzz! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ
BUZZ! BUZZ! Buzz! Buzz! SWOT-SWOT

'What a thing!'

Louder and louder buzzed the pest. It climbed clumsily to ceiling height and Melissa was getting up-mixed in her mind it about buzz-buzz. It! It and its Big Brother in the mirror. The pair circled the ceiling, and revolved in orbit, hovering hypnotically, round and round and round again, ogled by Melissa. In mounting consternation! Her mind! Her mind! Disorientated by.. the flittery, furry, weenie roach; a creature, an escapeeee, from agoraphobic nightmares. Be-ghosted by the menace from the beetle-kingdom, Melissa plunged into James's outstretched arms. Smothering herself in his hairy chest, she shut out of vision the encroaching-fast, bulbous-bellied, cockroach-on-wings, oozing proboscis shit-dipped, about to breed swarming young... Melissa hardly felt the fur glide off her shoulders. "JAMES! JAMES! Say it! SAY IT! SAY 'SHOO!'" A groan fetched up from James as his fingers met reef-knotted bra-straps. The life-form droned a nerve-splintering "BUZZZZZZZ!" Melissa jumped out of her skin, and James's arms, frantically clawing at air, in her effort to swat the beast.

James, in the grip of passion, hoarsely muttered, "Shall we take cover under the bed together? We'll be safe there, from, the ...INSECT!" He added, on an inspired note, "...All of them!"

"KILL IT! KILL IT NOW! KILL ALL OF THEM!"

"Now come, Melissa! That is hardly playing the game!"

"You brute! You beastie! You murderer! EEEEEK!"

"I like that! Told to kill, then told off for being a murderer!"

"ZZZZZZUB!" went the vile fly. It span into reverse. Melissa jack-knifed up and around to face Public Enemy Number One. With its

flightpath now a downward spiral, hairs at the bristle, the buzz scaling octaves to emerge from deep within its throat the whine of a dive-bombing stuka, the minuscule monster whirled and wheeled around, each revolution bringing it closer and closer. All too soon it was at Attack level. Still it came on.

ZZZZZUUBBB!

!BUZZzzZzzZzz

This was not a telephone to ignore with impunity

“Don’t answer it!” James warned. “...We’re out!”

The caller rang off. The embodied telephone ring cut out. In an all too brief, eerie silence, the fly fell like a stone into the immensities of the goldfish bowl. On Splash-down, a great scuttering in aquatic zigzags was set up by Wanda, the halibut. It was the last sound on earth Melissa expected. She keeled over in a heap.

So ended the Bluebottle’s sad flutter through life. In each phase of that life, it had suffered rejection. No lasting peace had it found, in elements of Earth, Air, or Water. It was balked of taking its chances in Fire.

“It needs only cremation to complete the cycle!” said James. “...But I won’t agree to it!”

“Mutter-Mutter-Mutter! Oh, brother! Mother, tell me, I really don’t see why you don’t like Igor? Is it because she is a cleaner in a MENTAL HOSPITAL? What else to expect from our family?” Tiffany asked, with a contemptuous look at James. “...And what time is she coming?”

“Ja, always remember, James, ze family has a Home for you to go to!”, Tommy cut in. It seemed he was only parroting Louisa’s theme song. Louisa, in a voice like a melody, finished off the thought.

“Yes darling, our precious boy, *mon petit chou*, it is all yours, remember, ...the house, ...the grounds...!”

It was Tiffany’s turn to throw James a furious look.

“Ze arse, mit ears! She comes ven?”

For Tommy to say such a thing of his own family! Blasphemy! Louisa crossed herself. Everyone knew about the young nurse who had dared tell Igor to wash up dishes. Igor had blazed back “My job is to mop floors! Yours is to sponge patient’s bottoms!” The nurse, bristling, dared to answer “And just look at your floor! Use a sponge on it, did you?” Eyes coal-black and yet glittering, Igor screeched “No! A broomstick!” and then Igor added a threat that had made her notorious “...An’ you will die within two weeks!”

Witnesses - and there were several - laughed it off. Enough to make the very bristles on Igor's chin stand on end, they said. Within the prescribed time frame, that nurse was killed outright in a motorway pile-up. The tidings prompted Igor to caw "'Ad it comin' to 'er! An' at 'er age too! *SO* unfashionable!" She basked ever afterwards in the reputation of possessing the Evil Eye even though her cherished curse, if frequently employed, never worked again.

Louisa lifted up the tea-pot, with filigree round the edges, crested with a double-eagle, an heirloom from Hermann, before her claws came out.

"Tut tut, I thought we had some tea in there. Never mind, Eamonn will bring it. You know, Tiffany, Man shall not live on one dimension alone. This is a simple rule, but one which an amazing number of people we know fail to live by. Like Igor. She is due at 4pm and won't dare be late..!"

Louisa had displayed these pearls in a matter-of-fact way, as if saying only the obvious, but her voice grew hard-edged as she warmed up.

"...For Igor to profess to an avocation as a skivvy was unspeakable enough but her winding up not even as Lady Muck, but as Miss Mops, and in the lunatic asylum to boot, takes her from being merely *déclassé* too far beyond that grubby pale of hers!"

A motion picture came into James's mind... *the silver tea-pot unfurling like a banner, troops charging behind it into battle. Against all who did not hold dear the illustrious name of the family Blotnitz!*

Tiffany was not going to go by her Mother's ruling. She had her own agenda. No way was Tiffany about to treat Igor as one more grotesque from the Blotnitz gallery.

"Well, Mother, I'm going to say it, I just think you are being snobbish!"

'What was she at? How could Tiffany say this thing? Was she going to take sides with Igor against her parents?' James shrank back in his deck-chair. Or rather, *'DECKCHAIR?'* James pronounced upon it as though it were 'A Handbag?', à la Oscar Wilde. Louisa's influence was insidious. He sprawled in it. Not the sort of thing to be recommended if one needed to maintain vigilance. He was safe for a while but he knew how prone he was to say the wrong thing if he gave way to subterranean, violent thoughts. *Relax, man, take it easy!* Thinking of sex if only for a moment would alter his stream of consciousness. It would help him calm down. His mind was still his own. Which dolly bird could he think about? *'I'll have 'em now! I'll have 'em how I want 'em! Here we go, Raquel Welsh, and you, my Brigitte Bardot, yeah, an' you too, Julie Christie, now is your big chance! Skip the tease! Strip!'* James, his mind on the job, was shafting them nicely. *So nicely*, but no one must suspect...

“Yup, we bow to your expertise, Tiffany!” James breezed. A parental storm followed, with all the stage effects of a full dress rehearsal of a major orchestral presentation at the Albert Hall. The force of this startled James, let alone Tiffany.

“And zis from an ingrate of a daughter but for whom, long ago, we could have added a ‘Yul Brynner’ to our dell!” Tommy hissed. Mustered behind him, so it seemed, he had Suppè’s ‘Night Cavalry’ dragooned in elegant formation, their bugles blowing full blast. Louisa, whipped up into fury, galloped after Tommy, her thunder crashing down on bass like an avenging knight from Prokofiev’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’:

“You **UNNATURAL** creature! **YOU’ll** be for The **HIGH** Jump! Don’t *you* **EVER** dare try and teach **your MOTHER** **anything!** You’re here to **EAT**. **NOT** talk!”.

The sight of Louisa and Tommy acting in concert as a strong and unified team was one to warm James’s heart with pride. He felt he had been prey to thoughts that were small, disloyal and unclean. He was present at a shrine of transcendent purity of power, and intellect, he was privileged to witness the performance. Here was his true compass, here was where he was supposed to be. His flesh and blood. Tiffany had it coming to her. And what had he been thinking of? James fingered his tie. He nearly sat up straight, but had enough about him, just, to see this might imply weakness, give the impression he felt he was back in a classroom. He was not of the stuff of Tiffany, perish the thought.

A spectral presence in James’s mind, hovered, accusingly. James felt his toes quiver as if an electric current had shorted in the joints. It was a pale version of the effect that The Reverend the Hon. Crispin Thynne-Fiennes, his housemaster at school, once had on him...

Louisa and Tommy had visited James at Rudyers in his third year there and, without antecedent discussion, informed him that he had been promoted to a Directorship of the family firm. James had had no thought of joining it before then. Subsequently, in supplication at a shrine of Objectivity so dispassionate as to be bloodless, he asked Crispin Thynne-Fiennes for his opinion about this parental offer. James outlined his dilemma at a lunch where, for once, he was privileged to sit opposite him. It took courage to broach any subject to that emaciated, almost incorporeal, presence, the skull forever leering beneath the aristocratic visage as if caught out smiling in the act of dispensing thunderbolts from an Assembly Hall beyond the grave. The sneering mien partook of no alteration at James’s importunity. Only in his falsetto, nasal tone did the man register the quizzical condescension of Authority surprised yet again by the perennial incapacity of youth to manage its own affairs:

***“It is plain what path you must follow. Your parents want you in. Many here would give their eyeteeth to be vouchsafed such an opportunity.*”**

When Duty calls, it is hardly for you, James Blotnitz, of all people, to wax heedless of that clarion!"

There had been nothing further to distract attention from the pudding of mushy suet scabbed over by bits of custard crust. The even tenor of feeding time resumed without knell or other supernatural sign to mark the passage of a moment momentous in significance. James's affairs, and dessert, were expunged from the communal mind with the intoning of grace, Thynne-Fiennes imparting in nuance his thanks to a Senior Almighty that another meal was at an end. No point gibbering against fate. It simply remained for James to get it all over with, then die. Tommy had taken to the theatrical world as one born to it. ***I was taken to it as well, as one born to it, but...***

"You all right, James darling? You look a little off-colour? Perhaps you need some food?" Mama asked, her tone soft after the storm, suddenly all for family harmony, the gentler theme of the Night Cavalry to the fore, horsemen strolling in the breezes of the greensward in the morning after.

How come Crispin and Papa were friends? They could not be more un-alike?

The hot sun beat down on the grass, a breeze rippling it into fresh sparkling tints. Life was going on. Beyond the glass doors. And the artifice. James gulped as if for air.

"Did you ever hear anything from my old Housemaster? And, well, I was just wondering, you know, where Papa and he met?"

"Darling, you know you were only sent to Rudyers because of our connection with him..."

A bird twittered.

"...Going tweet - on my lawn!" observed Louisa.

"Lawn!" echoed Tiffany. "...Birdsong round here is on the up and up!"

That did it. Tiffany was plumb in the centre of the parental sights. She got hit with all barrels. James deliberately closed his eyes to show Tiffany he wanted no part of it. She would take against him for all time if he showed he was so much as passively on his parent's side against her, just then. ***Lie low under the blitzkrieg, the best policy.*** James tried to concentrate on beautiful thoughts whilst feeling Tiffany's glare rake over him.

'The daffodils in the garden – but if one looks too closely at them, pins them down to an exact description, one misses their essence - Relax, man! Go with the flow! 'Flower Power', Mayfairville-style! - Is Papa fighting a rearguard action against Louisa's dominance? Does he see me as a Fifth Column within the camp? Mama's little spy? He has a touch of

the KGB about him, ready with a quip but with more secrets of his own than those he interrogates. One never knows if he is being serious. His emotions turn on a sixpence but, once his mind is made up, it can stay that way...'

Eamonn, bent under the load of food he was bringing, was coming up the lawn, footsteps clattering on the marble.

"Ah, there is dear Eamonn...!", James said dreamily. He was trembling despite even the prospect of the goodies but could not have said why. He was about to partake of a terrific spread in the heart of civilisation, at Home Sweet Home, an enviable situation?

Eamonn entered and, with a concern more appropriate in a distraught mother laying on a sickbed her ailing child, he placed with delicacy on the table beside Tommy a large silver salver. It was heaped high with mouth-watering food, reincarnated from a previous, more humble, existence in the shop window of a local Austrian delicatessen.

"SPLENDIFICO!" Louisa cried, her ice-blue eyes sparkling.

In the tradition of bemonocled, Austrian aristocracy, Eamonn clicked his heels.

Louisa was grounded in reality. "...Oh, **DO** stop now gobbling up the food with your eyes, Tommy darling, just for once! LEAVE IT ALONE! Can't you wait till Igor gets here? HONESTLY! Why is the healthiest thing about you, your appetite? Oh, well, you better have a taste then!"

Eamonn tiptoed off, a pained expression on his face.

"Then, darlink, ve can start eating, at last? But not sure I vill! Zat flaky pastry round ze mushy apple of *der* strudel, it remind me of Igor! *Nein*, though I am on diet, I vill have a leetle of it! No, I vill be strong! Ze wurst, zis I vill haf some of!" Tommy unpeeled a sausage with as much delicacy as his pudgy fingers allowed, scoffed it down, concluded he had been hard on himself, and piled into a second helping, "...*Wunderbar!* Jolly nice food served here!" then added in stage-whispered disgust, "...What there is of it!"

The telephone jangled. James sat up like a shot. The ring seemed unduly piercing, more so even than the last time. Tommy's pneumatic jaw action ceased a moment but his chins continued wobbling as if orchestrated by the ringing.

"It reminds me of the first interval bell in an Arthur Bliss concert! Only when the music stopped did I feel real music began!" Louisa sighed. "...Anything for a moment's peace! I'll take it!" She got as far as "The Blotnitz household... Really!" Her bright expression clouded over and she handed the phone to James. "...A rather peculiar person, for you!"

Tiffany looked most interested. James fought down panic. He took the call.

“Peace, man, you switched on?”

The languid, druggish tone belonged unmistakably to Buggy. James held the receiver close to his ear to muffle the sound from his family. Thank heavens they could not see Buggy. James had met him at Rudyers. Buggy was passing through, travelling light. James had been doing press-ups in a secluded patch of ground behind the gym in preparation for the fight of his life with the school arch-bully when, like a vision of freedom, he saw Buggy staring down at him through a Jesus-freak mane of hair. Or rather, James saw moccasins before his gaze travelled up frayed saffron slacks up a flower-power shirt and Afghan waistcoat - the garment’s pungency authenticated its vintage - and juju beads via a straggly, blown beard to gray eyes with dilated pupils and.... James’s gaze halted a shocked instant. Buggy did not see himself as a ‘Dedicated follower of fashion’. He had set his individual seal on his gear by wearing a ‘transfer’ bullet-hole on his forehead. This accessory, fashionably affixed to car windscreens at the time, drilled Buggy’s temples, giving him the look of the Walking Assassinated.

“...*Raight on!* I’m back to the old country, me, after one long musicfest, you name it, mojos, geetahs, a Rave Up, baby. Really, it was. Yeah, I made it out to...”

“Thank you so much for giving me a buzz. Well done, so, you made it to, er, astral places? Was it cool?”

James was only too aware of The Family hanging intent on his every word. Tiffany was already whispering “This has got to be ‘the groovy friend’.”

“Ya, Jamaica, that was the biz OK, none of this ‘Headin’ Out East’ for me, good to be holed up here awhile, I’ll say that, but those Carib guys, zowee, they sure are one bunch, liberated, all that stuff and thing they smoke, I reckon, they speak real-live truth...”

“Not NOW! We’re eating...” James blurted out to Buggy and Tiffany.

“Ees zis the man who introduced you - and us - to Trevor?” Tommy asked, rolling his eyes.

Tommy could allow himself the leeway of showing sarcasm. James knew it only too well. Trevor was a Jamaican actor who James had indeed met through Buggy and, under the impression that he was giving the Agency a helping hand, James had proudly presented him as a client. Louisa had humoured James by agreeing to take the man onto the Agency list. Trevor was untried on stage in England but not for want of being tested for it...

“Where is he ‘swinging’ from. Tell him it is all a ‘happening’ here...”

Tiffany giggled, chiming in with her father. "...Oooh, sorry James, don't look at me like that, didn't mean to offend you, no really..."

"Shut yer trap, er, no, not you, Buggy, I'm, er, ...with my folks..."

"SSSH", Louisa admonished Tiffany, which did not make things easier for James. Why couldn't the family circle carry on talking? *Why am I always wrong-footed here? Bloody hell, this is the bloody limit!* A memory rose in James's mind of Michael FitzArthur and Carl Waite, upstanding school friends he was proud to know, and who, on coming by Mayfairville, had met Tommy. Or rather, after they had rung the doorbell, they had met a letter-box flap slowly being upraised, and heard the words, muttered in a tone 'fit for a morgue', "James is not here! We expect him one day!"

A trace of animation could be heard in Buggy's tone. "What is this you're into? You talkin' real 'shit', or what, huh? Sock it to me! What you chewing then if it is so goddam interestin'? Hash? Magic mushrooms? L.S.D...?"

James felt his stomach detach from his abdomen, as if cut cleanly out if it, and fall, plummeting into a void. Was one of his secret lives, his hidey-holes, being exposed to family searchlights?

"Yup! Er. Heavy bread..., it cost pounds, shillings and pence..."

"You lulu, James! Tell yer dad to get his hair cut! We'll speak some other time, man! Have life!"

The line went dead. James replaced the receiver slowly, carefully. His face was a studied mask of diffidence. *I'm a-getting' fazed. Take it easy. Wouldn't it be fab to live like Buggy, instead of... cool it, man.*

James was spared Tiffany's post-mortem on the chat. Eamonn re-entered, exuding a senile variant of Red Alert. Igor had arrived ... Detained her in the front hall ... What now, Modom? *Phew! Close call, that!*

By a snooty inflexion of his voice, and the way he said "Really?" when requested to conduct Igor to the Summer House, Eamonn made it clear he felt that a proper class of person would not ask this of the good class of butler. Tommy was not going to have this. He immediately re-established the relationship on the correct footing by holding up a sausage skin between his thumb and forefinger with the utmost aplomb, and said in his most imperious tone:

"Please can I have a re-fill!"

Eamonn, fractionally raising his eyebrows, scuttled off to collect Igor.

"James, don't you it'd be nice, surely, your friends were more, shall we say 'theatrical' in type? It would be useful. After all, Mother always says

that your first friends, your school friends, stay with you for a lifetime.” Tiffany said.

“Well, there is old Paul. Paul Summerbottom...” James began.

Paul was now a set designer, willowing his way through the crowds at the intervals, as one born to that milieu.

“Ven are we going to see more of *him*, then?” Tommy asked.

James, his brains in a scramble, came up with “He was at the First Night of Edgar’s play. But it can hardly be expected that Paul, decking himself out, as he does, in shimmering gold lamé, and chiffon, would allow the darkness of a theatre during actual performances to hide his sartorial handiwork. He goes to intervals; only the intervals.”

Tommy showed his superiority by capping James’s story rather than point out that James’s answer did not add up. Edgar Fotherington was a brilliant comedy playwright who had been a client for years.

“Better Edgar were dead! And the longer dead, the better!” Tommy said grimly. “...Said so himself. I had a production of *A Picnic of Arsenic* lined up for the Comédie Française in Paris and I asked the Manager if he’d like Edgar to come to it. Zaire vas a long silence and he asked if Edgar was still alive? I said ‘*Ja*’! Then he told me zey have zis rule there zat no playwright can have his work performed till he has been dead for 50 years. Ze whole production had to be cancelled!”

Eamonn was returning with Igor in tow. She clomped up the pink marble path as if a carthorse newly released from her cart and glad to be following someone rather than pulling something. There was something ponderous, yet jaunty, about her gait. Louisa observed that “She reminds me of a plumber still grubby in his Sunday best at church, giving Thanks for the deficient Central heating systems of his customers. I can never help the thought that Igor is hugging a horrible secret, and gleeful all will be revealed in a cold snap!”

Tommy shot his cuff links and fingered his tiepin ready to show how much more solvent he was than Igor, or so James, nursing his bruised feelings after the interruptions to his telephone conversation, and trying not to hate Tiffany, suspected.

Clomp-CLOMP-CLOMP

“Loverly garden, yer got! Votta a pity, you must think, that it’s overlooked!”

Igor clearly surmised that Louisa would be too much the lady, and Tommy would be too punctured, to do other than ignore this gambit. She was correct though it was only eardrums that could be punctured by her bray. It

was too loud for ears attuned to a normal volume of conversation. It had an equine quality, strong, and dependable. *If only she could be broken in!* Igor was solid, almost muscular. Not a person to ignore, except deliberately, James thought. *What a family!*

James was brought up sharp. He had lived in Mayfairville for ten years and never noticed it; Igor was right. One window at the top of the next door house, detached like Mayfairville, did face onto Blotnitz grounds. *Must concentrate on the real world.* James looked anew at his dumpy *hausfrau* of a cousin, with her rhinestone rings, swarthy skin and the calculating, even mean, look in her eyes, her fleshy, somehow bastardised, version of Blotnitz features. He gave an involuntary shudder. *If Igor notices such a detail, what will she think if she looks in that distorting glass? Cripes though, even SHE gives me the idea that there is a lot more going on round these parts than meets the eye...*

The family stood up to greet Igor only after Louisa led the way. She almost leapt to her feet. No one must be given to think she was riddled with arthritis, her deformed bones, a side effect of the *hetertrixate* she took by the spoonful to combat her hideous skin complaint, akin to psoriasis. It was concealed by devices such as her long, silk gloves. Tommy was last to get to his feet and, by dint of Herculean effort, he showed himself second to none in the way he did this honour to his guest. With a huge frown that bore testimony to his determination to triumph over the onset of age and infirmity, and rise to the occasion, he grabbed hold of an imaginary handle in thin air, levering himself up slowly, taking great pains, not daring to relax his tight grip - on nothing. His pantomime was rewarded by a look from Igor that mingled pity with appreciation.

“How we have looked forward to this moment! We have a present for you, Igor dear! An auto-bio-graph-y!”

“Good gracious lady, I got one already!” Igor stated. In her mud-coloured eyes was a beadiness that stopped just short of being insulting to her hosts. Had she thought the better of commenting on their lack of intelligence? It looked like it. She met Louisa’s gaze levelly. James felt she would have done so even if Mama and she were not the same short stature.

“*Mein lieber Igor, zat I believe!*” said Tommy enthusiastically, adding under his breath to James, who felt flattered to receive a confidence from him, “...But can she read it?”

“Your accent gets more like back ‘Ome the longer you stay ‘ere!” Igor chuckled.

Igor did not seem too sensible of the privilege of her being invited once every blue moon to Mayfairville.

Tiffany gave her cousin, twenty years older but in the circumstances - James did not count - closest to her generation, a chummy smile.

“Hiya, Igor! Mother must have got you that book by Lord Middlemass. Such nice things he says about Mother and Father in it! Wowie!”

“**CHEEK AND SAUCEBOX!**” Louisa said, pleasantly. The family must at their best in front of outsiders. If eyes could talk! Tommy and she had long wondered how it was that Igor always seemed so well informed about what went on in the family and the business. Tiffany must be a traitorous mole?

On weighing up how far to show she got the message that some greetings dripped more with treacle than honey, Igor brayed “Dearest ‘Tiffy’, lovely to see you. An’ if the men’ll go now, we can gossip about them li’l darlin’s behind their back, eh? ...Us girls!” she added, as if compelled only by accident of gender to include Louisa, “...’Fraid ter say, Louisa, I ain’t got no space on me shelf for the collected works of Lord Muddlemess, all three of them. Given all of ‘em are identical copies!”

James had strong feelings himself about that autobiography. Mama had given it to him for their first and only journey up to Rudyers together, ostensibly to help him pass the time. Her deeper purposes had been to enable him to avoid chatting with the lower orders and also as a way of reminding him of the glamorous world he was temporarily leaving. In his pages, the Milord had come across as a pervert who matured early, then fell prey to arrested development. Trapped in a collapsing homosexual brothel during a typhoon in China, the man still felt reality never had stared at him so starkly as on that gray morn when, outside his Headmaster’s Study, he awaited ‘Six of the best’. In any other country, James had thought, they would be of the worst. ‘...Our achievements are but as boiled rice compared to the dim sin and crispy dick alpha and omega, as one might put it, of emotional deprivation spoon-fed to our youth..!’ In at least one boy on his first day at boarding school, his teachings ensured that an aversion to Englishmen and their canes took root. Above all, James had felt, avoid Lord Middlemass and his. The memory blended with James’s embarrassment at the Buggy debacle, Igor’s rude comments, and her gaucheness, to further tauten his nerves. He swallowed hard, words failing him.

No one had sat down after the greetings. Tiffany was in her element. At last, a sympathetic audience and a lull in conversation.

“I waited till you got here. I have an announcement...!” Tiffany’s high-pitched voice was tremulous, staccato in her excitement, reaching a peak of treble.

Everyone looked at Tiffany with differing degrees of apprehension. From her smug expression, it was a safe bet what topic was uppermost in her breast.

If Tiffany did nothing by halves, it was because she had discovered quadruples. She had made a career out of boyfriends, and failed at it. She got going as a tot. Ear drums had been at risk for a week after Mummy and Daddy refused to present her to bald star actor, Sampson Thatching. Could they not see SHE was MAD about HIM? Screech-Yowl-Howl! Did they not CARE about HIS WHOLE FUTURE? Bawl--HOW--OW--OWLL--Scream! HE would SEE PROOF of her devotion even if THEY could not. To prove the human screech-owl meant business, she sliced off her beautifully-braided pony-tail. Then came a supreme sacrifice at the altar of love. She went the final inches. Sampson would not have recognised a kindred pate. Zigzag clumps of Tiffany's hair were sprouting from a scalp streaked in caked blood. Tiffany was no dab hand with secateurs. Though this incident could never be forgotten, Tiffany still had the power to take her family's breath away.

"Nobody tells me anyzink. Who ees it zees time? Ze cast of ze Rocky Horror Show?" Tommy enquired with a show of curiosity, and politeness, as if seeking enlightenment about a contentious interpretation of a biblical text by a notorious religious sceptic. His eyes were trained on Tiffany's *bijou*. He could be forgiven for thinking that his family did not appreciate what a *maestro* they had in him.

"Don! Yes, its Don!" Tiffany squealed. "I'm going to marry Don!"

Igor was about to offer congratulations. This was big of her considering the lack of romance in her own life, which Tiffany had often pointed out. Louisa, however, was torn between very different emotions. Maternal fangs were barred. Was it Tommy's influence that made Louisa come over all Teutonic? She was rooted to the marble floor but her expression and her voice crackled with sheet lightning:

"Don! Marrying a daughter of mine! Your perfect match, Tiffany, you idiot girl, you dredged up. Don! A human being, comprising billions of interacting DNA-animated cells, a culminating brew of evolution over aeons of time, and he can land up like that... Neanderthal...! Are the Blotnitzs to come down to this?"

The force of this impelled Tommy to snarl: "Exactly! Your brain, Tiffany, has retained more than a trace of the primordial soup in which it first originated!"

Tommy turned to Igor with a look of disgust. James felt for an irreverent instant that Igor, with her peculiarly dusky complexion, stood cursed with also having been spawned in that swamp out of which the family first had crawled, a mire destined to reclaim its own.

Tiffany's face was no longer radiant. Her eyes were moistening, her voice a strangled squeak.

“But Don loves me. He ...he brought me this beautiful brooch! We’ve...we’ve fixed the date...!”

Louisa made as if to rise, her gloved hands were clenched, her eyes aflame, red at the rims, brands burning to ignite paternal fury. Tommy had to pronounce sentence:

“*Mein Gott!* You net in marriage ze most execrable specimen even in your abundant collection *und* you expect ve comes to your wedding? Did ve see you at ours?”

James saw a chance to lower the temperature.

“The Blotnitzs always erred on the ambitious side!”

“Why drag in ambition? To the family, now, Tiffany is NOTHING!” Not an ‘S’ in sight but Louisa spat out the words with the sibilance of a hissing snake.

Igor cantered into the fray, snorting “What a load a’PISS! An’ that ‘as gotta be thicker, Tiffy, than yer Mum an’ Dad’s blood! Listen, don’tja worry, Tiffy darlin’, Oi’m ‘ere for yer! Igor’ll represent the fam’ly at yer weddin’!” Igor’s nostrils were distended, about to exude steam. “...An’ Oi’ll do a darn bettar job than...!”

Igor stared past James who was thinking ‘I’m shook up! Man, this is real bad!’ and rounded on Louisa and Tommy. She saw the expressions on their faces, Tommy so sinister and Louisa incandescent, and Igor stopped in her tracks. Louisa flew at her.

“You can take Tiffany’s place, not ours. We all know, Igor dearest, that you fancy Don yourself!”

Eamonn, who had stayed to witness the proceedings, took what he saw as his cue. A thin streak of saliva having found its way to his upper lip, and in a cracked tone redolent of the unspeakable but typical cruelties he was normally glad to undertake on behalf of the family, he enquired:

“Does modam wish me to get out the pikes, the ones reserved for heads?”

It was not clear to James if, this once, Eamonn, a failed actor but who knew well the ways of the family, had misjudged the mood of the moment. The deposits by Polenta were bigger, going round *feelin’ dizzy!* and James wanted to sink into his deck-chair and *man, lets get the hell outta here..! Yikes! Must get a grip! Must preserve family harmony! But Tiffany needs support...*

“Well done, Tiffany, not sure about Don but, well, sorry to say, but I do rather like your brooch...” A sudden thought struck James. “...But

haven't I seen sprigs like that, patterned into matching flowers, somewhere before? Don must have got it specially commissioned? Corymbs, aren't they? Like the barbed bars, but jewelled, in our...windows...". James tailed off. "...Oh, well never mind! Igor, you know, you're right, I mean, I'm a man, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do so I better go now, you've a lot to talk about, ha-ha, and get a camera, and then Igor, you can take a photograph of us all! Happy families, eh? Leave a bit of food for me please, Papa, er, I mean..!"

"*Und* another Blotnitz from the stable speaks!" Tommy growled. "...*Gott in himmel!*" This reduced Tiffany to a fit of giggles, not of a piece with her tears, causing blank looks all round. Hysteria, was it?

James had rehearsed a little essay at humour in his mind. On a snap decision, he pulled this rabbit from the hat to thaw the temperature. Like a conjuror maximising effects, he withdrew from one of his pockets a sachet of sweets, called 'Nutty Pops', and flourished them in front of the paternal scimitar-slits.

"...I knew you'd think Mama short-changed you on the food. You can suck these between mouthfuls, Papa. I saved them for you."

Mid-summer at Mayfairville might have been mid-winter in Siberia.

Tommy's glare pierced James. "Taken leaf off zair zenses, haf zey all?" he snarled, "...*Nein, nein, nein! Und* snap-shotts to remind us of zis day, zat vas ve need! *Ein* brainwave from zat zohn of yours, Louisa! *Jawohl*, straight from ze *tohas!* You go for zat camera, you, *und* now. Fetch!"

James made good his escape, alarm bells ringing in his ears, mockery even in blackbird chirping.

James should have known that Papa was not one to relish a joke at his expense. ***Why was his reaction so extreme? Is anything else bugging him?***

The answer was obvious, to James: Tommy was upset about Tiffany's marriage plans. James still did not believe that his parents meant what they had said to Tiffany. It was play-acting. It would all pass. Not till that evening, when James noticed the frame of Tiffany's photograph, did he see that the afternoon charade had been for real. The frame was standing on the Bechstein piano in the drawing room, without a photograph in it, beneath the oil painting of Dieter von Blotnitz. This, by long tradition, faced the wall. Seeing such a tangible illustration of the changed state of affairs in Louisa's household, James's first thought was that he must control his thoughts, he had to concentrate on the future, on how, for instance, he would cope with his ordeal at the office tomorrow. His second thought was for Tiffany. It was going to be a body blow for her. His third thought was that she had better get used to it, if she was going to marry someone like Don.

In his bedroom, James found a camera though his eyes were swimming. As were the walls with the white flock wallpaper that Louisa had chosen and which he so hated, and the heavy, oak furniture of *fin-de-siècle* Scandinavian design, proclaimed to have been in the von Blotnitz family since its heyday in the Austria of the 1860s. In his mind, James faced another, and a tougher, issue: How on earth he had gotten into this whole situation in the first place?

CHAPTER THREE

In the ten years that James served before the mast, and indeed in the period before his servitude, nothing was said and little done to rock the good ship, Thomas Blotnitz Limited. In the years still left it to float. Come the day, come the new dawn, there would be a new lick of paint. No trouble. And, till then...

All is rosy in Theatreland, year in, year out.

The ogre would roar in his film set of an office. Client after client, mauled by the 'Mutt' would have their egos salvaged by the 'Jeff' that was the Mother Hen, his wife Louisa. Secretaries new to the job would quiver, while older hands would shrug their shoulders and accept with resignation their being fired, twice daily.

Enemies are here, there and everywhere. They lurk, even inside the facades of friends. Friends are for today. Diamonds and Enemies are forever. All is unfair in love and business. Watch here, watch there, watch out! Truth? Honesty? Justice? What price those bubbles? The only thing of brick: The facade of the Agency. Roll up, roll up, Come see the Blotnitz show. The high, the mighty, the privileged hopeful, they all come.

First Night follows First Night follows First Night. Rush, rush, rush to the theatre, five minutes to spare, arrive sweating...

Plays were a busman's holiday. They were supercharged by the considerations of Show Biz mechanics, the need to analyse performances and people, rather than ideas. Onto the next deal! Never look back, except in anger.

James had embarked on a voyage of discovery. He had to discover about the aliens on this colourful planet. He was an explorer of everyday life...

James was awoken into a nightmare. The alarm cuckoo clock had sounded off. "About Clause Three of the contract for..." it went, then Papa, showered and pomaded, tie rakishly untied, exited James's bedroom as mercurially as he entered, cuddling his dictaphone, leaving James to cope as best he could with the thunderbolts of business scattered at him first thing. A high-speed wash, suit & tie on, egg gulped down and...

"Why do I always have to wait for you?" The next time James heard that roar was an hour later when Baby Bear James had been waiting for Daddy Bear in the car for twenty minutes. Apart from his other duties, James was talked that morning into temporarily supplanting Eamonn as chauffeur.

Just like that! Without antecedent discussion! Were Eamonn's other roles due to fall like rotten plums into James's unwilling lap? Was that why Eamonn had been giving James the odd looks, of late?

Tommy Blotnitz hobbled down the grand sweep of steps that led to the garage, where the new Jaguar idled. The guard-doggie loosed off her daily fusillade of yips at Tommy.

"I live here too, you know!" Tommy barked back at Fang.

Tommy then raced back up the stairs and through the porticos flanking the entrance to Mayfairville HQ. Twenty minutes or so later, he rushed down again – at the hobble. After he was sitting in the car, James had to hoist in the lower part of his legs. Seeing him levered into his seat, strangers might pity such decrepitude. Tommy play-acted at being an old man. Why? So that he could then startle people with his hidden reserves? To point up the contrast with Louisa, who summoned up all the enthusiasm and life force of a woman in her prime to disguise the fact that she was riddled with disabilities?

"You are now Mother Hen to our artists!" Louisa had told James that morning. The car was once again leaving Mayfairville for the office without her. Some mother, some hen, some chick! "You sound like an eighteen year old girl!" Harvey Dill, a film producer who was one of Louisa's lovers in days gone by, told her. So much was wrong with Louisa: skin, bones, vital organs. How she survived for a decade after James joined the firm was a mystery even medical science explained largely by reference to her supreme will to live. A will to power was more like it. No one outside the Office knew about her indisposition. "I never apologise; I never explain! I never complain!" said Louisa, and she was as good as her word. Everyone thought of her as the power behind the scene. If anyone rang up for Louisa, James was 'rehearsed' – a frequently used word in the office – to say "Oh, just a tick, I'll just have a quick word with Louisa!" as if she was on the spot, not the other end of a telephone.

James could hardly wait to get to the office. He was in love with the virginal, the frigid, Melissa. If only she would give him the chance he did not truly want... or did he? Even if she had wanted it, to conduct a romance with his beautiful co-director under the eye of his family was fraught. The complex brainwork in which his puppy love was rooted! The shifts and delusions needed to keep burning platonic emotion! Unthinkable that the Pure One hear of moral backsliding on his part! If she showed signs of real interest, James should drive gross lusts from his mind.

There was a mis-match between the way James's mind worked, and his job. Not that there was anything that could be pointed to by outsiders, there was no bolt to be fixed. So long as James could keep his own thoughts working in his own way, undetected by others, all seemed alright, even to him.

His father's dictaphone taking the strain of conversation, James pulled out of the drive. On through the traffic, into an ever-rolling stream of dictation, the flow of which was broken if it chanced, as today, Tommy was disposed to small talk.

"We'll need alcohol! A kegs' worth! I'll tell you where to collect it!"

All Directors are teetotal.

"Who is coming in, Papa?"

"Further to yours of 4th inst., I write to warn that we shall not hesitate to pursue vigorous legal...!"

And so on to Journey's End, which is only the start of the daily odyssey.

By rights, trumpeters should sound the Curtain Rise for a visit to the Office of Thomas Blotnitz Ltd. It had 'OOOM-Papa' written all over it. A film set of an office. Venerable Age, Efficiency, Beauty and Disorder vied for precedence. It was a hive of thrumming action lent authority by the weight of family tradition, by blatant material success, and by the endeavours of swarms of supplicants at that commercial shrine to artifice and to profitable scribbling. A busman's holiday for thespians, it was the nearest thing to being in a theatre during daylight hours. Tommy, ever the tactician, claimed never to have been inside anyone else's office.

What a wow of an Office! Piles upon piles upon piles of scripts, a clutter so vast as to imply for an unthinking instant that the room was a sort of giant dustbin of intellectual endeavour. Serious Literature had a tangible buttress in the shape of a walnut bookcase. So elongated it was as to seem without end: A very shrine to the leather-bound volumes within. This piece, shipped over from the family home in Vienna, concealed an entire wall of the immense, high-ceilinged office. 'The rest of the bookcase burnt down in a fire!' Tommy informs first-time visitors. Standing imposingly between windows that give onto a premier square of the capital, is the Grandfather Clock. A magnificent piece, it also came from Austria, apparently. How it got there was a mystery. John Mudge, the manufacturer, sounded un-Austrian, and mindful of economy - not at all appropriate for Thomas Blotnitz Ltd. He had cut out all surplus brass from the dial-plate, replacing it with baser metal. On this, Tommy was as silent as the passing of the un-chimed hours. One hardly dared tread on the plush, red carpet, woven only of wool clipped off flocks of pedigree lambs. Cosseted on costliest caviar, James could imagine them gambolling far from the looms of Axminster.

Tommy, personally assisted by Melissa, but advised by Louisa, 'looked after', namely managed, authors and playwrights. Louisa, assisted by James, looked after the actors and actresses. James saw the light as to one of the reasons as to why she had told him at Rudyers there was a vacancy at the Agency. Two few chiefs in her department resulted in a falling off of Indians.

By the time James had arrived at the Agency, hardly any client artistes were left 'in the stable', courtesy of Louisa's increasing indisposition.

OOOMM-PAPAPA and Hail to the Prince! Tommy and James arrived at the office. A rejuvenation of legs! Quick-march, quick-march!

Reclining in wait, in the outside reception area, and consuming a cuppa supplied by a star-struck typist, Olga, bent on fuelling ego, hers and his, is rake-thin, six foot six Jake Randell. Immaculate, in his thong cravat, and high-heeled cowboy boots, Jake, in his own mind, is always the star of '*A Gun Down in Boot Hill!*' The sheriffs he killed were just off camera-shot, James felt, with Olga the *après*-shoot out barmaid plying the liquor. James stayed a pace behind his father, involuntarily taking cover.

"I dunno if this place impresses folks but it sure impresses me!" Jake growled by way of greeting, his voice a deep, hoarse rasp. "...That there thing, that a 'Casting couch'?" He indicated the stretch-settee, of porno. mag fame, upholstered in Chinese velvet, and piled with tasseled cushions, that was visible in the main office through an open door.

"*Mein Gott*, no!" replied Tommy, shocked, "...Here, we use the tops of desks!"

James went past the film-set, parental office to a small, cluttered, functional outer office, being his own official business domain. Jake strode after him, shoulders swaggering this way, and that, glowering, clear and black eyes glittering, boring through James's back. The urban badlands were over the horizon, music of pan pipes was playing in James's mind, wild melodies redolent of free, if untamed, spaces where such as he might die entertainingly violent deaths. James spun around. The eyes sliced into the worm, James.

"Howdy, pardner!" James greeted Jake, as if seeing him for the first time.

Where possible, James played along with all fantasies in this line of work. What was this honcho like at home? Surely, he could not keep up this pretence for long? Or was he so accustomed to playing a part that it had become a second nature?

"I got somm-thin, to, say!" Jake returned. There was a whip of hacienda dust in a high wind in it.

"OK! Do it!" says James, hopelessly out-gunned in dialogue and dreading the substance of what Jake would say.

James was nominally in charge of Randall's acting career. Jake liked simple things in life: An outrider for his limousine, a second dressing room, a third personal make-up artist, a fourth. One did not ask him which of his facial profiles needed special attention. One was expected to know these things, to insist on them to Directors, cameramen, and all involved with him.

Not to make such demands on his behalf felt like trying to hedge around the Divine Right of Kings if one was talking to Jake, but an infernal nuisance if one was talking to anyone else.

“Ah’m gonna shoot...!”

James flinched.

“...You know, *amigo*, you can’t be too careful...!”

Cowboy hands travelled holster-wards. What is Jake going to draw, for gawd’s sake? Jake was going in for the kill. James sensed it. Then he saw the flicker of a smile at the corner of Jake’s lips. James was letting himself be carried away by the situation.

“...One day, James Blotnitz, someone might just come in... and see you dressed so scruffily!”

It was obviously part of Jake’s little act that his audience had to know that Jake knew it was an act. James had no chance even to look quizzically at Jake’s stirrups before he was hit with “...I wanna speak to Louisa.”

“Ye-es, I’m glad you asked that!”

James dashed out to the main office muttering something that sounded more like ‘They’re after me!’ than ‘Hold on a tick!’ He rang Mama and then, on her advice, he rang the Producer of the film ‘Matt Dillon’ about the progress of the current offer for Jake to play ‘A rival law-giver’. James belted back to shoot the low-down to Jake. He sounded as if he knew what he was talking about, at any rate to go by the way Jake’s hands stayed clear of his invisible holsters. To James’s relief, Jake strode out, reassured. Jake left James in no doubt that he would be back. The typist was still simpering by lunchtime at that parting glower of his.

James was not just a son and a chauffeur and a Director and Artists’ Agent, he was the *chef de telephon* as well. He was learning about a craft – in both senses of the word - from the bottom up, and saving his parents several salaries in the process. How to cope with up to four simultaneous incoming calls ... wearing at least two very different hats ... expected to know everything about what was happening in the Artists’ side of the business, and in fact knowing little ... as well as having to jump to it, the glorified conduit for all who chanced to ring? How to be aloof and deferential, knowing and neophyte, senior and junior? James’s habit of being mentally in several places at the same time paid off. He was so used to thinking with one part of his mind about matters unrelated to what was going on around him that he found the problem less difficult to cope with than would most people. In the ‘cubby-cubicle’ adjacent to the main office...

Important (they all were!) Casting Director, Gilliane Handel was on one of the lines... **...Red Alert. Three Line whip. Help!...**

“Hullo James, I used to know your mother very well. She doesn’t seem so easy to get hold of these days, eh? Still, you’ve just joined the old Agency, and I’m sure it is going to go just dandy from here on in. ...Who do you recommend to play ‘Emillio’, the eager young disciple of the Japanese guru in my latest film, ‘The Wheel of Fate’? You know all about it, don’t you...?” The voice contrived to be both throaty, and flint-sharp.

“Yes, of course Gilly..!” James had been rehearsed by Louisa never to sound as if he did not know what was going on. In fact he did not see that script till too late. Ten years too late. Till then, it lay in pristine condition in one of Melissa’s drawers. “Could you hold on a moment, please, I’ll just check...”. James clicked the switchboard button enabling him to take another call while Gillian was ‘on hold’.

“Hullo, Thomas Blotnitz Ltd! Can I help?... Oh, it’s you, Tiffany. How are you but can you hold for a.... You want me to come to your wedding, and Mama and Papa aren’t coming? You’ll just have to hold on a moment...!”

“Hullo, Thomas Blotnitz here, can it help in a moment...”

“Hullo, Back in a moment...!” “Hullo, Gilly, yes, I do have an idea in fact...!”

The Star client of the agency is Jeremy William, nationally known as a bloodhound-like, if seemingly down-at-heel, TV detective. Gilliane was less than impressed with that idea for ‘Emillio’, instantly trotted out by James.

Who else to talk about? There were several top flight character actors - if only anyone ever would see them act - a brace of great names of yesteryear who adorn the List after their decease, their names accidentally un-removed, and a few ‘hopefuls’. James felt like Beau Geste at Fort Zindendorf, propping up dead bodies on the ramparts. Then he suddenly remembered. Of course! Jake! Gilliane got the message. Then so did James.

“...How surprising, and delightful, it has been to get you on the phone. And how is Louisa, really? So, she has, ...you to help out! I can’t wait to meet..., you!”

James flushed with embarrassment at his *faux pas*, which he only now saw it to be; his voice trailed off with a bleat about the Devil having all the best lines.

“Hullo, sorry to have kept you, oh, it’s you, Carl, look, let’s meet for lunch soon...”

A friendly voice at last...

“Good idea, James. Why don’t you ask along that pal of yours,

whatisname, Bugsy? Michael FitzArthur wants to meet him as well.”

“FitzArthur? Wants to meet Bugsy? But they’re chalk and cheese! FitzArthur isn’t thinking, by any chance, of trying his Svengali act on Bugsy, surely? He won’t be in luck if he does try ...Hold on, hold on. Don’t go away...”

Carl and James had met at Rudyers. Carl was a pupil of the day school nearby. It had been an arrangement between the two schools that they both participated in the Combined Cadet Force - even the name seemed dated to James now - and Carl, a schoolboy boffin, had been shoehorned into the role of an unlikely boy soldier. James felt that he was on Carl’s wave length while FitzArthur was someone to admire.

Michael FitzArthur was to the military manner born. A first rank diplomat or soldier in the bud, he had been thought. ‘Hip’, he was not, but he too had a subversive streak. He had carried off a Historical Essay annual prize by his cogently argued essay - a ‘monograph’, his Housemaster had called it - purporting to prove Churchill, more a crafty capitalist than a patriot, had been in a clandestine wartime league with Hitler’s Prussian bankers. The idea was to let the German and Russian proletariats fight it out. President Roosevelt was hoodwinked; military fronts in Africa, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia were an elaborate feint; British soldiers were so much grist to the propaganda mill; and so forth, the theory went. FitzArthur was not taken seriously, of course, except in as much as he wrote ‘History is a training ground for the mind; a purely synthetic intellectual exercise.’ Someone to watch, FitzArthur.

Bugsy was not so much serious or subversive as downright anarchic. Whatever could FitzArthur see in him? James had a policy - since, courtesy of Bugsy, he had introduced Trevor to the Agency - of keeping, where possible, social, family and business circles concentric, rather than overlapping. James had no time to think this through at such a moment...

“Tiffany, you still there, good, look, I’ll come to the wedding ceremony, but not the reception. I know this is terrifically serious, for you, but I’ve got to be careful with Mama and Papa, you know that - or you should - but what is important - I see it - is that I do at least show the flag at your ceremony, at some point. I can’t talk here, now, you do understand, bye for now, really must rush, take care, and by the way, many, many congratulations, I’m sure it’ll all work out for you both, well done!”

“Hullo, thank you for waiting, yes Trevor is available for the *Othello Cigar* commercial. I quite see that any self-respecting Othello needs a butler. Can you give me an idea of the rates you propose to pay? You’ll tell me exactly? Splendid! Ah, right, £35.00 daily rate. Hold on while I check with our bank to see if our account is big enough to take this sum? OK, that is the basic, the minimum - yes, I did know that! - but the ‘Repeats’ then - You do propose to repeat the ad. on air, don’t you? - what are they based on? Nothing? Oh, THAT sort of air! Great! He’ll do it. I get a cigar thrown in? Only if I take up smoking? You don’t advise it, not with that lousy product?”

OK! It's a deal! Done! Raight on! I'll have to get Trevor's confirmation, of course! Any other parts going? Only the lead? Hey, great idea, how about Jake Randall? He goes up in smoke all the time, or sorry, joke. No, not him? Ever? Oh, Can you hold on for a mo...!"

"Hullo, Carl? Carl? Come in, Number Six!" *Damn! He's gone. And he always liked Number six.* Carl and James, when down in the dumps at school, had wanted to laugh as much as possible - they had numbered their jokes so that, when inspiration ran dry, or time was pressing, they need only reel off numbers to produce the required effect. *Damn, who was that I cut off? Well, that's good for Trevor at last, something to tell Buggy anyway, and that ad. guy seemed to like my style, I guess he'll think of our agency again when he gets another basic rate job. What the hell DO I say to casting directors, damn and blast it? We don't have the clients, and everyone thinks we're big shots! Comes of talking non-stop about the grand old guys of yesteryear. So no casting directors ring us up for actors? Because we're too grand? No! But if they ring, it'll be only too easy to puncture their respect for us, if they find out for sure we don't have anyone much, any more. Must get more actors, must get... Oh my cripes, I didn't get back to Trevor's ad guy. Hullo...Hullo!"*

The frying pan over but, summonsed by Olga, whose grumpiness was not just down to pining for Jake, James walked reluctantly into the pan. Rick, or Roderick, Cartwright, or perhaps it was another alias today, was in reception.

"But it is only 10am!", James grumbled.

"Well, why didn't you tell me you had an appointment with him?"

"I didn't have one!"

Louisa had once, mid-morning, rung Rick with the offer of a part in a film that she had been at some trouble to arrange for him with Gillian Handel. Rick was to play a Roman poet ordered to commit suicide by his Emperor. All sympathies lay with the Emperor; Louisa knew how best to dress this up to Rick and was ready to reinterpret the film as post-Ealing Comedy. "Well, top of the morning to you Rick. Sun is shining. Great news for you..!", she began. "And how are you..?"

"What the bloody hell has it got to do with you?", had been the response.

Rick was drowning in his sorrows in gin-soaked corn flakes.

A whey-faced chameleon, James thought Rick. A man of ash. Rick's bowtie and luxuriant moustache were ashen-coloured, as was his wispy hair; there was ash, or worse, over the shoulders of his Sherlock Holmes-style cape. His dark eyes rolled slightly as if he was attempting to keep steady on his feet in a high sea and wanted spectators to know how jaunty he was. It gave him a

shifty look, at odds with the avuncular, solid image he was otherwise at pains to cultivate. He had rubbery features and a thin, pointed nose prone to wrinkling, double-jointed he said. Rick was into a ‘Method School’ of acting; the question of which method was unresolved. He intoned the name ‘Stanislavsky’, lingering over the consonants, pronouncing them in a pseudo-Russian way, as befitted a man steeped in cabbalistic secrets of his craft, but doing so with a theatricality more in the tradition of a would-be actor-manager of the previous century. He traced arcs in the air with a cigar that never left his fingers, and had been lit, but once, as an aid to his oratorical flourishes. He had a faded, dubious, yet energised, grandeur. Rick was at his best playing to a gallery of blue-rince, star-struck ladies, in the provinces, a broad swathe of footlights between them and his alcohol-laden breath and his blotchy, pitted skin and his... James was not his ideal audience:

Rick stood up as James came in and said, after a dramatic pause “I am sorry to have kept you waiting!” (*Had he?*) Rick’s grating voice was at odds with his message, and his airs generally. “...For bad tidings! But I wanted that man, Jake, to be out of earshot. Really, such a pig! (*Why? Had Olga been comparing them volubly?*) But, now to my fell purpose, (*Sounded bad!*) and, well, how can I begin, I don’t know how best to break this to you, so you will forgive an actors’ bluntness, but I think..., I have to say, it is my unfortunate duty to tell you that...”

“Yes? Yes?”

“... That Frederico Lomax, our dear, dear friend... this is no joking matter...”

“Go on!”

“...is, alas....., dead!”

“What? I spoke to Ferdy on Friday! I can hardly believe it! He was delighted that I could understand him; his English was really coming on; he’d all but lost his guttural Austrian accent. What on earth happened?”

Slowly, painfully slowly, the tale of the death of an actor unfolded. There had been a heroic adieu to life, complete with kiss blown to, even a glove thrown to, the audience who had gathered by invitation round the death-hammock. “Bury me where this falls!” Frederico had declaimed before expiring. Rick was at his best, James thought with sudden irreverence when describing the smile that spread slowly over the face of the deceased and which congealed to muted applause.

“And, you know, Destiny has a purpose in all it does...” Rick finished up, roughly wiping away an invisible teardrop - superstition played a part in most actors’ lives even if dignified by the title of ‘Destiny’ - “...It was his other glove I had on!”

Or, I suppose, he’d have had to chuck your arm as well as his glove?

“I’m sorry - I’m thrown by all this... Oh, it is terrible news. But is it really true?”

“I do know you think you spoke to him on Friday. Allow me to present myself. I am Rick Brandt, otherwise known as Frederico Lomax, except of course by Frederico himself. No one better than Rick Brandt Esquire at doing an English accent that betrays no trace at all of Austrian origins, eh what, me boy, wha-hey? Got you there, didn't I? And I do think you should have bought that vacuum cleaner I tried to sell you on Thursday!”

“THAT was YOU as well? Look here, I was about to be so upset to hear that Frederico had...!”

Melissa whisked by, with a quick “G'Morning!” The vision of loveliness was gone. The memory of her black, sensible dress, her wondrously blonde hair, her slim ankle, it would be etched on James's memory all day. But Rick just nodded to Melissa *What a clod that Rick fellow is!* and went on “Your carpet was dirty! Look, I know I failed that audition for ‘*The Woman in the Aluminium Mask*’ but don't you think you could put me up for the part again? All you got to do is give me a different name, and I'll do the rest...”.

“Put you up for a part? When I wouldn't even buy a Hoover from you...?”

James ducked as Rick's cigar, whose parabolas in the air were turning pointedly into decreasing circles, apparently with James designated as an ash tray. As James did so, he caught a tiny movement... in the painting of Hermann von Blotnitz, a ‘masterpiece’ in oils but not important enough to grace the main office. Was it the nose rippling, the corner of the eye-pupil swivelling? Was James's vision impaired, his mind giving under strain? Had he made too rapid a head movement? *Hard to keep a grip on reality in this temple dedicated to Make-believe.* James needed a break to calm down. A few moments not on duty, that was all it would take to get his act together.

Man, take it easy! In the loo, James let his imagination rip. It was his way of returning to True North. One particular mental trick he found best adapted to conjuring up instant Nirvana. He had only to think of women and the rest of the world, let alone his own problems, were lost in oblivion. One name above all others guaranteed this effect:

Melissa! Her features caress-able, but untouchable. Just to be close to Melissa, just to touch her hand with slight pressure. Just to see her chiseled features at close quarters. This was as close as James dared approach to the shrine of loveliness. She would be the perfect soul mate, if but one could trust her and if not, then one might imagine the ideal world in which one but could...

The Time: 7.am. Yesterday.

Action: An alarm went off. A coffee percolatorette marked ‘HERS’ gargled into life; and James turned with sleepy eagerness towards Melissa. The vision of She, acting as bait and lubricant, acted fast on his

eyelids. They shot up, and open.

7.05am: James went a-goggling. He pondered Melissa's long, perfectly formed legs, whose lithe contours - each so similar and yet so different - gently swelled on their deliquescent paths upwards. They lay tantalisingly concealed beneath her diaphanous nightshift and, much, much harder to bear, under the coverlet. What joy, to trace a finger-tip along one of those legs! What joy, in each tiny, fluffy hair encountered by a sensitive finger! What would he not give just to touch one leg! He envied, with a devouring if irrational jealousy, that other leg which could nestle a lifetime alongside. He pictured the swell of Melissa's breasts, those mounds of soft Venus, with their roseate crests, and exquisite undulations cupped in... a heavy-duty brassiere. And those thighs! Those loosening silken thighs! Those thighs James thought singular not plural, whose locomotive action was evidenced by the ping of bed springs as Melissa stretched herself with feline sinuousness. Thrilling stabs rained down on his mind, evoked by those springy coils, encoated in foam. James's thoughts flitted empyrean-wards, born aloft on the magic carpet of those hips...

And those fine-spun, honey-blonde tresses trailing wantonly over the pillows. James hugged the thought that one day - a day when all the writers of lovers' haunting songs would carol together - he would bury himself in their scented web, to be sucked down in dizzying spirals to an awakening; manacled, in an enchanted castle. His gaze travelled slowly towards Melissa's lower reaches.

James prised his stare away from those guitar-shaped hips, and fastened it longingly on Melissa's eye-lids. Like gloves they fitted, over eyes of translucent aquamarine, set amidst a warm sea of cream to watch a nose so snub... Snub? James dwelt a moment on that word. Melissa? Snub him? Never! Words were always found to reassure James. To argue with Melissa was like drowning in a vat of syrup; and when, at the last moment, one sensed air, a stake would be thrust up, impaling one from below! And, if she did have some small failings, what of that? Was there not compensation? In the sight of her...

The Time: 7.10am. Melissa swings with languorous ease out of the bed. She idly wonders if the few moments allotted James for gazing at her curves, will excite him to orgasm. She preferred this light spume in springtime, when it neatly mirrors the rising sap outdoors. A neat person, Melissa.

The Time: 7.11am. The vista was uncurled, the limbs a-scissoring, Light Fantastic... Those legs! Those legs! Those warm throbbing visions of sinew and sinuousness! Lush sweetness moulded in throbbing flesh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Deepest spice of Man's yearning! Melissa was springing up. The divine Moment of ecstasy! Moisture had happened. The shell-burst flash of an earthly Paradise! That beauteous, fleeting spring wherein all men drink in mysterious alchemy! To call them legs! Tcha! A dog, a horse, has legs! James groped for the words in which to clothe his heaving

thoughts. He satisfied himself, sotto voce. ‘Those cylinders, in the shape of funnels, with slow gradient! Oh! To blazes with verbiage! What is a word? A word is a thing, as unlike a female limb as it is possible to be!’ James’s mental processes slid from the sizzle of the pump-room to an après-massage lounge. Melissa could wash, undisturbed by eye-balls on stalks craning towards thick shower-curtains...

“Stay where you are!”, James commanded. “...I’ll be right out!”

“Thank goodness, we thought something was wrong! We were about to call a carpenter for the door!” Melissa spoke in a tone of grating glaciers.

“...Sorry, sorry, Melissa, my fly was jammed!”

It was an in-joke. Tommy habitually went round the office with his flies undone. When told, he would say: “But that is to excite the office staff!” The reaction from Melissa was different this time:

“Fly, you said? What is wrong with you?”

James rushed back to the telephone cubicle, hardly knowing what was going on.

Whilst he had been AWOL, Olga, anxious to ingratiate herself with Jake, used the opportunity to do a spot of promotion on his behalf, describing him to the Producer of ‘Matt Dillon’, in her choice phrase, as ‘Lean and hungry-looking!’ This move, bad enough, was made far worse by the fact that the Producer to whom she spoke was in fact the brother of the Producer of ‘Matt Dillon’ and he was considering Jake for the part of ‘Moses’ in a biblical epic. Jake got neither part. James found out why, the following day.

Tommy tape-recorded telephone conversations, playing them back afterwards if of interest, or for analysis with Louisa. There was evidence in those tapes to incriminate the entire theatrical profession. James was curious about these telephone conversations. Rarely did Tommy relay what was said, by way of anecdote. James thought this a lost opportunity. The theatrical world was inherently interesting. Amusing James’s parents might be but they were not *raconteurs*. Tommy only told stories about the people he knew for ulterior motive, usually to show, without being obvious about it, how clever he was. James wanted to understand about the people who, one day, he suspected, would play a role in his own destiny. James had once asked Louisa what she thought about Ludwig Tench, the legendary opera singer.

“The brains of opera singers...” Louisa responded, “...Are in their lungs!”

That was a positive oration by comparison with what Tommy said about this world class singer. Which was nothing. Every so often, perhaps in the bath, Tommy would break into a snatch of song: ‘Wien-a-vie-a-kai!’. A strange ditty, James had thought, till he heard Tench singing it on an LP. So

the stardust had rubbed off on Papa. One just had to know where to look. These were figures from James's childhood, according to Mama and Papa. James was just making up for lost time...

Ludwig Tench was on the line. James was all ears. Ludwig had just come from a high-powered meeting but the vividness of his description was reserved for the ballroom in which the meeting had taken place. It was, said Ludwig,

"...like a vast, upside-down wedding cake, with a topping of multi-coloured icing, into which a giant has just put his boot...!"

James felt as though he was participating in a scene germinating in Ludwig's mind, one set to break upon a wider public after it was slipped into a production by way of a re-write.

James's curiosity in the bank of illicit tapes did not survive long. He felt guilty about prying into other people's secrets. What James only heard that day, on the one time he played a randomly selected tape, was enough! It happened that James had picked on the tape of a conversation Tommy was holding with Scarlett. It was handy because Tommy had fished it out. He had a meeting scheduled with Scarlett and needed to refresh his memory.

In Scarlett, James now realised, Tommy was onto something so big, it made her bottom seem puny in comparison. Her 'Womanual' took on 'Album status', as Tommy put it so delicately. Scarlett was becoming an autobiographer. Not to be seen hanging a head in shame in her memoirs was worth the payment of an exorbitant sum! James, to his horror, heard about the price of fame. And the lengths to which people would go in order to avoid it. It was tantamount to blackmail. Tommy's contacts were in his pocket in more ways than one. The commissions Tommy negotiated! They made the bomb that the book would otherwise drop. James suddenly flushed, remembering that he had sent old Eamonn to her Centre.

"Is Scarlett coming today?" James asked Melissa as she was scudding by the telephone cubicle. "...Isn't she due now? Do you think something has happened?"

"Nope, she's late, as usual. No sign yet - even of her cleavage. She has probably had a puncture." Melissa remarked sweetly. She was not referring to Scarlett's tyres.

What did Louisa make of Melissa, a secretary so intelligent, blossoming, eager to please Tommy? Once, Louisa had been all that. Tommy said he had married Louisa as she was the best secretary of his bunch. Quite a sense of humour, had Tommy. Pity that Louisa lost hers. She was getting older, in poorer health. Tommy's many mistresses had never bothered her. Before! Officially!

The facts of the situation were slowly dawning on James.

Louisa it was who had kept rein on the purse strings. And the mistresses! She saw to it that they were fittingly recompensed for adulterous time-serving. So what fell from the rich couple's table were crumbs, and also crusts. The extra-marital affairs of her husband harvested marmite sandwiches, mistresses knowing the score. Most had not been involved in Tommy's work, but Tommy also was getting older. He no longer went out regularly on the razzle. The secretary to Tommy who Melissa replaced, Joelle, had worked a decade on the spot, night and day, but she was no match, or worry, for Louisa. She fell prey to Melissa after a short but venomous feud between that brace of birds. Tommy might be cock-a-hoop, but Louisa was hen of the coop. What to do about Melissa? Could either Louisa or Tommy conduct themselves with anything less than the utmost propriety? The suggestion of such a thing would outrage Tommy. He was born in the year of the Fire Horse. No fairy tale, a story which began under his inauspices. According to Chinese Astrology, those born under that sign have a meteoric career in the arts but they are a disaster for their own family.

The time came when marmite sandwiches were not enough. Tommy wanted to promote Melissa. She was far too precious, argued Tommy, to the business not to be given incentives. She might leave. This, he alleged, she was threatening to do. Louisa could not call any bluff by openly voicing the suspicions about the relationship that were her objection to the proposal. A compromise was reached. To satisfy Louisa, Melissa was to be offered no shares in the Company, no extra salary, no percentage or commission in the few deals she helmed. To satisfy Tommy, she was to be awarded the title of 'Director'. *Quel* prestige! Tommy had things all his own way, as Louisa saw it, so now he must concede something to Louisa. What Melissa had earned by dint of hard work on desk and couch for several years, James must be given by virtue of his being the son and heir. Was this not the family firm? Tommy could hardly object openly that what his wife wanted was her own nominee on the Board to provide a counter-balance to his protégé. The plot was hatched, the deed done, the letterheads reprinted; and the Rolls Royce was soon whisking its way up to Rudyers bearing glad tidings of his promotion to one bemused schoolboy. Had James but known it, this was the backdrop to the offer from his parents to join their team.

Melissa had been in the Agency for ten years. James wondered if she might think he might pose a threat to her if she thought that Louisa would champion him against her? The last thing he wanted to do was be responsible for upsetting an apple-cart.

When Scarlett showed up at last, Melissa exuded charm by the bucketload. Which was the amount of perfume Scarlett had on, Melissa calculated. A born Gemini, Melissa. It would need a Freud of astrology to plumb the depths of the chasm dividing Melissa's two facades. She was born in the year of the Snake, according to the Chinese astrology, the qualities of that creature complementing neatly her tendency to dissimulate.

Scarlette and Melissa settled down to business. James peeked into the office to see the beautiful spectacle. How well he remembered what he had thought of Scarlette when he ogled her in that porno mag! There were compensations for this way of life. A pin could have dropped unheard so deep were their heads in a contract relating to the latest 'articles' by Scarlette. To see them together! It was a study in contrasting loveliness, two faces that an artist of genius might paint in order to symbolise Lust and Love. Only the napes of their necks, each so milky soft, so vulnerable, seemed as though created from the same female mould. Then Scarlette saw James.

"Well 'ullo there Jamey-boy, I'll pop aht an' see ya laite-ar!"

James withdrew like a shot. But it was too late. Soon enough, Scarlette came out for him. She dripped groin-wrenchingly sexual allure. She had 'It' all right. Her oval face, with tilted nose, the knowing expression, promised what her 'Come hither!' deep blue eyes demanded, flowing blonde hair, and her 39-24-38 figure - as James remembered it from the photograph - was concealed, just, by leather. She was five foot eleven inches. James felt he would relish being manacled by her, she could do what she would to him, in that dungeon that he had once fashioned for her in his mind. Her eyes transfixed him. It was as if she knew she had a hold over him and would use it only at her leisure and for her pleasure. This satanic goddess was speaking to him. James went into shock:

"I got bone ta pick wiv you, young Master Blotnitz!"

"You have?"

"...Eamonn O'Higgins, so yer told him, was the man for me! Yer said! Ha! My clients is most peculiar! My regulars like ta feel that if Torquemada or de Sade dropped in for a pinta - and I don't mean milk - they gotta home to come to! They wants real live victims. All your bloke 'ad to do was be hooked up, and scream! 'Bloodcurdling Yells' that's what it says on Der Tariff! They ain't cheap neither! I'd ave been right there with 'im, helping, prompting! What happened to his lungs? Waterlogged in the war, were they? T'aint so easy for a single girl like me! I gotta handpick all ma instruments. They don't grow on trees! 'Cept fer bamboo, and, even then, needs an hexpert eye to select me canes! I takes trouble! I don't snivel! Not me! Scarlette girl, I allays seys to meself, Swish-Swish, I gotta give THE BEST! My voyeurs 'ave standards! Eamonn O'Higgins? Don't make me laugh! In all ma born days, I ain't ever seed a specimen like that one! 'Ave you seen his fanny? Well, take a look at it before you recommend 'im to anyone else! You ought to ta know abaht these things! You been brought up proper, like! That is one 'orrible mangy arse! All skin and bones and pong! I got the 'Aluminium-Maiden' - well, the price of iron these days! - all cranked up something lovely, and 'der Rack', and whoopee time, I wheels Eamonn on! The Star! Hah! 'E goes and knocks this Reverend out stone cold, wiv his FARTS! POOH! I asks yer! Destroyed all the ambience, they did. And them sniggers when Higgins first came in! Haw ha Aha! In case yer think I'm larffing, yer right! That's' genuine aristocratic larffter. I 'ear

enuff o’it. Haw ha Aha, he goes. Last sound I ‘eard afore the farts got me! Wotta night! What did I ever do to deserve it...?”

Even allowing for James’s embellishments, there was no doubt that Scarlett cut a pithier figure than would be gathered of her from any magazine. *To put it mildly*, James thought.

The moment Scarlett left, Melissa vigorously fanned aside lingering traces of her scent as if dispersing fumes of mustard gas. She then snatched up the glossy magazine, the contractual aspects of which had just been under discussion, and she slammed it back down on the desk the other way up, as if to hide from view the picture on the front cover of Scarlett’s nude posterior. Tommy, eyebrows raised, swooped on her with a single word,

“Disappointed...?”

Tommy laconically implied that Melissa must have wanted to see even more of Scarlett. She had been balked of a full-frontal pose.

Melissa chuckled on cue at Tommy’s jokes. When money talked, she believed. What most scandalised Melissa about Scarlett, according to Louisa’s reportage, was that the Agency had no financial stake in the easy pickings of her lucrative live performances. James did not believe it. He brought himself to bring up the subject.

“Papa, is it true that Lord Middlemass speaks highly about Scarlett?”

“Don’t ask me, how should I know, ask him, he’ll come by today, Where is that file, ah yes, Dear Jolyon, Further to mine of 20th ult...”

“Yours sincerely,...” James prompted, beneath his breath.

The really upsetting thing for James in his exercise of telephone eves-dropping lay in his discovering more about what made his father tick. The next telephone call was to an associate of Jolyon Danville, the theatre director. “...I was a little worried to hear what Jolyon said about your theatre. I’d just like to know if all is OK between you two?” Tommy’s stratagem had been to encourage his clients to co-operate on a project, then engineer a blazing row after contracts for the project were in the bag. He invented a remark by one, which he passed on, in confidence. He called this, ‘Putting the poison in!’ He was left holding the hands of both the babies, an indispensable go-between. The outcome of the conversation was that Jolyon was barred the theatre before the opening night of the play. On the credit side, from the standpoint of commission, Jolyon did get Directorial royalties for the following decade, courtesy of Tommy’s watertight contract.

James, lost in thought, was ambushed by Harvey Dill, who had crept in.

Dill was redolent of old Vienna, spiced up with a touch of the Kafkaesque. Yet he was a film producer. Odd how people did not seem to conform to stereotypes. The authentic voice of the Vienna coffee house wits, he seemed, with his saccharine manner, bushy eyebrows, and his creamy accent, thick and rich as *Zacher torte*. Hard to say what made him such a cloak-and-dagger figure. Dill could have been a Spy in *The Third Man*, a bookseller perhaps, with gruesome secrets. He exuded a tiger-ish quality, as if he was always about to spring, even though he had just feasted on his prey, and he was lolling at his ease as a result. He seemed to speak with filled mind and full stomach at the same time. A man who had mastered what life had to offer him and constantly vigilant to see he was not deprived of it? A man who...?

“...No! No! No! Herr von Blotnitz, you haven’t understood...!”

He had been speaking to James!

“...Not a word I say! Let me put it in simple words? *Yah?* Take a fly! We call it, ‘James’! A fly that goes flit-flit! Imagine this fly is stuck in web. Fly in web. Of ‘Mother Theresa’. Remember her? Scarlett’s leetle pet? Think about fly’s leg. Fly. Legs. They no move. A non-adhesive web? You are thinking, WINGS! Fly has wings, *yaaah?*” Here there was a whole performance with a script, which had fallen out of his pocket, which James had to retrieve. The pause allowed Dill time to gather up thoughts. “...Our leetle fly, it moves forward! But slowly! Aaagh, so slow, it move. Now! What give the fly the idea it move forward, huh huh? I know you know the answer. It is ‘Time’! So..!”

James had to think quickly but his thoughts were mired. Harvey seemed to very friendly with James’s family, part of the family circle. If one could be sure of anything in this world of mirrors? James felt he was living a true life of the theatre; it mimicked the deeper emotions that outsiders felt. Harvey’s words left him feeling he had become part of a web. One day, it might ensnare him? Everything that happened seemed to generate its own train of thought, one that, no sooner started off, went onto a different track from the one expected.

“Ah, soooo, Mr Blotnitz! Do you slide back towards a pulsating darkness, of which we were part before our separate egos were formed?”

“Eh? Come again? If you will pardon the expression!”

“I am quoting Koestler, writing on dreams in *The Act of Creation*. I am interested in your mind, Mr Blotnitz! “...Vairy iteresting!” Harvey added that he hoped James had not been too ‘discombobulated’. “...English! Was sort of a language! Ha!”

Yet no one could write more faultless English prose than Harvey Dill. What did Harvey know, if anything, about James’s secret life? Or did he simply see James as a dreamer? Twirling his cane, Harvey Dill walked,

almost hopped, to the door, whistling an air from a Viennese operetta, something by Tauber but...

Edgar Fotherington, brilliant comedy writer, immaculate as ever, a carnation in his button-hole bordering on cliché, was coming in.

James well recollected being taken by his parents during a holiday from Rudyers to meet Edgar Fotherington. James was shocked to hear that icon come out with

“The most important thing in life is to wake up in the morning with a smile on one’s face!”

James had felt of such comedians, their faces, on waking, slit in two by vacuous smiles, he for one could do without their wisdom. It had reminded him of Seneca saying that he only had to meet a writer for breakfast to lose faith in the man’s scribblings. Who, James had thought, would want to meet Seneca? James had never been star-struck.

Edgar was in his late-sixties but his clothes and gait were dapper. As a young man, he had been dropped behind enemy lines in the war. He was said to have been an expert in camouflage but, of this aspect of his past, James knew little. A pencil-thin moustache above drooping lips, dark circles in eye-pouches beneath gold spectacles, and thick wavy, graying hair did not prevent Edgar seeming to be lacking somehow in substantiality. There was little distinctive in his appearance, just an impression of ineffable correctness. He seemed to flit on his way, a moth gathering up tit-bits in the dark, morsels that people on the ground would drop or pass over. One of Edgar’s quips was ‘I have the sort of face, once seen, never remembered!’ but it turned out that this was not original in that it had been Lord Middlemass’s verdict.

“Here comes another one for ze web!”, Harvey muttered gnomically.

Edgar had a vulnerable air, as if always ready to make light of something that upset him deeply. He seemed to hover in. James thought that Edgar must come into his own when solitary, penning plays. He all but collided with Harvey, apologising gently, but profusely, as Harvey twittered like a sparrow with a crushed wing.

“I want not keep you too long at the talking. Your time is *zo* precious!” Harvey managed.

“Oh, yes, that is funny. Ah-ha! Very funny! Must make a note of that!”

Perhaps Edgar’s formula for witty writing was that he knew witty people, and rehashed their words? Possibilities of how to affect Edgar’s work on this basis entranced James. It seemed difficult to concentrate on the real-life playwright in front of him. Edgar seemed altogether lacking in charisma. Was it that he was not sure of himself? As if his penchant for the written

word had taken him sailing into another world, the future, with his feet no longer on the ground, voyaging into a life espied in writing on the wall, his wall... his epitaph? Could James introduce Edgar to a sad undertaker, turning him into a tragedian? Or a zoologist...?

That did it! James succumbed to a vision of a frog! It began life in the pond outside in the square. The frog rose from the wavelets, croaking its launch. Higher and higher it rose. Gabbling silently in quasi-tantric, James's body moving slowly backwards and forwards, his pelvis still, he kept bio-rhythmic time to the batracian gyration above. Backwards, forwards, backwards, round and round, mutter mutter mutter, croak croak. "ANSWER THE BLOODY THING!", Olga screamed at James. Not *le moment juste* to break in on that macabre *dance-à-deux*. The phone was ringing. Edgar, looking pained, noted her saying. She failed to understand either the charm or the subtlety of the 'Viennese Tango', as James was to style this mental jig.

"Hullo, hullo...!" **CROAK**
CROAK **CROAOK**

P

Up!

A

The caller: "Could I please speak to Mr. Thomas Blotnitz?"
EEEEIEIAOUU! E
Up! Up!

L

leapt **LEAP**
frog **LEAP**
The

"I'll see if I can get him for you, but I am afraid I do know he is very tied up at the moment. ...Excuse me...See you later Mr Fotherington."
(Wow! See that baby move!)

"...Sounds like old Fothers? Regards to the dear old boy. I know Tommy is busy. I sat in front of him this past hour, and we didn't have a chance to say a word to one another. He was on the phone, non-stop. So I've come outside, and I'm ringing him from this call-box!"

James listened in with half an ear as Tommy took over that call from Freddie Wilde, who years previously had worked at the Agency. He was whining "...But the biography of Lord Middlemass is going to be good, the best, why won't you represent it, why won't you talk at least to Henry Middlemass, why won't you...?"

The end was worthy of all that went before. The frog, now with a pelican attachment, went into free fall. The threshing animal bodies crashed to the floor, narrowly missing the halibut bowl. A spout of dust retraced the arc through the air. Frog-and-pelican came apart at the seams, mixing in indistinguishable debris. Grisly twitchings and a twang of de-

elasticated eye-balls, and sad little bounces. A squawk-box 'CAW!' All was not poignant silence.... "If you feel cobwebs coming over you, James, it is a good idea to open your eyes as wide as you can! James, are you quite sure you are OK, James?", Melissa asked. "...James, Speak to me!"

"Er-yes! Absolutely! Fine! Absolutely!"

"Are you sure you aren't on drugs?"

"No! Absolutely not! Had a bad trip once! Can still imagine it! I was thinking!"

"Go on!"

"We-el, about how odd everything is!"

"Like?"

"We-el, how we all seem to know exactly what we are doing! How can we be sure? I find everything is diffuse. What is consciousness? We rely on it but don't understand it. What is the 'I' in the first place...?"

"You and I might have a talk later? In the meantime, I really think you'll find 'daydreaming' is more fun in the evening. Before I forget: Don't, whatever you do, give Olga any job of responsibility. I swear to you, she is even worse than Tiffany. Maybe not, I doubt even Olga, if asked to do the French filing, would file everything under 'Le' and 'La'!"

A roar from the main office cut short Melissa's comments.

"The sweet sound of His Masters Voice!" Melissa said:

"THAT IS YOUR PROBLEM! YOU SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT BEFORE! I AM YOUR AGENT, AND THAT OF OTHER PEOPLE INVOLVED. I AM NOT YOUR GUARDIAN ANGEL! ENOUGH OF YOUR IMPERTINENCE!"

Edgar Fotherington was one of the bigger money-spinners of the Agency. How come he was being treated by Tommy as though of no account? Melissa pushed the door ajar so that she and James heard Edgar whine:

"But Mr. Blotnitz, I've done everything you asked of me. Every last thing. And still you are cross with me...!"

Melissa gave James a knowing grin. James was non-plussed to explain it in terms other than Melissa enjoyed the spectacle of someone being hauled over the coals by Tommy. She quickly left the passage through which Edgar, a moment afterwards, came by, looking more plaintive than ever, as if he was beseeching James about something he dare not put it into words.

James gave Edgar a courteous nod, but said nothing as, wordlessly, soundlessly almost, Edgar vanished into thin air, it seemed, leaving behind an impression of great distress.

James felt he could not last long at this sort of life. He was not up to it. But was this a time to leave his parents in the lurch? What would happen to all their promises to him? What would he do? Where would he go? It occurred to him that perhaps Edgar had faced something of the same dilemma? Once in Tommy's toils, all escape routes seemed cut off. There could be no solving the riddle of the contretemps, or indeed that of James's own future, just then. Whatever had gone on between Tommy and Edgar was not for his ears. But suchlike fates could not befall the son and heir...?

James's rose-tinted spectacles stood him in good stead, getting him through that day, allowing him to fantasise about Melissa even while he was talking to her. Even as she said, when she came by the telephone cubicle in that outer office after Edgar had left, her voice, delicately modulated, her green eyes, so sparkling, so full of platonic friendship,

"I wonder if you think you did a wise thing, in joining the Agency?"

"How good of you to take such an interest in what is best for me!"

Melissa clammed up immediately. James meant it sincerely. It was so unlike Melissa to be so outspoken. She had seemed to mean what she said, so kindly, she had seemed so charming. James noticed the way she was walking away. A brisk, almost military walk, to which, at hip level, was tacked on a swaying motion. Two cushions, sewn together, atop twin rods? Her mask of a face, beautifully made up, and her clothes, so exquisitely chosen for effect said one thing, but there, in that walk, was the Melissa *au fond*. Using sex for effect, using people for effect, determined, ambitious, hard...? James knocked a glass of water over in sudden agitation. Was this person, the real Melissa, right in at the heart of the family? But she did seem as if she was sweet?

"I don't think it was meant to do that! Are you sure you aren't daydreaming again? Am I boring you?" said Melissa.

James brushed his hand over his forehead, as if to clear away a cobweb. But Melissa did not go in for any sarcasm. She changed her tune. He was spared further embarrassment. What had gotten into her? She normally only talked about the things she wanted to talk about, unless, that is, she was with Tommy, and then she only talked about the things Tommy wanted to talk about, and said the things he wanted to hear. *Is Papa hiding in here somewhere?* Melissa was not complimentary about Tommy in his absence, but now... She was being flowery about him! Melissa, she of the crystalline utterance. Had James missed a vital link in her discourse?

Tommy had indeed come into the typing pool, on the far side of the telephonic cubby-cubicle. No way did it look as though he was listening to

Melissa. He was looking into the mirror, engrossed in picking his nose. He could not indulge in such a habit if he thought anyone might spot him at it?

Melissa, having cottoned on, had played up to the eavesdropper.

“Oh, there you are, Mr. Blotnitz. About the little party we are laying on for...”, Melissa remarked, when the nose job ground to a halt.

“Oh, yes, quite right, goodness, really that Fotherington man. I don’t know if you heard me going for him. He will insist on writing plays with too many characters. Does he not know that how much actor’s salaries are these days. When people besides certain people - to name no names - in our office do the negotiating...?” Here there was a look in James’s direction. “Fotherington writes plays for fifteen actors at a time, not five. And then he wants to do a TV play, and he thinks that Germans should be played by real Germans not, as is happening nowadays, but people who speak the Queen’s English. Honestly, one can only try to tell these people...”

This did not ring true but James could not help but feel that, were it Louisa who was ‘smoozing’ the client, rather than her husband, there would have been no problem.

The next telephone call was difficult. It was Igor. James never knew quite how to react to her.

“How is the invalid?”

“Are you referring, Igor, to my mother...?”

“Entertain me!” said Louisa when James rang to report on the morning’s developments. James was instantly tongued-tied.

“...Doesn’t time fly, my darling boy, when you’re enjoying yourself?”

Was Mama asking for information? Was she trying to draw James out? She had been telling James of late more about the way she was feeling. No one outside the family knew how bad things were with her. The last thing that James could ever wish to do was let down Mama. But the effect on him merely of her voice, irrespective of what she said, was soothing. James found himself thinking he should not distress himself with false imaginings. Mama sounded so well. It was hard to take her confidences too seriously. His mind drifted. He thought he would air an innocuous question:

“You know, Mama, poor Melissa has such a long way to go home. She doesn’t like travelling by tube and bus late at night, and her car is not up to much she says, and as her place is not so far off our route, perhaps we might go slightly out of our way to drop her off?”

James felt Melissa had to put up with much at the office from his parents and he was anxious to show her that he was not one to abuse his

privileged position of being the son and heir. James had not understood why Tommy did not act on this issue. When asked by James, Tommy had muttered that this was ‘In Mama’s line of country.’

“Poor Melissa?” Louisa began in her vibrant voice, the voice of an unusually strong, intelligent, but volatile, young woman, used since childhood to the exercise of power. James felt the first gusts of wind that presaged the gale to come. “...‘Poor’, did you say? You are wrong, my boy, wrong, wrong, wrong, you are wrong from A to Z...” The waves were breaking over James’s head. “...Melissa is Ambitious, Arrogant, and Avaricious; we haven’t got past ‘A’ yet. Shall I go on? Shall I? Yes? Yes. I’ll skip some of it. She is Ruthless, she is Superficial, she is Treacherous, she is Under-educated AND she is...a Woman. You are warned...!” The storm petered out. “...Be strong! Walk tall! Enough said!”

One was never stronger, according to Louisa, than when following her lead. James, as so often, felt knocked back by the force of her personality. But was she prone to exaggeration or jealousy? James changed the subject fast. It was Office Hours; it was time for office questions.

Louisa gave James guidelines about publications - ‘Variety’, ‘Casting Today’ and so forth - where he could find out what parts might be ‘up for grabs’ for the artistes, but ended up by saying word of mouth about such precious information counted for more than the printed word. Louisa, unlike Tommy, said she was interested in promoting the careers of the client artistes who were not well known enough to command high salaries...

“...which WE need to keep going. Most artistes don’t attain to having a reputable Agent. Ours can count themselves damn lucky to have us...!”

Louisa was probably more caring than many Agents but James wanted to promote the unknown artists, build their careers as, indeed, Louisa had done in the case of Jeremy William. It was not a moment to argue the toss over policy matters. James steeled himself to tell Louisa of his decision over Tiffany’s wedding. Had he been rash in what he said to Tiffany? His heart was beating. He led up to it carefully.

“We - in which I of course include you - do not patronise non-events!”

Louisa had spoken. What was not of interest to Louisa did not exist.

James’s chest was thumping as if factory machinery inside was steadily pounding out pre-shaped ironware, a contrast to his finger-ends quivering with what seemed like uneven pulses of electricity. His whole body was flexed, tensed, as if sensing imminent danger. Subconsciously seeking shelter from stormy blasts, James remembered he had not finished speaking to Carl.

James rang back. The educated quietness of Carl's voice, redolent to James of comradeship at a school where physical threat had been only too real, would be soothing.

"I had a nasty experience yesterday..." Carl began. "I'd parked my car at the back of the old school Clubhouse - near the municipal rubbish tip..."

"By way of a camouflage...?"

"You may call my 'Superjet', an old banger, but it goes bloody well. It only looks as if it's falling to bits; I admit. I went to get it, at midnight. The place was deserted. A tough was shadowing me. I heard his footfalls behind me. I quickened my pace. So did he. I suppose he thought no one would get into that car? I got in, in the nick of time, and locked up. As I did, he put a hairy hand on the near side door handle. An Indian, or Pakistani, no, an Afghan. Fierce, bearded, ugh! horrible. He tried to wrench it open. He couldn't. I drove off. Mighty relieved. I got to the end of the road leaving him far behind then I thought, 'No, I'm not going to run' - not with mobile metal around me. Why be spooked? I turned the car around. I came back at him. Faster, and then faster. I must have hit 60mph. Brakes screeching - luckily they don't operate properly - alarm systems going full blast, I threw every last ounce of power into the limo. Then, I saw the tribesman. Hard at him I came. Fast. His back was to a wall. I saw a look of fear on his face. His mouth open, he froze. Thought his end had come. I was going straight at him. Helluva din, exhaust back-firing... At the last possible second, tyres squealing, I veered off, missing him by a split-second. And you know what?"

James ran nervous fingers through his hair. "Tell me?"

"...In that instant, I saw him clearly. I'd nearly run down ...the wrong man!"

"Oh!" *Where have I heard it all before? Odd! But one day, Carl will get the wrong man, in deadly earnest.*

"It was someone else. This one was an Indian."

"From the right part of the world then, at least?" James hazarded.

"Olga, give us a helping hand, would you?" Melissa called out.

After asking about their mutual friend, Michael FitzArthur, James brought the chat with Carl to an end. Office Hours was no time for gossip, he said. Carl's turn to say "Oh!" Though a businessman of sorts, he clearly worked in a very different environment.

It was... *Action stations!*

Melissa and Tommy issued instructions:

- Drinks laid out.
- Silk sheets thrown over the Casting Couch, but in disarray.
- Middlemass's latest books spread everywhere.
- A signed, framed photograph of Milord strategically positioned.
- Tommy's tie loosened. Here, Melissa obliged.
- The reclining backs of the armchairs levered further back downwards.
- A play by Edgar Fotherington 'accidentally' left on top of one of the piles.

James had to pinch himself to believe it. There was Teetotaler Tommy with Miss Prim-iscuous lolling with abandon on the *chaise-longue*, wine-filled tumblers at the ready! It was an Office fit for an orgy. The scene was set for...

Lord Middlemass shouldered his way in. He filled the grand offices with his still grander presence, radiating strength, intelligence and superiority. He was, as always, late.

"Ah, How good to see you all! Getting along so well, I see, how very good! Tommy, you delightful old rogue! How, I wonder, would you cope without your couch? I always think the inside of your office resembles one of the better brothels in downtown Munich. Dear, dear Melissa! And the sprig, I see? How are YOU getting along, young man? Good! Good...! Humblest apologies for this shameful hour. By which, of course, I mean to say I am sorry to be late and miss, well..." The shaggy eyebrows were raised a fraction. "Whatever it was that I have missed out on. I was held up by a demonstration march. I'd have loved to know what it was about. Young of today; so naughty. Us old reprobates - eh, Tommy - getting left behind. I craned me head out the taxi for a dekkko but the only placard I saw, read 'Piss Off!'"

Then, Henry Middlemass saw Fotherington *oeuvre*... everywhere!

"...That man is NOT writing, STILL, is he? Oh my God, he is!"

Henry Middlemass was as rude about Edgar as Tommy was the opposite. It was a conversational set piece between them. Tommy would boost Edgar to the skies while Middlemass shot him down. One day, no doubt, the contractual relationship between The Blotnitz Office and Edgar would come to an end. When it did, one could be quite sure that the conversation between Tom and Henry on the subject would continue as before but with Henry now acting the part of Edgar's champion.

Lord Middlemass spoke in the refined tones of inbred aristocracy but it is the aristocracy of Rome at its most debauched periods that characterises his Lordship's conversation. This is reflected in the postures of the senior Directors of Thomas Blotnitz Ltd. Lord Middlemass's face was carved in the fine lines of a roué, one who has not just drunk deep of salacious experience but has gone on to think deeply about it, to re-live it in his mind. His stately presence held hint of no ordinary vices but more those of a Nero. An aristocrat yet beneath the varnish, an imp; beneath the saturnine, there was yet a twinkle. Tommy acted up to Lord Middlemass as one born to the role. It seemed he had been lolling all day in embrace with his secretary-cum-mistress. Lord Middlemass actually clapped his hands in approval. Intimacies took on a new feel in such company. The Milord had a linguistic ability to vividly chart his progress through seamy by-ways of capital cities in a way that left little open to doubt what he did when at home in the privacy of his own privy. He made his vices sound so respectable.

A few initial pecks at the food and they got down to business. Tommy sprinkled his talk about potential new publishers for Middlemass's next book with word about their sexual habits. Peccadilloes of moguls rippled over this man-to-men-&-women chat. It is by such hints that Tommy knew how to gauge his Lordship's reaction to which Publisher in America, Soho or wherever, that Tommy might approach on his behalf. James made notes for his diary as surreptitiously as he could.

"Clarence Justinian is one of the more honest publishers. He is conscientious, he keeps tabs on booksellers", said Tommy. "...He even inspects window displays. The trouble is, I don't think we will get him to do better than a £75,000 advance in account of royalties. And he is bound to ask for an option on your next book."

His Lordship replied "All of which fails to stir the flaccid genitals!"

Faraway places are of perennial interest to Middlemass, the more sordid the better, ditto the publishers. It was agreed that no book by Middlemass was to be channeled in Clarence's direction. Tommy and Melissa knock back reddened water. Middlemass knocks back harder stuff. James stayed sober. He had been told only to drink tea in case he put his foot in things through being tipsy. As rehearsed, he told Middlemass about his recent bout of jaundice, which weakened his liver.

"Oh, I had rather supposed you enjoyed being the Death's Head Skull at the festive board. And now, this!", Lord Middlemass remarked frostily. Then he went on "Festive board! The words have such resonance to me. They conjure up dear memories of school meals. Which reminds me: You will be hearing from Crispers about a little project that he and I have been hammering out. You will of course accord him every assistance, my dear Tommy, of that I am quite assured..."

This passed James by. When the company settled down to enjoy the spread, Middlemass could relax. He asked Tommy how he felt about his native Vienna.

“The Viennese...”, Tommy replied, with a donnish air “...Are always prepared to see something phony behind every enthusiasm, a personal motive behind every ideal striving, and, when they have no other recourse, to see intellectual ambition as a piece of nonsense. Vienna has a curiously grotesque character to it. It is a lovely city with repulsive people. But they do know how to eat. The Coffee Houses, with their wonderful cakes, raise conversation to an art form...” James had never before heard Tommy speak like that but Tommy reserved his biggest surprise - for James - till last. “*Und the bier kellers...*”, Tommy went on. “No better place for communicating business, eh?”

This inspired Middlemass: “Quite! Time-honoured custom teaches man to synchronise ingestion of food with the absorption of intelligence. In Arabia, business cannot be transacted until a cloud of small-talk weighs down hooded eyelids of Sheikh and camel, blanketing them both with the idea that nothing of consequence will ever be raised. Indeed it rarely is, so fatiguing is the everlasting chew over their indigestible sweetmeats. In China, all business of note may be comprehended in the chinking dialogue of abacus and chopstick. But then rapid progress was never likely in a land where the cutlery is of chopsticks yet the staple food is rice. We British have the Expense Account lunch, a perquisite too precious to be squandered in hashing over the sordidities of Business...!”

James, lagging behind, piped up. “Not like school meals.”

“Pardon me. I should know. I was at Rudyers.”

James’s hand flew to his mouth. Another *faux pas*! Crispers! Of course! Lord Middlemass had been talking of Crispin Thynne-Fiennes, James’s old housemaster at school. So that was why he was being helpful about Thynne-Fiennes’s project. They knew one another from Rudyers as well as the Club. Tommy’s role, was it only that of middle man?

Middlemass ignored James’s embarrassment but was diverted into a new track.

“...We have a wonderful new Indian chef at the Old School Club. Every day, our Menu is cooked up afresh. The curry we offer is fanfared with optimism ever more breathless. On Monday, it begins life brewed of a recipe matured on the steaming pavements of Madras. By Tuesday, left-overs stand revealed as ‘The Last Consolation of a Maharani’ before her committal to the pyre of Suttee. On Friday, we learn the ceremony went off as planned, the curry dying the death as ‘Faggots’. Mourning is not in order. Next Monday, the ‘Chicken Agra’, as it is now described, gives way to ‘Chicken Bombay’, come Tuesday. The drifting of another seven weary days finds our chicken, now scrawnier than a Bombay duck, holed up in Cawnpore. Talk in the Club

then is if it can once more re-juvenate, and walk abroad, to turn up on the menu as that most capital of birds, Chicken Delhi!”

A pause for breath. James waited expectantly, trying to see a way of piecing together some of the jigsaw of the Agency. Did it involve the Rudyers hierarchy? No, too fanciful. Middlemass must be a pivotal part of it all? James did not dare mention Freddie’s biography. He put a query about Scarlett. What was the connection between sage and stripper? The only evidence - to James’s way of thinking - of this came from his dream but one never knew...

“Ah! You are interested in the sublime Scarlett? There is hope for the sprig yet! She is a modern counterpart of the nineteenth century courtesan, Harriette Wilson. You know the story? Lord Brougham advised Harriette to expose her old lovers, the Prince Regent included, in her memoirs unless they paid up...! Young man: why is it that you are taking notes? Has your jaundice seeped into your memory?”

“Oh! No! I mean, I don’t know!” James got out.

“I hear philosophy is now on the Rudyers syllabus?”

“Oh! Yes! I mean, I don’t know!”

“Do you know anything of Wittgenstein?”

“Oh! Yes! I know!”

“Perhaps you know of his outburst: ‘My lectures are not for tourists!’?”

By now, Tommy could stand up straight. His voice was thick and slurred. He did a manful best to come across as sober, an effort Middlemass appreciated.

“You spend too much time toiling at that desk of yours, my dearest fellow! Such a waste! Rick Cartwright! No there’s a man who knows how to drink. You should speak to lesser clients, Tommy, you might learn something from them.”

Tommy was nothing dismayed.

“Don’t tell me: You and Jolyon Danville have been on a spree together? Gives me an idea. Why don’t you branch out - into writing a play - I’ll get onto Jolyon to direct it, and, oh-ho-ho, what a ‘jollyon’ time will be had by all... Must you go so soon?”

Henry embraced Tommy and, in a courtly gesture, blew a kiss at Melissa. He threw James a lascivious wink that had about it a whiff of bamboo.

“I’m so sorry we hardly had a drink in the house!” says, but nearly sobs, Tommy, maudlin at the leave-taking, “...And don’t forget to pull the chain afterwards!” he climaxed *sotto voce* after ‘dearest Henry’ closed the office door behind him.

“Good riddance to Lord Middlemass, the rudest man I have ever met!” Melissa remarked.

Given Melissa’s upbringing in the rudest of Canadian outbacks, that was saying something. But she had spoken up for James, been supportive of him, he considered. So, she did care about him.

“And the most perverted!” added Tommy, salvaging a whole salami from the depleted table.

James regarded his father, waddling about. James admired him but, at that moment, Tommy seemed like quivering jelly. James must try to replace Tommy on the plinth he, as a father, should occupy but... Such unending charades! Such tomfoollery! It did not matter because Tommy was so successful. Had he misjudged his father? James previously had never heard Tommy utter such considered views on Vienna, or anywhere else. James caught sight of a book by Egon Friedell beneath Tommy’s desk. Only later, reading it, did James realise that Tommy had mugged up his patter about Vienna.

Rarely were the Blotnitz’s, *père et fils*, Mayfairville-bound before 8pm. To whomsoever Tommy spoke after 7pm, he produced a mutually flattering, “Only the best people are at work at this hour!” James did not fall into the category such hard workers, being only too inclined, according to Tommy, to slope off in dereliction of duty. At home, James had been reading ‘War and Peace’. In an effort to make small talk, he told Tommy he was enjoying it and was rewarded for by what might go down in literary history as an immortal phrase for a Literary Agent. Tommy sneered:

“Reading for pleasure!”