

A Glorious Thing

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A Glorious Thing

by [Liliburlero](#)

Summary

DI Keating has fallen in love with the vicar of Grantchester. It's not easy for anyone.

Notes

Thank you to [kindkit](#) for beta-reading.

The one about the ox

It was like the set-up for a slightly off-colour joke, Geordie thought. *There's a tart and a vicar, right, down at the cop-shop, and...* And then the whole concerned citizen rigamarole: an 'anonymous' tip-off—which meant the German wife, like as not, fair enough that she wouldn't want to believe it, but you'd think a clergyman would be more realistic—combined with the invincible belief of the general public that when it came to violent death, things were never as clear-cut as they seemed. True enough in its way, Geordie conceded. They were usually even clearer. Which was more than you could say for the one about the spiv and the lorryload of condemned mutton. There was murky for you. He reached for the fat folder with a sigh.

Chambers probably gave a pretty good sermon, he reflected idly, licking his index finger and flicking over another badly-forged invoice. Nice voice, well-spoken but not too plummy. Persuasive. The way he'd said *sometimes—things can be rather too clear, don't you think?*; for a half-second Geordie had been half-convinced, though of what he couldn't quite say: not that Staunton had been murdered, just that Chambers had some sort of instinct, a nose for a case. Misguided, of course. He smiled, remembering the vicar's earnestly furrowed brow and lifted chin: if a girl made that face at you, you'd call it a pout. And then, if you had the nerve, you'd lean over and kiss it off her. Lucky poor bugger, he was probably beating away the women with a shitty stick himself. A dog-collar on a young neck was catnip just for starters, and there was no denying his height (a solid four inches at least on Geordie's let's-say-five-foot-nine), wavy fair hair, square jaw and mobile cruiserweight physique. His wife, if he had a wife, was likely at war with half—exactly half—the parish. He could tease Cathy with that, the next time she started mithering about the long hours; there were worse things than having to share your fella with the Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

Geordie wasn't feeling quite so Christian when Mr Chambers showed up again. The two fraud files that he'd been putting off for days had brought him vividly and immediately back to the last year of the Great War and Miss Chivers' Arithmetic class. It had taken him a further quarter-century and another world war to discover that the rancid old bint had an instinctive talent for torture to match the best of them, which didn't, astonishingly enough, make him feel any better about any of it.

'Oh, Christ on a bike,' Geordie groaned. Beside Chambers on the bench was Bonaparte O'Coonassa (couldn't be his real name, but no-one knew it if he had another) whose flights of paranoid fantasy were inextricably entwined with a comprehensive practical understanding of every shady scheme that Mill Road had to offer. Between them, Boney and Annie could teach you everything you needed to know about what passed in Cambridge for an underworld, and about half of what you needed to know about life. Geordie beckoned Chambers into his office.

This time he'd decided he was Sherlock Holmes, or no, the priest one, that Cathy used to like when she still had time for her books, except that he was a Catholic, of course. Mr Chambers dug with the *right* foot. Establishment type, conventional, though he seemed to know his whiskey. Weren't clergymen supposed to lay off the hard stuff, or pretend they did? Detective

novels were a bloody menace. The dirty secret of police work was that most crimes got solved pretty much the same way they always had, even before there were policemen to solve them. You caught the bastards in the act, or near enough to it. Someone told you who did it, and when you hauled him in, he gave himself away. *Sleuthing*, Geordie thought scornfully, made up less of the job than the public could possibly imagine; detection was ninety per cent that other, much less glamorous thing, *collecting evidence*. He nearly said as much, but something stopped him—the irony of preaching to a vicar, maybe. As he hunted for the Staunton file in the stack on the windowsill he began an elaborate line of grouse about last night's football catastrophe instead. Chambers just stared: he probably thought the Association game was strictly for oiks. That couldn't be a pastoral advantage, even in Cambridgeshire, but it was better than a patronising pretence of interest. The chummy ones were the pits. Geordie chunked the file onto the desk and indicated the visitors' chair.

'Go on.'

Tapping a fresh cigarette against the side of the packet, Geordie noticed that he hadn't finished the one he'd left in the ashtray, and felt a fool. Bloody sums, bloody Miss Chivers and her bloody wicked steel ruler, it was all her bloody fault. He glanced over at Chambers, who had reached the note. He wondered if that slightly self-conscious calm concealed unfamiliarity with gunshot wounds to the cranium and bloodstained letters to wives and girlfriends, or its opposite. He guessed the latter somehow, though his estimate of Chambers' age and possible war service ran aground on his ignorance of how long it took to train a vicar, and (he had to admit) those rugged but still boyish good looks. Christ, why this fixation on the lad's pretty face? He was envious, that was the honest truth. Envious of men in the prime of life, because his had been taken from him. But so what? He'd got a late start at family life, that was all. One in four—among them far better men than he—hadn't made it back for a late start, or had actually left families behind. He took a measured drag of his cigarette, blew the smoke out of his nose.

'It's his handwriting?'

The cheeky sod. He wasn't standing for that.

'It's all authenticated.'

'By whom?'

Whom. Jesus Christ. He could have slapped the little shit.

'By me, Mr Chambers.' He stood up. 'It's suicide. The coroner says so, my boss says so—' Benson would say the moon was made of best Wensleydale if it meant he didn't have to hoist his fat arse out of its comfy chair, but Chambers didn't know that. 'Even the poor bugger himself. Jameson or no Jameson.'

Chambers threw the folder back onto the desk.

'Case closed?'

'Case closed.'

That was the thing about these public school types. They were mostly arseholes, but they knew how to concede a point gracefully. In the pavilion before the umpire's finger went up. He'd bet a bottle of—of Jameson Chambers went in for cricket. Having made the wager, if only with himself, he had to find out.

'I could have you arrested,' he said, as he showed him out.

'Really?' He grinned ingenuously, like it would be an awfully big adventure to spend a few hours in the cells. 'What for?'

'Wasting police time. But frankly, it was a nice diversion after the whole Hungary debacle, so —'

'I don't watch football.' A slight sneer in his voice. 'Generally leads to disappointment.'

'*Always* leads to disappointment,' Geordie said, suddenly finding Mr Chambers very hard to dislike.

'Backgammon, there's the game.'

'*Backgammon?*' The old dears who had squatters' rights in the snug of the Fighting Cocks, circa 1922, they played *backgammon*. Still, he'd won himself a bottle of Irish off himself.

'Cricket,' Chambers shrugged. *Two* bottles, at nineteen and six a twist. Imagine if he actually bought them: Cathy would crown him with the frying pan. 'Bit of rugby.'

'My next one'll be bloody badminton.'

At the door, Chambers turned and offered his hand. 'I'm sorry to have—troubled you.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Mr Chambers.' He meant it, too. Almost before he let go, he wondered if he'd held on too long, a pathetic middle-aged man trying to leach energy from one twenty years younger.

'Backgammon,' he snorted.

Chambers strode away, cheerfully hallooing, 'It's the game, Inspector, it's the game.'

That was that, then. He might see the Revd Mr Chambers again in five or six years time, if some lead had been nicked from the church roof, or in court as a character witness. He felt oddly deflated, and certainly disinclined to go back to the possibly linked outbreaks of hire-purchase fraud and shepherd's-pie-related diarrhoea on Norfolk Street.

When things got to him, he liked to be able to tell Cathy. There were lots of things he just couldn't talk about, of course, especially not now. She'd sworn blind she was past it, hadn't been cursed for six months before she started puking up her breakfast and falling asleep for half the afternoon after giving the girls their dinner, but it just went to show. But he couldn't see any harm in mentioning this.

‘Had a right one in to me today. A vicar. Convinced that a case of—death by misadventure was a murder, because he hadn’t been served the right class of whiskey when he went to enquire about the will.’

‘Like Father Brown. At least he didn’t throw plates at the wall to make sure you remembered him. Ooh, yes, just there, don’t stop. My ankles are horrid, aren’t they? Thick as me thighs.’

‘Give ower, fishing. You’re reet bonny still, and you know it. I say a vicar, but he looked like his balls hadn’t dropped.’

‘*Geordie.*’

‘Well. Young. Really young. I’m used to policemen looking like schoolboys, all right, but when did the parsons start getting young?’

‘When we—’ She yawned enormously.

‘—started to get old. Aye, I know. Come on, love, or I’ll have to carry you to bed.’

‘You used—’ She smiled hopefully, one eye winking and her head lolling on the arm of the sofa.

‘Naw, pet. I’m knackered. I’d drop you, and I’d never forgive myself.’

Entitled Ease

Detective Chief Inspector Benson shifted in his walnut swivel chair, a small fastidious movement that his bulk made seem momentous, as if the globe had wobbled on its axis.

‘Morning, Geordie. Take a—a pew.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Looks like this upcoming by-election might turn out a bit more interesting than usual. Atkins fill you in?’

‘Yes.’ Geordie recognised that his discomfort at hearing that Sidney had been one of Sir Edward Kendall’s dinner guests had very little to do with another of those guests’ subsequent suspicious disappearance, and that made the feeling all the more uncomfortable.

Benson screwed up his face, visibly suppressing fatigue. ‘How well do you know this—this vicar, this Chambers bloke?’

Geordie shrugged. ‘He was very helpful in the Staunton case. He—er, obtained the diary for us, which was crucial, but you know that.’

‘Nasty business. I don’t like to see a woman hang.’

Geordie’s grief for people who did things like shooting a dead-drunk man in the head with his own service revolver, following it up with an attempt to shove an amorous rival in front of the 10.17 to King’s Cross was, frankly, all too containable, regardless of sex. But Sidney had been rattled too, when the nervous elation of a success had worn off and it occurred to him what catching a murderer actually meant. Geordie resolved to make himself available at the vicarage, with something fairly stiff on hand—it had better be Scotch, considering—on the day Annabel Morrison went to the gallows. To Benson he said, ‘The sentence might be commuted on appeal.’

‘Hardly likely. We’re not bloody Frogs. Anyway, I was asking you about your tame God-botherer.’

‘I’ve had a few pints with him since, just friendly, like. We—’ To complete this sentence with *play backgammon and chew the fat* seemed, absurdly, like a betrayal. ‘We could sort of, you know, cultivate him.’

Benson made a sceptical noise.

‘People trust him. They tell him stuff they’d never tell one of us. I mean, he could hang about in a, kind of, whatsit, counselling capacity.’

‘All right. But don’t let him get the idea he’s—’

The idea that Sidney was not to be allowed of himself was lost in the telephone’s shrill cry.

‘Benson. Yes.’ A series of grunts, a nod and grimace confirmed the mortal end of Lilian Calthorpe. ‘Inspector Keating’s with me now, I’ll send him along.’

Geordie rang Sidney on the way out. After all, Benson had practically put his stamp on it.

It must have been a proper knees-up they’d had last night. Sidney looked as rough as he’d sounded on the phone, and there was a fair hum of booze off him. It didn’t stop him taking a squint at the body, though. Vicars see plenty, he supposed, but cleaned up, not like this.

‘Usually people don’t want to look. Seen a bit of death, have you?’

The wordless look Sidney returned said *active service* rather than *funeral parlour*. Embarrassed—Geordie found it all too easy to forget that a man just about young enough to be his son might nonetheless be on the windy side of thirty—he hastily pointed out the signs of violence and the absence of jewellery. From Sidney’s account of the party, it hadn’t really been much of a night, with accusations flying around all over the shop. That surprised him, nobs shrieking at each other like a pack of drunken keelwives. Sidney took a last look at the body and straightened up. His face was bright through the pallor of a night that had probably contained more worry and whiskey than sleep. Geordie heard himself overdoing the grizzled old cynic bit; the fact was when Sidney vibrated enthusiasm like that, he struggled not to get caught up in it.

‘Police work. It’s all about keeping an open mind, Sidney. Come with me to talk to Calthorpe? He could probably do with a bit of pastoral care.’

‘I—but look, it’s Sunday, Geordie. And my sermon’s going to be an ad lib as it is.’

‘Oh. Well.’ He’d almost said *some other time*, as if he’d asked him out for a drink. Just as well. He wouldn’t want to come to depend on Sidney; Benson would most certainly have something to say about that. ‘Good luck.’

Calthorpe was in shock, too shattered to talk at all; Geordie made an appointment to return that afternoon to take a proper statement. Sir Edward, his daughter and their guest Mr Hopkins were *not at home*, which Geordie accurately guessed meant that they viewed policemen as belonging to the servant class, and if the look the butler gave his loosened collar and well-worn mackintosh (he made a mental note to drop it into Sketchley’s) was anything to go by, not its upper reaches either. His attempt to put the screws on a bit was a humiliating failure; while wishing that the keen young DC he’d brought along hadn’t been there to see him bloody his noggin on it, he couldn’t help appreciating the snooty sod’s perfect stonewall. That was why, in plays and such, it was always the butler who did it. Damn it, he needed someone who knew how to operate in these surroundings without quite belonging to them either. He needed Sidney.

And because he needed him, he couldn’t stop goading him. He knew, of course, that Sidney didn’t come from a house like this, with Turkey carpets scattered over the flagstones and portraits of double-chinned ancestors on the oak-panelled walls, Chinese vases big enough for a child to hide in and Grecian busts in every recess. But somehow that knowledge only served to emphasise that a clergyman with a minor public school and Cambridge behind him stood closer to a baronet than he ever could to a lad made good, or fair-to-middling, out of a

tenement in Elswick, and it *hurt*. 'You soft bugger, Keating,' he mumbled, leaning over a small forest of silver-framed photographs on the marble-topped hall-stand.

'They'll never be my lot, Geordie,' Sidney said, almost angrily, as if he'd read his mind.

'So, what, they just like having a man of God to hand?'

'Something like that.' Geordie heard suburban London underlying the wireless-announcer accent, and acknowledged that being Almost But Not Quite Our Sort might be more awkward, sometimes, than being Not Our Sort At All. Before he could reflect further, a small, slim, dark-haired woman emerged from something that was probably a smoking room, or morning room, or a drawing room, or some bloody other thing that posh people called their parlours.

'Sidney! How did this happen?' Her relative physical reserve did not match the imploring tone of her voice, nor the bleak expression that drew vivacious features into what was clearly the closest they ever came to plainness (and she was still far from plain.) If he hadn't been there, Geordie realised, she would have flung herself into Sidney's arms, and for all her distress evidently dismayed him, he would have liked it quite a bloody bit. Never be my lot, my arse, Geordie scoffed to himself. He was in like Flynn here, even if she had decided to get hitched to someone else.

Then her father showed up, a lean, hard-riding sort who looked at Geordie like he was a bad smell, which he supposed he was. Bringing river mud and blood and corpses into this opulent hallway, most unsavoury. He half-heard Sidney dealing with it: *Inspector Keating—friend of mine—discretion*, and blurted truculently, 'It's harder to be discreet if I have to drag you down the station.'

He'd said it, he recognised instantly, not to disconcert Sir Edward, which was impossible anyway, but to embarrass Sidney, to punish him for—for what? For fancying a bonny lass and wanting to be on good terms with her family? Hardly a capital crime. Sir Edward pushed between them with an impatient this-way gesture. Sidney let the girl through after him, rolling his eyes over her head at Geordie, but the exasperation had affection in it. They both gazed after her neat little retreating figure.

'You sly old dog,' Geordie said, but he felt obscurely that he was somehow shooting a line.

His discomposure grew as they made their rounds of the witnesses. Amanda's father was a tyrant and her fiancé was a braying twit—women's taste in men was like the peace of God, he thought, but resisted sharing the quip with Sidney, who he felt wasn't in the mood. And yet he wasn't as pleased as he should have been for him when she revealed that things weren't all rosy in the garden with her intended. Calthorpe was a ninny; the sort of man Geordie's mam would have called *a small bit of a half-eejit*. And as for that lady don, turning to stare at Geordie as she said her lodger was a poofter, as if he knew something about it that she didn't, the thundering bitch. He shrugged it off. It was just because he was a copper, people assumed you paddled in the sewer as a matter of course.

And then he met Jennifer Chambers' coloured boyfriend. His first thought, before even that *here* was his explanation for the toffs losing their collective rag over a ring that could just

have rolled into a crack between the floorboards, was that he hoped a taste for rough ran in the family. And, try as he might, he couldn't pretend he hadn't thought it.

Intent

Geordie glanced over at Sidney's new curate, perched primly with a book behind an untouched glass of sherry that looked somehow regulation Church of England issue, doled out with the dog-collar. He probably didn't like it any more than Sidney did, but lacked the guts to protest, the sodding jessie. That was unfair, though. He'd taken a hell of a risk, letting them into Daphne Young's rooms. Geordie winced at the memory of the hasty fudge he'd had to make of the search warrant and the bollocking he'd got from Benson over it. Finch was probably just cracked on Sidney and would do anything to impress him. How could he not be? How could anyone—any man of that kind that not be? *If* he was, and not just a bit of a cissy—whose word did they have for it, anyway, only that of a murderess who had in the end only been charged with manslaughter and perverting the course of justice?

'Do we know for sure?' he ventured. 'His penchant for the opposite of the opposite sex?' He regretted it before the words were properly out of his mouth. *Penchant*. Jesus Christ on a bloody tandem.

'What business is it of yours, or mine, or any bloody one's?' Sidney replied irritably. For a delirious moment Geordie thought he'd let something slip, that it meant something, and then the pint of bitter shoved into his hand as Sidney picked up his own of orange squash reminded him what it *actually* meant.

'How long are you going to keep up this self-restraint?' he snapped back. 'Because, frankly, you're no fun any more.' He blanched at the campy note he'd struck without even meaning to, not daring to look back and meet Sidney's eye. That was the problem with it: if you let it in, just the least bit, it tainted everything, even the most casual banter. It was like scratching a jungle ulcer with dirty fingers: irresistible at the time, but the next day it would be as big as a penny and you'd be limping; within a week, a stinking amputation case.

He gestured at Finch's book with an overcompensatory bark. 'What's this?'

Finch raised it so that he could see the title. Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*.

'It'd be a busman's holiday for you,' Sidney said, with the aggravating complacency of a man who thought his Double First entitled him to comment on books he'd never so much as opened. Geordie hadn't exactly read it either, but he knew what it was about, and resented Sidney's evident assumption that he'd never heard of it. Bloke murders an old bitch of a money-lender with an axe, gets caught in the act by her sister and does her in as well, lots of agonising to a tart, finally confesses to a bad-tempered policeman, packed off to Siberia, more agonising, redemption, the end. Not his cuppa in the least, even if he'd had any time to read.

'It poses the question of whether something that is not virtuous,' Finch said in his comic little Manc pipe, 'can ever truly be justified.'

Geordie hadn't thought of it like that, but it made sense from what he knew of the story.

‘Can it?’ he asked, sort of interested despite himself.

‘No, not really.’ Bloody Norah. That was fairly—unanswerable. Finch’s posture was nervous and defensive, but his voice had the calm note of genuine authority. Floored by a sudden access of unwanted memory, Geordie looked to Sidney for rescue. He obliged with a question about the Livingstone case, but the information Geordie had to offer only sustained the conversation for about a minute. He bought himself another five seconds by lighting a cigarette before turning back to Finch, whose self-conscious absorption in Russian nihilism was becoming really pretty disconcerting.

‘So how are you finding things?’ he bellowed at him, hollow and hearty. ‘Made any—’ oh, God, it poisoned *everything*, even the plainest Anglo-Saxon word. ‘Friends?’ emerged from his throat in a strangled shriek.

Finch glanced at Sidney in mild alarm, as well he bloody might, Geordie thought, cringing. He was coming across as a complete nutter.

‘Not *friends*, exactly. Everyone’s been very—kind. Very welcoming.’

‘Maybe that’s where the old Bill are going wrong,’ he babbled. ‘Dog-collars, that’s what we need.’ What the hell was he chuntering on about? He sounded fucking loopy.

Finch smiled in polite bafflement. Sidney frowned, leaned forward, and bounded to his feet.

‘He does this from time to time,’ Geordie said consolingly. At some point, he was probably going to have to confront the deep sense of satisfaction he had in being more familiar with Sidney’s idiosyncracies than someone who actually shared a house with him, but not yet, oh Lord, not bloody yet. ‘Excuse us.’

*

They got to Robinson seconds before he claimed his ninety-seventh victim.

‘Let him do it,’ the old man said. ‘I can’t live like this. Let him do it.’ Geordie saw Sidney’s face freeze, and instinctively knew he’d once, at least once, released someone from excruciating pain. Lucky bastards, the both of them, he thought, to have had the means to end suffering. All the thoughts, he murmured to himself, taking a deep breath to stay steady on his feet when everything went grey, all the thoughts you can’t unthink.

Back at the station, he found it difficult even to be in the same room as Robinson, and he’d shared air with a fair few murderers. That toneless Scotch voice.

‘Society has to trust that a doctor knows best for his patients. You have to trust that.’

Geordie remembered Sandy Reid, moving among tattered mosquito nets in the flickering light of coconut-oil lamps, amid the stench of bedpans and suppurating ulcers, administering serum made from the blood of survivors to new ‘dip’ cases. He was a Scot too, with a very different sort of soft voice. He could have smashed Robinson’s face in, but he just ground out his cigarette in the ashtray.

‘How many?’

‘I have relatively—uninformed opinions about the police force, about theology—I leave that to you. I don’t know about your worlds, you don’t know about mine.’

Geordie wanted to say, *I had relatively uninformed opinions about railway engineering before I got a involuntary crash course in it, you smug twat*. But that wouldn’t have followed from anything but his anger, or helped anyone, least of all him.

‘But when people die,’ Sidney said, ‘our worlds collide.’

‘And when people kill—’ Geordie added, pressing the advantage.

The doctor addressed his fellow professional. ‘Sidney, you’ve sat with the dying.’

‘Many times.’

And then, the mere tradesman. ‘And you, Inspector.’

Geordie shoved his hands in his pockets and turned for the door. Though the interview room was chilly, he felt sweat springing on his brow, around his neck, in the small of his back. He thought of the courageous, brilliant, ingenious doctors who had been forced to preside over a death rate that Robinson couldn’t achieve even by resorting to murder, and he hoped Sidney could speak, because he couldn’t. Not without puking first.

‘Sometimes people are ready. Sometimes they hold on, and suffer terribly,’ Robinson announced, as if it were news to men living through the wretched, bloody, shit-stained twentieth century. Still speechless, Geordie stared at Sidney. Sidney drew a sharp, conscientious breath that took about fifteen years off him. Geordie saw him suddenly as a schoolboy, given his first small responsibility for the juniors and baffled by the lies and cruelty he discovered as a consequence.

‘I have seen,’ he said carefully, ‘how debilitating an illness can be.’

‘Then you understand.’ There was a mad, hopeful glint in Robinson’s eye.

‘No, I don’t.’ Sidney shook his head, hoarse-voiced with sincerity. Recalling Sidney’s expression in Mr Fielding’s parlour, Geordie wondered if that were more a sermon sentiment than the truth: his horror had not looked uncomprehending. Quite the opposite.

‘You’re a compassionate man, how could you not? You’ve seen Mr Fielding. He’s suffering. He wants to die.’ He sounded exasperated and emphatic, but his tight-drawn face was curiously expressionless. He looked to Geordie again, but by the time Geordie had steeled himself for the fishmonger’s-counter eyes they were already back upon Sidney, who was saying churchy things in his frank, *let’s have this out, man-to-man* voice. Geordie was ashamed to find it as soothing as he did.

‘God,’ Robinson said, forcing out the syllable as if he were speaking around an india-rubber ball. ‘I have never seen God at the bedside of someone in agonising pain.’

It was true, Geordie thought. Neither had he. He stared at the floor.

‘It’s an extraordinary thing, in those final moments. I don’t think faith makes a blind bit of difference.’

The faces started to coalesce in the green, mottled linoleum: sunken faces, slimed with sweat and pitted with sores, gapped, toothless mouths twisted in ungovernable pain. Haggard, hideous faces; beloved faces. Looking up took an effort akin to holding a man underwater to drown. Sidney said nothing. Robinson had knocked the wind out of his Christian sails. It made Geordie feel sick again, to know that his own beliefs were closer to a mass murderer’s than to Sidney’s, but it somehow gave him the means to deal with him too.

‘I do what is right,’ Robinson pronounced, with the quiet conviction of mania.

Geordie pulled himself together. This had nothing to do with the bad old days, the lives he had been powerless either to save or end. He stepped forward. This was about a deranged little Jock whose lack of belief in God was so complete that he thought he could play him. It was about old men and women knocked off in their own sitting-rooms and bedrooms—some of them wanted to be, fair enough, but others, maybe, who just seemed to Robinson’s dead-halibut eye to have reached their natural limit. He couldn’t see old Ma Livingstone volunteering to meet her Maker: she was the haunting type.

‘So,’ he said, ‘was it right when you killed Mrs Livingstone? Was it right when you killed Miss Shepherd?’

Geordie sat down at the table. It was all right now, just part of the job.

‘They were old. They were dying.’

‘They were living too—’ Sidney exclaimed, feelingly. That was a bit much. Hamming it up for the old dears in the pews was one thing, but it wouldn’t do any good with this heartless fucker.

Robinson’s head jerked around, like something clockwork. ‘You’ve killed. You were both soldiers. You both fought. It was your duty to take lives.’

Geordie leaned back. He felt calm, detached; dangerously so. He could even have said: *Not me, pal. Not for most of it. No more duty than to protect the security of His Majesty’s armed forces, whatever that meant in an atap hut with miles of jungle and a few vicious Japs between you and the nearest newspaper or bottle of beer.* But he didn’t want Sidney to know that about him. Not yet.

‘And it is your duty to save them.’ That was the thing about Sidney. He made life difficult for himself, but really he was just so completely straight and simple. It was almost embarrassing.

‘My conscience is clear. I doubt even you could say that, Mr Chambers.’ That was a low blow; perceptive in its way, though it didn’t take much to see through Sidney’s composure to the fretful heart. Geordie remembered Robinson’s birthdate from when they were booking him in. 14/1/94: he too must have—but likely as not he just drove a desk, well away from any

front. Or perhaps, in some field hospital, he'd got a taste for making imperious decisions— It didn't matter, anyway, none of it mattered. They had what they needed for now. He drew the interview to a close; called a PC to take Robinson back down to the cells.

Sidney was as rattled as hell. His shoulders sagged, tense and disconsolate; his complexion was grey and blotchy.

'Come on, man,' Geordie said, steering him into his office.

He took the bottle of Bells from his filing cabinet. Not quite up to Sidney's expensive taste in Irish, but it would do. He poured a couple of decent measures and dangled the glasses in his friend's face. He took a surprisingly lengthy moment to take one; long enough for Geordie to think *if the bastard havers for another second I'll put them down, grab him by the lapel and kiss him until we're both gasping, his prick's painfully hard and he's begging me to do something about it*. But he took the drink, so that was okay, the thought could be relegated to the filthy pit it crawled out of.

'Do you believe—' Oh hell, *no*. Not the conversion attempt. Not now.

'What?' Geordie growled.

'—there's ever justification for killing?'

He knew what he meant. He pretended he didn't. That's what you did, wasn't it? Said no when you meant yes, like a drunk lass tottering down a dark ginnel with a fella she was trying to convince herself she trusted.

He sat down heavily, reached for his fags. 'Do you think I'd be in this job, if I thought that?'

Sidney gulped at his drink. When he surfaced, his voice was rough with it. 'What about war?'

'War's different.' Geordie tapped his cigarette against the desk. Yes, war was bloody different. War was when you held another man's heaving, desperate body against your own and offered what comfort you could, however you could. He couldn't tell Sidney about his war and leave that part of it out. Well, he could. He just didn't want to. 'You know it's different,' he said crisply.

'Did you kill, Geordie?'

The truth was he didn't know. Probably. In that fog of confusion and sleep deprivation, three weeks after he'd arrived in Singapore, he'd fired at Japs in steaming blind back alleys and the Go-Downs by the Empire Docks. One surrealistic skirmish had taken place in a smart shopping street with bright handbags and frocks and scarves in the miraculously unbroken windows. Some of the Japs had fallen down; their blank foolish bodies didn't get up again when he stumbled past them.

'What do you think?' he muttered. It was a pitiful evasion. He would tell Sidney, one day. It was difficult, that was all, to imagine talking about it except under the conditions that might loosen anybody's tongue: he'd let bits and pieces slip to Cathy, when she was naked and

drowsy and he was the same. He hoped she didn't remember them. Cathy belonged to his present, not the unspeakable past that had no women in it to love. But here was Sidney, undoubtedly in his present too, complicating it. Sidney drained his glass with a consummating sigh that didn't make anything less complicated.

'One for the road?' Geordie asked.

He held out the tumbler. Geordie slung a reckless three fingers into it.

'Good to have you back.' He knew he had at last found the person he could tell the whole story to, the story he thought he had both to set his face against and carry silently to the grave. But not yet. He had to wait for this foolish infatuation to wear off, so that it would be an act of total honesty, without ulterior motive. It was, after all, a matter of intent.

A man's private life

‘I’m as pissed off about it as you are, Geordie,’ Benson said, rubbing at a blue-black ink-spot on his meaty middle finger. ‘But it’s out of our hands.’

‘I don’t—one bloody charge. *One*. He’s been bumping off his patients for twenty-five years. At least. He confessed.’

‘They’re holding back the Shepherd charge for a separate—’

‘It stinks.’ Geordie slumped and flung his arm over the back of the hard chair. ‘Do you know what’s really going on?’

Benson glanced up at his office door. ‘Well. This doesn’t go beyond these walls, you understand?’

Geordie nodded.

‘I’m on a—ah, a sort of committee—’

Geordie suppressed a grin. Benson’s Freemasonry wouldn’t be a running joke if he didn’t so very grimly maintain a wholly unnecessary secrecy.

‘—with—well, best not say. Somebody in the know. And the feeling On High is that with the National Health the way it is, they can’t afford to hang a doctor—’

‘So we should brace ourselves for drugs registers having grown legs and slipped away into the night? Mass outbreaks of witness amnesia, that sort of thing?’

‘Looks like it. I’m sorry. I—know how it feels.’

‘All part of the job, isn’t it, sir?’ Geordie favoured Benson’s fountain pen with a particularly bitter grimace.

‘Look, speaking of—ah. Well, I won’t beat about the bush. Your baby boy is quite poorly, isn’t he?’

Who had told him that? Geordie wondered. He’d been careful not to mention it, not even to Sidney, though God knows he’d wanted to, and a couple of times when they’d both been fairly well-oiled he’d nearly let something drop. Cathy was quite thick with a few of the other wives, that was probably it. Or perhaps the quack was in Benson’s Lodge.

‘Just the usual. The sort of thing all kiddies catch in the first few months.’

‘Geordie. That’s not true and we both know it. I want you to take a fortnight’s leave. For starters. Beginning tomorrow.’

‘Sir—’

Benson raised his hand. 'Not open for negotiation, Detective Inspector. Brief Atkins before you go.'

Oh, Christ on a high nelly. Geordie saw the prospect of getting convictions out of the Six Bells racket recede into invisibility. Not to mention the rest. Benson had a much higher opinion of Atkins than he did. They were the same sort of copper: so devoted to the obvious that they missed the thing staring them in the face. He wished, not for the first time; hell, not for the first time that *day*, that Sidney was on the force. 'With respect, sir, he's not ready—'

'Bollocks, Geordie. He'd be quite capable if you could bring yourself to give him his head, and this is the perfect chance. Best thing all round.'

'I won't know what to do with myself. I'll be under Cathy's feet all day—she won't thank either of us.'

Benson made a fist and brought it down on the desk with a precise, resonant thud. 'Don't bloody argue with me, Keating. You're not indispensable. Not here. But you are to Cathy and the girls. Just—' his jowls sagged unexpectedly and he blinked rapidly, twice. 'Spend some time with—so you remember what he looks li—oh, just go, all right? Get out.' He indicated the door with a jerk of his head.

Too bemused to protest, Geordie went. He made a detour to the typing pool, where he had his suspicions confirmed—Benson had a daughter who'd died of measles before the war—and was assured they'd keep an eye on Baby-face Atkins in his absence. He didn't even bother to express surprise. The typing pool was oracular.

Benson's parting words followed him about. Every time he heard their echo he resolved to go upstairs and sit with the bairn a bit, give Cathy a break or a bit of support. But he couldn't stand to listen to the sinister whoop, that seemed to grow in strength as the child weakened. So he convinced himself he was more use out in the garden, chopping firewood that they wouldn't need for at least four months, thinking of how he might finally dismantle the Anderson shelter. One evening he tried to cook tea, to Esmé's sceptical running commentary.

He slammed down the knife. 'I don't give a s—I mean, I don't care how your mam does it, see? This is how I do it. Now shut the—pipe down.'

A month ago she might have run off wailing. Now she cocked her head and pursed her lips. 'You should go and drink beer and play backgammon with Mr Chambers,' she said sagely. 'That makes you—relaxed.'

'What the—' His hands were full, or he might have done something he'd have regretted. 'You cheeky little madam—'

She slid down from the chair, dropped a curtsy with a Shirley Temple smirk, and skipped towards the hall, shrieking bossily at one of her sisters.

The tea was revolting, a scandalous waste of decent brisket. Cathy was forgiving, which he could bear a good deal less easily than reproach. He washed up as penance. Esmé, whose enthusiasm for stories of plucky heroines pulling off daring rescues had received a boost

from the Taylor house-fire, organised her sisters into a bucket line to dry and put the crockery and pans away. He set them loose in the garden and went upstairs.

He leaned against the bedroom doorjamb.

‘It was disgusting. Admit it.’

‘It was all right. Thanks for trying. If you—’ She looked sidelong, running her fingers along the rail of the cot. The baby was quiet for the first time in hours, sniffing as he slept.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘No, what?’

‘If you’d just watch him—I could get a few things done. Look at this place. Like a bomb’s hit it. And we wouldn’t—’

‘Have to eat old boot-leather for tea?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You meant it.’ He moved towards her. ‘Look, pet, sitting here with him all hours won’t—won’t—’ he swallowed *keep him alive*, and said, ‘make him better.’

Before he could put an arm around her, she turned on him, clearly on the brink of tears but too tense to let them fall. ‘How can you—you’ve—sat with people before. I know you have.’

‘I—that’s not fair. It was different.’ It was a shameful excuse, but it was true. It was hard enough when the patient had some life behind him, some experience that you shared and could connect to. It was hard enough when he had a man’s strength and fight in him. It was hard enough when he knew what was killing him. To stand by while a helpless creature who didn’t even know what he had to live for struggled against something that he couldn’t understand, who would die long before he knew what death was, that was impossible.

‘How? How is it different? Except he’s your own son.’

Provoked by the scorn in her eyes, he raised his voice above a sickroom murmur to ordinary speaking volume. ‘It just is, all right? It just bloody well is.’ The child immediately started to whinge. Geordie steeled himself for the cough. ‘Sorry. Sorry. I’m—’

‘Oh, for goodness sake.’ Cathy reached down into the cot. ‘You’re right. You’re useless. A spare part,’ she said with the tonelessness of total contempt. ‘Go on, go down the pub.’ The child in her arms convulsed in a series of sharp little barks. He fled before it could be succeeded by the uncanny, echoing gasp, far too loud and penetrating, it seemed, to be produced by lungs so small. He didn’t make it. The whoop, and Cathy’s sobs, caught him at the bottom of the stairs. He paused, and headed for the door.

He was working off his hangover on the logs when Sidney showed up bearing murder. There was hardly a decision to be made. Even Benson must see that Atkins couldn't handle a murder investigation. And Cathy—well, she'd said it. Useless. A spare part. She could hardly blame him for going back somewhere he could actually do some good.

A tetchy interview with the slimy landlord of the Red Lion, an awkward pint with Atkins and a fraught conversation with Benson later, Geordie was regretting it about as much as he'd ever regretted anything. Talk about out of the frying pan. The phone rang. It was Sidney.

'I—look, I was cycling along Regent's Terrace, and even at that time in the morning, there were heaps of people about. There's no way a murderer would have risked it in the open. Even among the bushes; they not very thickly planted. And then I saw—' His voice, small and tinny over an indifferent phone line, nonetheless displayed the strain arising from an attempt to speak neutrally and forthrightly of something disgusting. 'He didn't have to. I mean, the public lavatory. I think Taylor was stabbed in there.'

'And let me guess, you think he didn't nip in because he happened to be caught short?'

'Why would he? Downing College is *on* Regent's Terrace. He had rooms there.'

'With their own nicely appointed private facilities. Makes sense. Sort of,' he added hurriedly. 'Thanks. I'll get onto it.'

'May—may—I? I mean, he was my parishioner. I think he might have tried to tell me about some of this before he—'

Geordie felt himself blanch and was glad Sidney wasn't there to see it. He could hardly come over a stickler for regulation now, though, after everything he'd let Sidney in on. And this, anyway, was nothing like—what he felt, either back then, or now. Dominic Taylor hadn't been isolated, desperate, forsaken in a hostile wilderness. He'd had a huge pile of a house, an attractive wife and sweet kids, and he still hadn't been able to control himself. And maybe it was a good thing to be reminded, in Sidney's company, of the consequences of such a loss of self-control.

It didn't make it any easier to actually stand there, staring down at the bloodstains while Sidney outlined his horribly convincing theory. He could only hope that, having seen a vicar go in with the two of them, fairly obvious Plod, the queers would give the place a wide berth for a bit, but that was probably wildly optimistic. And Atkins, bless his little cotton-wool mind. They didn't go in for some of the tactics used by the Met., it was true: the Super. still took a pretty dim view of *agent provocateur* stuff, so gross indecency arrests weren't as frequent as they might be. But all the same, there was a cabbage patch somewhere out by Fen Ditton missing a prize-winning specimen.

'I think his wife knew he was a homosexual,' Sidney said. His instinct for a lead had wiped out his former embarrassment: he spoke with pulpit clarity and enunciation. Right on cue, two poofs came in. Practically arm in arm.

How stupid or brazen did you have to be? Perhaps they did need to get a few pretty PCs down here, if had got that blatant. Geordie glared at them. The older, savvier one got the

message, and turned tail; his companion tried to bluff it. Atkins looked enquiringly at Geordie. He nodded, meaning *let him pass*. Like a lunatic Jack Russell, Atkins snapped at the wrong end of the stick and clung to it. And once he'd done it, Geordie had no choice but to back him up. That was just how it was, between coppers. After a time-wasting pantomime back at the station, ending in the man's release with a caution, Geordie cursed himself for not anticipating it, but he simply hadn't noticed how rattled Atkins was. He hadn't thought it possible that an officer who'd done CID training could *be* that rattled by a sordid, commonplace nuisance.

By the time they got to Marian Taylor he was rattled himself, and he treated her badly. Her passivity irritated him—perhaps that was what had appealed to her husband, someone who made him feel more of a man by being even more limp-wristed than he was. He wanted to give her a good shaking, show her how the world really worked. 'Dominic loved me,' she bleated, 'Dominic dealt with the accounts.' The middle classes were a bloody howl. He could imagine what his mam would have said to a woman who let her husband control the household budget. What Cathy would have said. Asking for trouble, that was.

But that wasn't the end of it. He wanted to show Sidney, too. Let him know that this gentleman's agreement bullshit—*privacy*—wouldn't fly. Not when someone had been stabbed to death. If they were going to work together, as it seemed they were, as Geordie wanted them to, as Benson (astonishingly) seemed to be letting them, Sidney needed to understand what sort of a job he was doing, one that meant gaining people's confidences and betraying them for the greater good. He needed to know what sort of a man he was working with, a man for whom the job came first, who couldn't afford to respect people's finer feelings. Sidney's merry voice echoed down the months—could it just be months? it felt like years, it felt like always—of their friendship, as it had echoed in the station corridor: *It's the game, Inspector; it's the game*. He wasn't wrong, it was in its way a game, and Sidney's instinctive perception of that made him a better detective than Atkins, than Wilkinson, than Benson, maybe better than Geordie himself. But if it was a game, it was one with no gentlemen, only players.

That night he was woken by the bairn's coughing to find Cathy flat out on the spare room bed. He dithered over the cot. Cathy deserved her kip, better than anyone. Perhaps if he picked him up, he would quieten, and she could get another half hour. But then the whoop came, and no mother could sleep through that. She stirred and sat up, blurred and blinking and—beautiful. Her frizzy red hair was on end and her face was puffy and creased in the yellow mixture of moon- and street-light, and she was still the loveliest thing he'd ever seen. His redemption.

'S'all right, Geordie. I'll—what time is it?'

It had been twenty-five to three by the bedside clock when he got up. 'Nearly three.'

'There's nothing you can do. Get some sleep.'

He crept back to bed, ashamed of being a man.

The next day Sidney was at the station with a lead.

‘Hall found them *what*? Where? But why would—when he had rooms in town, and yon big house—’

Sidney ran a hand through his hair and shrugged. ‘I think Taylor must have had a sort of—a fetish for it. In lavatories. It adds up when you think about it.’ His colour rose slightly.

‘I don’t want to think about it.’ But he did, and what he thought was *if I could have you, Sidney Chambers, it wouldn’t be in a stinking jacks, not if there was anywhere else on the planet we could go*. He pulled himself up hard: how could he do this, when seven hours earlier he’d almost wept over his wife’s stoical grace?

‘He’ll help with the enquiries as long as he remains anonymous.’

‘That’s good of him,’ Atkins interjected. He had a bloody point, for once.

‘If you can just guarantee his privacy, that’s all I ask—’

Oh, bloody Norah. English gentlemen should be able to bugger who they damn well please in the privacy of their own castles, was that it? Ladies and gentlemen, a correction to your scorecards: Chambers, S.J. is S.J. Chambers.

Atkins, revelling in new-found cynicism, growled something that he probably thought sounded worldly-wise. Geordie barely heard it.

‘Arrest Tobias Hall for blackmail,’ he said. And added, since he had nothing now to lose, ‘Arrest Ben Blackwood. Find out where he was on the day of the murder.’

Sidney put his hand on the desk and leaned down, earnest and frowning. Geordie caught the clean pine scent of his soap and turned his face away.

‘You know what this means for him. You’re not thinking straight.’

He knows, Geordie thought, Sidney knows, I don’t know how but he knows, maybe it’s some God thing, some vicar thing, but he knows what I’m thinking, about me and him, and before he could reflect that that was the very definition of *not thinking straight*, he roared, ‘Don’t you tell me what I’m thinking,’ and walked out.

As soon as Geordie sat down across the table from the Blackwood boy in the interview room he knew he hadn’t killed Taylor. It wasn’t the alibi; Geordie had seen the girl, a soft, fluffy blonde who wanted a nice boy, a sweet boy, one who wouldn’t pester her. The prosecution would cut through her like a knife through whipped cream, if it came to it, but it wouldn’t come to it, because Ben Blackwood hadn’t stabbed Dominic Taylor. He’d loved him, or thought he had, because when you were eighteen and all you’d ever got from a lonely, widowed or abandoned parent was anger and admonishment you were so desperate for someone to love you that you’d think slipping into the Red Lion’s reeking Gents for a snog and a feel from a married bloke twice your age counted as love. Well. In his own case it had been a woman, and the washhouse at the end of the row. But there was no point kidding on it wasn’t the same thing.

When Sidney came down the station he told him that Ben was still a suspect. It was technically the truth. ‘Practised liar,’ Geordie said, ‘his kind have to be,’ still half-hoping Sidney would see he meant *my kind too, and yours, if you’re going to hang around*. But the implications of him understanding that weren’t to be borne, so it was better that he didn’t.

‘There was a better way to do this,’ Sidney said. Geordie couldn’t see it, if there was. And Sidney didn’t get a chance to tell him, because they had to go and tear Vic Blackwood off his son’s throat. The words were the universal ones of parental disappointment. Geordie heard them in a different pitch of voice, a different accent: ‘Do you know what I’ve done for you... I can’t even look at you.’ He promised there and then never to say them to his children—his *son*. The son he could barely look at as it was, who wasn’t going to grow up to be a credit or a disappointment. He left Ben to Sidney. That was his department, wasn’t it: harlots and publicans?

The house was quiet when he got home. He stood paralysed at the bottom of the stairs, bone-chilled despite the warm, muggy day and his mac. Then the coughing began, feeble but piercing. He couldn’t have thought it possible he’d be glad to hear it, but life was full of nasty surprises. He climbed the stairs.

Cathy was crouched on a stool by the cot, staring through the railings as the little body in it went limp and then tensed up for the next bout of coughing. Geordie went over to her, meaning to hold her in his arms, but it was like she was behind glass. He couldn’t even put his hand on her shoulder.

‘Martha’s taken the girls for their tea,’ she said flatly. ‘I had to call the doctor again.’

‘What’d he say?’

She twisted her head around without moving her body. Her face was lined and pinched, unstained by tears, her mouth a wide, wobbly gash of pain.

‘No, love, no.’ He reached out, but the glass was still there. ‘They’re not infallible. They get things wrong all the time.’

‘If—if the fever breaks in forty-eight hours, he has—a chance—’

‘See? What did I say?’

She turned back to the cot. ‘There are forty-six hours left. I’ve been counting them.’

‘Aw, hinny. Come here.’ He hugged her, but there was no relief in it: her body was rigid but unresisting, like one of the girls’ china dolls, the ones they didn’t play with except for best. ‘It’ll be all right. You’ll see.’ He didn’t believe it, and it showed.

She stepped back, breaking the embrace. ‘You better go and ring Benson.’

‘Benson? What’s he got to do with it?’

‘Your leave. You’re taking the rest of it now, aren’t you?’

It hadn't occurred to him. He supposed he ought. The child in the cot writhed and stiffened; the convulsive hacking was succeeded by an unearthly skirl. Cathy's mouth twitched and she looked at the floor, but she didn't turn back to the cot. She'd been listening to it for days, Georgie realised, with no respite. For her, that probably wasn't even a particularly bad one.

'Pet—I *can't*. This Taylor case. It's murder, now—' had he even told her that? 'We thought we were getting somewhere, but we've no weapon and the chief suspect—well, you know sometimes that the person who had every reason to do it just didn't, but he's involved somehow—'

'Shut up, Georgie. I don't care.'

'What?'

'I said I don't care. I don't care about your murder. I don't care if half Cambridge is running amok stabbing the other half. David—David is dy—' Her eyes brimmed as she wrestled with the word, but did not spill. 'And if you don't ring Benson now, I will.'

He grabbed her by the upper arms as she made for the door.

'Don't you dare—' he snapped. He saw then the fear in her eyes as well as the determination, and loosened his hold. Was that what he had come to: replaying all the incontinent emotion and casual violence of his youth? 'I'm useless here. You said so yourself. A spare part, you said.'

'Oh, Georgie.' She wrenched herself away and went back to the cot. 'Detective Inspector, and you haven't the motherwit of this poor soul here.' The poor soul gurgled, sounding for once, almost normal, almost well.

'Why'd you say it, if you didn't mean it? Anyway, you were right.'

'Yes.' She sank down onto the stool. 'Yes, I was right. Go on, piss off.'

He stood, stunned. Cathy never swore. She wasn't prim about it; she'd hardly have put up with him for the last eight years if she were. She just never did it herself.

'Come on, love—you don't mean—'

'I didn't, then. I do now.' She turned, her mouth taut and cruel below devastated eyes. 'Piss off. Leave us alone. Do whatever you like.'

Georgie had always prided himself a bit on having more imagination than most policemen. But clearly he didn't, because *whatever you like* turned out to be staying in the Bell until closing time, followed by a frowsty, sour-mouthed Sunday morning supervising Atkins' slow-witted progress through the search report. By lunchtime his hangover was howling for a cure, and by teatime he was pissed again. Then suddenly Sidney was there, and that meant it was all going to be all right. Sidney was his luck. They hadn't parted on very good terms, last time, but the Taylor case was putting the wind up everyone. They'd have a drink or two, and

a game of backgammon, and Sidney might even beat him, because he was, admittedly, a couple of pints ahead.

‘Sidney!’

Sidney was trying to look disapproving; well, he had to keep up appearances, in a pub in his clericals on a Sunday afternoon. But there was a smile twitching his lips and the corners of his eyes. He made him look—content somehow, and just a little shy about it. It did wonders for looks already in the celluloid class. That Jerry piece was back in town, maybe that was it. Geordie didn’t entirely like the idea, but you could hardly blame her—hardly blame either of them.

‘Sidney, you sly old dog you.’ He clapped a hand on his shoulder. God, it felt good: muscular, broad and bearing. A bit of human contact, that was just the ticket. ‘Tell me something interesting.’

From there, it was the most natural thing to move his hand upwards, take Sidney’s neck and jaw in a—what was the word, like an uncle, *uncular*, *avuncular*, there you go—grip. His skin was dry, smooth-shaved but rugged, a real man’s skin. Women’s skin was so soft it was creepy, sometimes. Nice most of the time, but you needed a bit of the other thing too. Sidney’s eyes flicked minutely to his hand. Geordie saw, with gut-twisting clarity, his misjudgement, his unwitting self-betrayal. He hung on, helplessly: he couldn’t snatch his hand away, that would compound it. ‘Tell me about the German,’ he rasped. Christ, now he sounded like a peeping Tom on top of it all.

‘How’s David?’ Jesus. He was a fool, not to have expected that particular bucket of cold water, but it came almost as a relief, put an easier construction on Sidney’s uneasy sufferance of his touch. He felt rotten about that too: what sort of a shit was he, that he would rather let Sidney think him a neglectful father than guess—guess what? There was nothing in it. Just a gesture of affection between pals. He let his hand drop.

‘One and six, please,’ said the barman.

His face flaming with more than best bitter, Geordie took refuge in a privilege that, sober, he thoroughly deprecated. ‘I’m a police officer,’ he mumbled.

‘One and six, please,’ he barman repeated with a sigh. Little sod, making him look a fool. This place was on the skids, anyway. The beer was crap. Sidney was reaching into his pocket.

‘Don’t pay—don’t pay him. I’m a police officer.’

‘Geordie.’

‘Show some bloody respect—’ This friendly pint wasn’t going as well as he’d hoped. Sidney handed over some coins.

‘How’s David, Geordie?’

What happened to *a man's right to his private life*? He didn't think much of this, as a replacement for backgammon, but two could play.

'Have you got in her knickers yet? The German.' He flinched at his own crudity. He didn't like thinking of Sidney like that.

'If he dies, and you're not there, how will you live with yourself?'

Oh, straight out with the big guns. Except the answer was the same, wherever he was when the bairn—when it happened.

'I have work to do. Got a dead pansy. No leads.'

'He's your son, Geordie.' Why did people keep fucking *saying* that? He knew he was his bloody son, as certain as any father ever could be—oh, hell, *there* was a thought that he needed like a hole in the head—

'You should be there,' Sidney added.

Fury welled and brimmed, rapid and unsteady, as it always was for him in drink. Sidney had a bloody nerve, coming in here and lecturing him in his pastoral voice, his level, sincere voice that made all the old biddies weak at the knees—well, *he* wasn't one of Sidney's female fanclub—making him, however momentarily, doubt Cathy, who was the most faithful wife in England, in the world—what did Sidney know about marriage, anyway, about family life? He couldn't even pull himself together to propose to that Amanda one, and now she was spoken for, the Kraut—he played the tolerant, unjudgemental man of God, giving houseroom to nancy boys and all sorts—but he had no idea, no idea—couldn't catch a wife for all his height and strength and glorious, magnificent, angelic looks—scared of women, probably, at the bottom of it all—and he poured his frustration into busybodying, interfering in police business—and all the while mouthing off about *private life*—

'And you,' he said, punctuating the words with jabs to Sidney's chest, enjoying both the resilience of the musculature there and the sensation of wilful, pointless destruction. 'You should stop pissing about.' He grabbed a fistful of black serge, feeling the living warmth beneath, wishing clerical outfitters didn't have quite such high standards of craftsmanship. He'd have liked the cloth to tear in his hand.

'Just admit it. You hate your life.' He saw, with satisfaction, that he'd landed a blow, and reeled in his advantage, pulling Sidney's face close to his, inhaling that sweet, resinous soap-smell. He felt a sort of vicious elation, like the moment when you know you're going to get off with a real bitch, one you secretly can't stand but can't keep your hands off either. 'You hate it so much that you have to screw up everyone else's.'

'It's fine, we're fine—' It took Geordie a hopeful moment to realise that Sidney was speaking to the concerned and approaching barman. He let him go with a shove.

'Oh, you think I don't care,' he said, half to the pub at large, dimly aware he was acting the part of the obstreperous drunk to perfection. They should give him a bloody Oscar. Best

Supporting—supporting wasn't really his strong point, though, was it? He sighed. 'I'd give my life for my boy. But I can't, can I? There's nothing I can do.'

He'd said those very words once before, before he was a father. He'd meant it then too. And the boy—the man—had died, half a world away from home, with only Geordie at his side. He couldn't afford to remember that.

'Go home.' Terry's bones were in the cemetery at Camp 206, six thousand miles away. There was no going home for him. He couldn't explain that to Sidney. Not because Sidney didn't know how it felt to lose a mate, a pal, a member of your unit. Because he did. But Terry had been more than a mate, a pal—and it would be a betrayal of his memory to pretend he hadn't been, to Sidney of all people. He just had to try and forget it.

'Scotch.'

'You're a selfish bastard,' Sidney said, and walked out.

Fair comment, Geordie thought, taking a gulp of his pint as the barman put down the whisky. It was right that Sidney should despise him. It was bound to happen, when someone honest, straight and clean dabbled in Geordie's world of murk, crookedness and lies. Better that than him getting soiled and corrupted by it.

But Sidney couldn't stay away. He arrived at the station hot on Ben Blackwood's heels with the theory that the boy had made a false confession to protect his father. Geordie thought it sounded like more detective-novel stuff, too symmetrical to be true, but about a minute and a half with Ben was enough to confirm he hadn't killed Taylor. He might be able to plan a shady assignation or sham interest in a pretty girl, but faced with 'what did you do with the knife?' he looked shifty and defiant, like Esmé asked to say her nine times table: he just didn't know. False confessions would be funny, if they weren't so abject and tragic: people really did seem to think that the investigation stopped short, right there, no further questions asked, which if it were left up to boneheads like Atkins, it might. So they fetched up at the crime scene again. There was a certain self-punishing gratification in being able to emerge from the cubicle of a public shitter and say to Sidney, with an irony that bordered dangerously on camp, 'Now who's a selfish bastard?'

He did not expect him to respond, with devastating suitability to the scene, 'I'm sorry for wasting your time. It won't happen again.'

He wondered again what Sidney Chambers knew. About him. About himself. On his way back to the station, he dropped into the Eagle for something short to steady his hand. He'd barely raised his wrist before he saw that things absolutely couldn't be let stand as they were. He drove out to Grantchester, wishing he'd had one more and hoping that Sidney himself, not that ferocious old bag of a housekeeper, would answer the vicarage door. As it turned out, it was far worse than that.

'Oh, hello, Inspector.' Finch's voice was pleasant, but his eyes were hard and dull. Looked at from his point of view, Geordie supposed, it was pure persecution. He wasn't at all sure he wasn't right. On the other hand, sane legislation would still have to protect underage boys

and keep it out of the public eye. It wouldn't have saved a man who had a fancy for doing it with a teen-ager in half the nettles in Cambridge. 'Inspector? How can I help you?'

Geordie realised he was staring gormlessly over the curate's shoulder: he was doomed, it seemed, always to make a pillock out of himself when Finch was around. 'Ah, is, is Si—'

'If you're looking for Sidney, he's in the churchyard.'

'Thanks.'

'A pleasure, Inspector. Good day.' Finch smiled quickly, tightly, and shut the door on him.

Sidney was scrubbing moss off the perimeter wall of the churchyard. Geordie instantly recognised the impulse towards physical makework, that was supposed to stop you thinking but just gave you more time to brood.

Sidney got up and strolled over, wiping his hands on his trousers. His usual spruce, dog-collared appearance gave the open shirt and worn corduroys an especial savour that Geordie wasn't going to think about. Sidney's mouth moved wordlessly. Geordie swallowed, dry and dusty.

They began to speak in chorus. 'What I said—' Geordie had only ever done that with Cathy. He didn't know what it meant. It was probably pretty soppy to think it meant anything. Just a coincidence. But Sidney didn't believe in coincidence.

'Sorry—you go—'

Now it had got daft: which if them was Cary Grant and which Katherine Hepburn? He nearly said it, but thankfully realised in time how it would sound. Anyway, there was an apology to be got over first.

'I've not been myself lately.'

'Understandably—' Sidney's voice was light, nervous; different from the one in which he delivered vicariously reassurance and absolution. Geordie felt the urge to comfort in his turn, and started to speak, not even sure what he was saying. But Sidney got in a fraction in front of him, 'Calling you a selfish bastard—'

That long southern a. There were a few words in which he'd never get used to it. 'It's not far from the truth,' he mumbled, looking down at the ground. When he glanced up again it was not Sidney's face he saw but Terry's, or the two not-so-dissimilar faces superimposed, Sidney's heavier features under Terry's lighter jaw and thinner lips, stretching in the same rueful smile with the same creases at the corners; Sidney's full, pale cheeks, translucent like a net curtain over Terry's hollow, hungry skull, the same squinty blue eyes and fair eyebrows, that looked healthy and at home in Sidney's face, crazy, almost grotesque in Terry's wizened, sunburned, stubbled one.

Before he had time to think about it, he said what he had said then, *that time*, and whichever way he looked at it, he couldn't pretend to himself he hadn't said it in hope of the same

response.

‘I’m scared, Sidney.’

For a moment, he thought he was going to get it, too, because Sidney nodded, shakily, minutely, as Terry had then, *that time*, and said, as Terry had then, ‘Yeah, I know.’

He raised his hands, and for a second Geordie thought they would stay raised and open at the level of his waist, make a tiny twitch of invitation, as they had *that time*, on the way back from the village whose real name they never learned, that they called Leicester Square, that he would step like a sleepwalker into the inviting gesture and find his chin nudged upwards and his mouth full of a man’s hard, undismissable tongue, that he would get a hard, undismissable stand that he hadn’t thought possible on the rations they got, that a big, cracked hand would slip into the loose waistband of his shorts, pulling his loincloth aside to wank him with a sort of tender impersonality, that he’d feel a bright, barmy, light-headed joy, that he’d gasp, as he was about to come off, ‘But my shorts,’ that Terry would drop easily—it couldn’t have been easily, because Terry was six foot one and already a martyr to his undernourished, rickety, swollen joints, but it seemed easily—to his knees, push down Geordie’s precious half-rotten shorts and dip his mouth over Geordie’s prick and grab his saggy, bony arse, encouraging him to thrust, that the whole noisy vivid green world would go a bit woozy, that he would return to find himself leaning against a cassia tree, with Terry getting to his feet and saying, ‘Not a speck on your shorts, mate. Don’t look so shocked. It don’t mean you’re queer. It means you ain’t scared no more,’ that he was right, he wasn’t, it was a miracle, he wasn’t scared for hours, days almost, and when he and Terry could manage it, scrounge the time alone, they fell into each other, banishing fear.

Sidney dusted his hands and rested them on his hips.

‘I won’t interfere again,’ he said, ‘In that or work.’

It took Geordie a long, hard minute to realise that by ‘that’ Sidney meant his family life, and not *that*. Sidney was, after all, just a vicar, not a mindreader. The guilt that he felt at having forgotten a dying child in a dream of the deranged and degenerate past would have to *wait*. Grateful that he had ‘or work’ to take him up on, he said, ‘Shame. In another life you’d have been my Chief Inspector.’

He froze. It poisoned *everything*. But Sidney, normal, normal, *normal* Sidney took it absolutely straight. ‘I’m not sure about that—’ he said, sincere, charming, self-deprecating as ever.

Whatever Sidney meant by it, it was enough, enough to start talking shop again, to put things on an even keel, just ordinary men together. He drew a deep breath, and suddenly the world seemed right, the birds were chirping, things could be overcome, problems could be solved, even a sick bairn might live. ‘You have a knack for it, that a lot of the lads don’t have. They prefer to knock people about before they engage—’

Oh, Christ on a fucking ten-speed Raleigh. Atkins had just searched the toilet, hadn’t he? He’d done it meticulously, ordering miserable PCs to reach down U-bends and into the trough of the urinal, trusting absolutely that the search of the grounds around it had been

completed days before, when a knife stowed on the window beside the tank could so easily have been dislodged, any time, when he slammed that poor bugger up against the wall, even—was this how Sidney thought about things? All the time? Poor bleeder, if he did—

‘The knife,’ he said, ‘it’s still there.’

*

‘Geordie, it’s not here.’

Geordie didn’t really like to think about how satisfying it was to waltz out of the cubicle and say, ‘Not now perhaps, but when we first came here—Atkins—’, impetuously to grab Sidney by those demure black lapels, pushing him against the partition—and how Sidney had gasped, and grinned, and blinked, of course, it meant nothing. They had a point to prove, and that took precedence. They found the knife. It was an ordinary sort, sold in half a dozen ironmongers in Cambridge alone, and had lain days in the alkaline muck of an East Anglian park; any plausible blood or fingerprint evidence was probably long gone.

They arrested Vic Blackwood. He half-incriminated himself in a way that made Geordie shiver: he confessed to the murder, in essence, yet everything he said was revocable, and given a sufficiently committed barrister and the willingness to tear his son’s future into irredeemable shreds, would keep him from the gallows. He was cleverer than all of them, this simple, dull, unassuming man, who knew plenty about engines, who’d joined up during the Great War when he was Ben’s age now or a bit younger, who knew plenty about men, exploitation, and treachery, and nothing worth saying about love. They would just have to wait, and see how the trial went. But the fact was he’d beaten the lot of them already. He’d beat them if he hanged or not. Geordie only hoped that Vic Blackwood knew that his grit was hereditary, and somewhere along the way had been supplemented by gentleness. When Sidney asked what would happen to Ben, Geordie used Terry’s phrase, ‘Don’t look so shocked,’ even though Sidney didn’t actually look very shocked at the thought of getting gross indecency and perverting the course of justice charges quietly dropped. It was some sort of tribute to everything Geordie couldn’t say about this whole wretched mess.

He couldn’t have gone home without Sidney at his back, and when he saw the empty cot his ears rang and his knees buckled, even though it was what he expected to see, what he deserved for being a selfish bastard. His vision blurred—damn it, on top of every other humiliation that had been visited on him in the last few days, he was going to cry in front of Sidney. From a long way off, someone said his name, and he turned to see Cathy holding a living, snuffling bundle.

‘His fever’s broken.’

Geordie glanced at Sidney, just to make sure he wasn’t seeing things. Sidney nodded, though even he looked hesitant.

He faced Cathy again. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

She nodded, still clearly disbelieving and fearful herself. ‘I know.’

‘I’m so, so sorry.’

She tutted and blinked. Then somehow it became possible, it was real, and when he kissed her there was nothing and no-one else. How could he have thought there was?

When he looked up again Sidney had gone. Geordie heard his swift, tactful step across the tiles of the hall. The front door opened and shut. Cathy put David into his open arms.

The Trouble I've Seen

Not playing for money was Sidney's little intransigence. It could hardly be scruple, Geordie thought: did the C of E even have scruples about gambling for small stakes? They held raffles and tombolas, not like the Methodists. It suited him too, though, so for ages he didn't bring it up. Not that anyone was likely to raise hell over the chief investigator of the Six Bells racket playing backgammon for pennies in a country pub with a vicar, but it was, possibly, *technically* at the absolute outside—despite quite some frowning time spent with the complex and tautological jargon of the Gaming Act of 1845, he still couldn't fathom what 'resorting to premises' actually meant.

'The old dears in my uncle's pub used to play for a farthing a point,' he blurted one evening. 'Ha'penny, if they were feeling flush, or rash.'

Sidney paused with his hand clapped over the cup. 'I—my housemaster at prep school taught us how to play, but the Head kicked off about it, quite amusing in 1743 and all that, but very dated in enlightened 1931, and likely to lead to bullying of the smaller fry. So Mr Jevons thought up a points system to get over the objection, and I suppose it stuck. I don't quite see the allure of gambling, anyway. Having a flutter with money you can afford to lose is fun, I suppose, but—do you?'

'Mm.' Having brought the subject up, Geordie found he couldn't say what he thought about gambling without talking about the Far Eastern varieties of it, and he didn't want to have that conversation now.

Sidney rolled and groaned. His only legal move turned his man into another blot, and Geordie had only to roll a three or four to hit it or the other one, and he promptly rolled a three and a four.

'How about this, then? Scratch this game,' Geordie proposed, magnanimously, because his first backgammon in longer than he cared to remember was now almost inevitable. It was small, but distinct, relief to know that Sidney had been playing since he was literally in short trousers, though. An image flashed across Geordie's mind of Sidney as one of the interchangeable heroes of the school stories he'd enviously devoured from the boys' comic papers, finding them almost more exotic than the ones about African explorers or American pioneers. He would stoically take a beating for something he hadn't done, rescue the prefect who had wronged him from fire or water, the older boy would promise to mend his ways, and they'd become the greatest of friends...

'No, it's yours. Wouldn't want to wipe that silly grin off your face. It suits you,' Sidney said, matching it. 'What did you have in mind?'

'What about a sort of side bet? First of us to—shall we say three backgammons, from here on in—gets taken out on the the town by the loser?'

'You're on.' Sidney extended his hand across the board. 'Your round, isn't it?'

‘Sherry, vicar?’

Before the end of their next session, Geordie was already two up. He didn’t feel as good about it as he might: both thoroughgoing victories had followed a friendly query, as they set up the board, about how things were progressing with Hildegard. Geordie didn’t share the otherwise apparently universal opinion that she’d make a perfect vicar’s wife, but he did sort of like her, in her way. She’d been through hell, and not only survived, but kept her poise. It was probably just the accent, but everything she said gave the impression of being wryly amused at the world, especially the corner of it containing Sidney Chambers. He just couldn’t see it going down a storm with the Mothers’ Union.

He shut up about Hildegard. It was none of his business, and it gave him an advantage he didn’t deserve. While he was usually inclined to regard a touch of guile as an acceptable, indeed essential, part of any contest, Sidney was the sort of person you wanted to play absolutely fair and square. Sidney rallied, doggedly—they didn’t even see a gammon for the next fortnight—and then one inspired evening, equalised. Geordie had already started to think about how he would sell to Cathy a lads’ night out, something Sidney would like, maybe a fish supper followed by pints and chasers in the Criterion (very hip, very with-it, they had a jazz band every Friday fortnight) when all three girls needed new shoes this year, their feet having obstinately refused to grow in the expected hand-me-down configuration, when the dice started, crazily, flukily, to fall his way, the men practically clearing themselves off his home board while Sidney still dithered on the outer one. The win owed nothing either to honourable strategy or less upright gamesmanship, but with girls’ patent leather shoes at a horrific two guineas a pair, he wasn’t going to dispute it.

Sidney conceded with the officer-class good grace that Geordie never quite knew how to feel about: his attraction to it fed the repulsion, or perhaps it was the other way round.

‘Well, in a way that’s worked out rather nicely. Can you get Friday fortnight off? You’ll probably want the Saturday morning too. Johnny’s put me on the guest-list for Gloria Dee’s gig. Plus one, of course.’

Geordie spluttered into his pint. ‘In—Soh—’

‘His club. On Wardour Street, yes.’

It was all very well for Sidney, with his extraordinary capacity to touch pitch and not have any of it stick, but if he said that he would sound like Atkins, shrieking *but it’s not decent!* And it would look like he was afraid to look Johnny in the face after the Calthorpe mess. Or that he was colour-prejudiced, which he wasn’t, though he wasn’t sure he could be as sanguine about one of his girls stepping out with a coloured bloke as Sidney seemed to be about his sister. But a brother wasn’t a father, and anyway, that day would be a long time coming. It might be a very different world by then.

He sighed. ‘I don’t know if I—’ *can get the time off* was a lie, *would like it* ungracious. Then it came to him. ‘But don’t you want to take Hildegard?’

He saw from the brief, inarticulate motion of Sidney’s jaw that he hadn’t asked her, hadn’t even thought of asking her. ‘She’s—too busy. Her digs fell through and she’s looking for

somewhere at short notice. Are we on?’

‘But what about—when’s the last train back?’

Sidney laughed. ‘Before Gloria Dee sets foot on stage, I’d say. It’s all right. I know a place, a sort of hostel. Won’t cost an arm and a leg. I’ll just ring up and make sure they give us a twin instead of a single.’

A knot formed low in Geordie’s gut, making him less inclined to take the gulp of beer he needed to deal with his suddenly dry mouth. Just when he’d been getting over it nicely, too. While not appearing maidenishly to avert his eyes, he was going to have to look tactfully past Sidney’s broad chest and tapering waist, his strong cyclist’s calves and thighs and—no, he was not going to think about Sidney Chambers’ frankly magnificent arse, he’d been doing so *well*—and worse still, expose his own pot belly and wasted limbs to Sidney’s uninterested, indirect gaze. He was going to have to try and sleep in a strange bed with some indeterminately large quantity of drink on him that would probably knock him cold at first and then stop him getting back off when he woke, furry-mouthed and headachey, at four in the morning, with Sidney’s large, comforting presence, lazily superb and warmly slumbering, mere inches away. Damn him to hell. Fucking damn him to *fucking* hell.

Cathy thought it was a great idea, of course. In a tentative, amicable sort of way, their bed had become a properly marital one again, after—well, what with everything, it was probably nearer two years than one. It improved her mood no end, and he should probably be less anxious about it too. Catch him ditching the French letters this time, though. Not for a full year after her last curse, the doctor had said.

‘You deserve it, Geordie.’ She bounced David on her knee; he chuckled and cooed. He had really come on; you’d never know he’d been so sickly just weeks ago. ‘It’s been a rotten few months. Is that lady-friend of his going?’

‘No—I think she’s tied up finding a more permanent place to live.’

‘Just you lads together, then. That’ll be nice.’

‘Well, Jen will be there, I suppose.’

‘She is intrepid, that one, proper career girl—very nice, though, lovely manners. Bit of a shame her brother got the real looks.’

‘Pardon *me*, Mrs Keating—’ The note of teasing outrage came quite naturally; Geordie permitted himself a small self-satisfaction at that.

‘Honestly, Geordie. Even you must have noticed the piles of swooning hopefuls at his feet. He’ll be quite a catch for whoever lands him. Quite a handful, I mean by that.’

‘You don’t think—this German, then?’

‘Oh, maybe. But he’s not over that other girl, anyone can see it, and that’s a tight spot to try and marry your way out of.’

Geordie hadn't quite seen it, as a matter of fact. He was going to officiate at her wedding to the Prize Twit, wasn't he? Mind, that would be Sidney all over, like something noble and love-lorn out of the Boots' library books that Geordie used to read to his Nanna when her cataracts finally got too bad. Mam scorned both of them for that. To her hard, country-cute mind, learning was for getting on. Story-books were for eejits, ludramauns.

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So he resigned himself to hours of plinking and caterwauling, followed by the exquisite humiliation of an idle pleasure-dream become inhibited reality. At least he wasn't paying for it at London rates.

Neither, as it turned out, was Sidney. The Johnsons' idea of being on the guest list apparently included, as well as the best seats in it, a bottle of bourbon on the house. Geordie wasn't altogether easy about accepting Archie Johnson's hospitality; the man was a brute and a bully at the very least, and a brute and a bully in surroundings like these—he gazed around at the oppressive crimson flock walls, thinking that it was like being swallowed by something, Jonah and the whale—like as not meant a villain of the first water. But he was off duty and off his patch. Leave Archie to the Met. They should get on like a house on fire, and probably did.

He soon forgot about Archie, if not his troubles, when Gloria Dee got up on stage. It wasn't just that she was an absolute blooming knockout, though she was, tall and slim in a strapless gown that picked up the the lights to gleam soft greens and browns and muted purples, like the satisfied hen of a species whose garish cocks would tear each other apart for five minutes alone with her. But her voice—it was like the Daimler a pal of his who worked in a garage had taken him for a spin in once, before the war; Alf had coddled on it belonged to that lord, the one who was an amateur detective, but Geordie wasn't green enough to believe that—smooth and humming, but with what seemed like infinite power under the bonnet. Records were all right, he reflected, as long as you knew what the music really sounded like, your memory filled it in. He'd never have got into Gilbert and Sullivan from the 78s he hardly played anyway. You had to be there, right in the middle of it. He glanced at Sidney, meaning *I get it now*, and Sidney grinned back sincere, open pleasure in Geordie's pleasure. He had to look away.

He actually knew the next number, 'Frankie and Johnny'; he liked it, it had a story: hadn't there been a picture made of it? Couples rushed up to dance at Gloria's invitation. He hadn't danced for years—Cathy had two perfect left feet—but you could foxtrot to this, if you didn't mind looking like a Stone Age relic among the jiving kids. *And* if you had a girl—well, Sidney was a wallflower too, at least he had company. He shifted in his seat and saw Amanda Kendall checking in her wrap at the cloakroom. He resented her as passionately, for a moment, as he'd ever resented anyone, which was saying something, considering the people he'd had occasion to resent. The bloody little minx: couldn't she just stay *away*? It occurred to him that she might feel about Sidney as Sidney probably felt about her, and she'd never had the power to do anything about it. Girls didn't get to do the asking, just the saying no. Why was that? It only served the sort of woman who looked and behaved like Gloria Dee. And honestly, that Chambers was a dead loss, sometimes.

‘So much for putting your troubles behind you.’

Sidney turned.

‘I think I’d better—’

‘I think you’d better.’

Well, being alone left him time for what he was best at: drinking whisky and spotting crims. One transaction struck him in particular for being conducted between Archie himself, not one of his goons or that cocky little Ted Justin, and a plump man whose nondescript appearance looked just a little too deliberate. Johnny stayed between the bar and the dancefloor throughout, good lad. Geordie didn’t like to speculate what sort of grief he took for it.

About half a pint of American whisky later, Sidney came back to the table with Amanda in tow. He couldn’t really dislike her, seeing how happy she made him. But he could still hate her for how unhappy she made him.

‘So, have you been converted to plonk—I mean, plink—’ she hiccuped delicately. Sidney giggled idiotically, like people always said newly-weds did, though at most of the weddings Geordie had been to the bride and groom were either stunned or squirming. ‘Plinkety-plonk, Inspector?’

He felt he had a duty to put her straight about that plinky-plonk thing. That’s how it had sounded to him too, until tonight, until he experienced the reality of it. ‘Life,’ he said carefully, pouring bourbon into Sidney’s glass, ‘is a metaphor for jazz. Sidney told me that.’

‘That’s not what I said,’ Sidney expostulated, snorting. ‘That’s not what I told you.’

Suddenly he was free of it all, free as a bloody bird: Sidney was in love with that vivacious dark-haired girl, not pretty exactly, though far from plain, and she was in love with him, and that was one hell of a snarl-up, that he’d help Sidney through it, he would, he’d always be there for Sidney. But as for him, he was a married man with four happy, healthy kids, a good copper, husband and father, having a well-deserved breakout with his best mate. And that was all. That was all. It was over: the furtiveness, the shame and guilt, gone for good—

He slung his arm around Sidney’s neck. ‘This man.’ His voice came out as a growl, with something transatlantic in it. ‘I love this ma-an.’

Sidney leaned into him, pliantly, tolerantly, laughing. Geordie felt bright and giddy at the feel of the broad, hard back against his inner arm, the closeness of Sidney’s cheek to his; saw instantly how wrong he’d been, how delusional, how self-deceived. If they’d been alone, he would have tried his luck, taken Sidney’s jaw in his free hand and tilted it towards his own ravenous mouth. He wanted to snatch his arm away immediately, but here in public, with Sidney’s girl, not Sidney’s girl, across the table, he couldn’t, not until the natural span of a mawkish drunken embrace had elapsed.

‘You’re drunk,’ Sidney said.

‘I’m not,’ he said, playing the part for all it was worth and letting his head droop. ‘Am I?’

‘Very,’ Amanda decided. And then—merciful God—a crackle of applause signalled Gloria’s return to the stage.

‘This one’s for a couple of friends of mine,’ she purred, looking right at them. ‘A detective —’ Geordie actually jumped, sat blinking back in his chair, ‘—and an explorer.’ For the umpteenth bloody aggravating time, he wondered what Sidney Chambers knew about him, and about himself.

‘I ain’t got no-body—’ Gloria sang, and Amanda’s face dropped into bleak recognition first, then Sidney’s. But it wasn’t true. She had her Twit, and a big bloody house or two, that was what she wanted, wasn’t it? And Sidney, well, Sidney had *him*.

*

It was true, Geordie thought, what Nanna used to say, *half wor worries never happen, God help us and keep us all*. He barely noticed Sidney undressing, or gave a shit what Sidney thought of a physique that had never recovered from three years of relentless labour, disease and starvation—as the Red Cross doctor had said, some of the younger chaps might be able to put some muscle back, but at your age—

The mean, poky little hostel room didn’t even have a trouser press. The guest house in Margate where he and Cathy had stayed on their honeymoon had a trouser press. He folded his trousers on the base of the mattress and climbed into the creaky, malevolent rack of a bed.

‘Not a lot to do up in Cambridgeshire,’ he muttered viciously. ‘We’re not on first-name terms with club owners, that’s for sure.’

‘There are no clubs in Cambridge,’ Sidney said, maddeningly reasonable.

But there were plenty of shady dives, if the Reverend Mr Chambers only cared to visit them. ‘Even so,’ he said, shaking down bedclothes that looked and smelled like hospital.

‘She was just a child,’ Sidney said. Geordie blinked away the image of the bloodied head in Johnny’s lap, Johnny’s hand twitching convulsively above it, and thought again of the murder weapon, instantly recognisable to—well, to any Geordie, to anyone who knew warehouses and docks, so oddly out of place out back of a Soho nightclub.

‘Why kill a child?’ Sidney asked.

Geordie’s head pounded with the hangover yet to come. What was the thing—Sidney should know, better than anyone, the bloody Sermon on the Mount or whatever it was—sufficient unto the day—you made a joke, perhaps a pretty feeble one, and dealt with it tomorrow. Was that what Jesus meant? He had a renewed respect for the bloke.

‘All I know is, something like that would not have happened at Gilbert and Sullivan.’

Sidney snorted softly and turned off the light.

Sidney's shouts woke him, except Sidney's bed was empty, so they couldn't have. The walls of the hostel room looked even more bilious and crowded with dismal Victorian lithographs than they had the night before, or earlier this morning. He retrieved his trousers from under the mattress and dressed, trying to work out if he felt sicker when he looked down or straight ahead.

There were nuns in the dining room. Nuns, for Christ's sake. Sidney should have warned him about the nuns. Everyone else, except Sidney and the hatchet-faced housekeeper, was wearing a dog collar. Had Sidney passed him off as a—a 'colleague' so he could stay here? What were the penalties for impersonating a clergyman? Not six months and a fine not exceeding, anyway.

'Don't worry,' Sidney said. 'It's not catching.' There was an edge in his voice. Geordie wondered if he had been snoring. He didn't always snore, Cathy said, but when he did—And he'd had a fair skinful.

The old bat of a housekeeper slammed down a plate of—

'What's this?' It was oddly granular, pale brown, and smelled of fish.

'Egg, I think,' Sidney said resignedly. 'At least, I think it was an egg once.' He was eating it, though, which was more than Geordie, for all his visceral horror of wasted food, thought he could do. But then, Sidney had been to public school.

Geordie lit a cigarette and settled in for a good solid Army grouse. He was just getting into his stride when Sidney leapt up with one of his intuitions. Geordie had a sudden, vivid impression of the sneering face of DCI Williams. *Jacob*. This was going to be *awkward*.

*

And awkward it certainly was. Geordie leaned his aching head against the window of the train carriage, but warmed by the afternoon sun, it didn't do anything beyond decorating his forehead with smuts. At least he had the compartment to himself. A woman of about his own age had got on at Letchworth, taken one look at him—or one sniff, probably, he was sweating stale booze like it was going out of style—and fled in alarm.

Williams hadn't been serious about arresting Sidney. He'd just wanted Geordie to look and feel like a hay-chewing, forelock-tugging yokel, which he did, very effectively. He hated having to make a fool out of Sidney—*slip of the tongue, very late and a lot of drink on board, few recent cases involving his parishioners, friend to the Force, you know how it is, helpful member of the public, getting carried away, too embarrassed then to correct the misapprehension*—but it was Sidney's own fault anyway, damn him. He had been surprised to see the sympathy on the faces around him: Tommy, Johnny, even Justin. They were too familiar with the sleazy, emasculated feeling that came from placating a bully to judge another man for doing the same. Less of a surprise was Williams' subordinate: the tubby, nondescript man who'd accepted a wad from Archie last night. That was on the *dog bites man, in other news Pope Catholic* level of revelation, but when they got that blatant they were vulnerable. The whole set-up at the club had a tense, half-unravelling air about it: it remained to be seen if Tommy was willing to give one of the loose ends a good hard tug. He

wanted Jacob Williams brought crashing down, and yes, it was bloody personal. It was allowed to be.

Geordie expected to see Sidney at the station that afternoon, but he didn't show. Probably furiously bashing out a sermon for tomorrow. He looked down at the half-completed report in his typewriter and the half-smoked cigarette in his ashtray. The pubs were open in ten minutes. Sufficient unto the day—

When Sidney finally did turn up, he looked so shattered that Geordie at first didn't register the anomaly. Mufti. On a Sunday. And his overnight bag was still on his shoulder. The dirty stop-out.

'Back at last, then,' he remarked, overdoing the casualness a bit.

Sidney just stared. It was a look Geordie wished he'd seen a lot less often: the look of a man who's just realised what he's capable of.

'Are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?'

'I spent the night with Gloria.'

Among the more ridiculous emotions that hit him at that moment was *hope*. And excitement, anger, exasperation. But mainly blistering jealousy—envy; what was supposed to be the difference, anyway? He sat up slowly. 'Bloody hell.'

'I'm supposed to set an example,' Sidney said, looking more than ever the anxious, earnest head boy in one of those *Boys' Own Paper* tales. 'I'm supposed to be beyond reproach.'

Geordie couldn't help picturing it: Gloria astride, his hands on her hips, hers clasped behind her head, raising breasts that heaved and shook with his thrusts, her moans becoming cries—did Sidney even know how to get a woman off properly? It wasn't the most obvious thing on earth, and while he couldn't credit virginity, there couldn't be many notches on the bedpost there, not with all the scruples Sidney had: no paying for it, no married ones, no coaxing a reluctant, respectable lassie into letting him, just a little bit further... But Gloria wouldn't have been shy about telling him, showing him—the thought of Sidney fumbling at first, but proving a quick, enthusiastic pupil was actually making him hard, thank Christ for the desk. He took refuge in irony.

'It was no good, then?'

'That's—that's not what I'm saying.'

Nothing in Sidney's audible swallow, the evasive look sideways and down that nearly broke into one of triumph, Geordie thought, was going to make it easier if he had to stand up. He had to pull himself together, be what Sidney needed now: the mentor, the older brother.

'So it was good? You sly old dog, Sidney.'

Sidney took something from his pocket and put it on the desk. It was a silver charm: a dove with a letter in its beak. 'I found this. From Claudette's bracelet. It was in her room.'

Before all the many things that could mean could quite sink in, the phone rang.

Geordie answered it, or tried to. Overwhelmed, he was momentarily at a loss for his own name.

‘Charlie Rush,’ said a Cockney voice. ‘August the twenty-fourth, nineteen forty-one. You can do the rest yourself.’

Nothing like a good lead for instant mental hygiene. He put Jonesy onto it: he was looking to apply for CID, might do him a bit of good.

‘How do I explain where I found it?’ Sidney said when he came back into the office.

This didn’t, Geordie considered, display the most stunning grasp of moral priority he’d ever seen from Sidney: you have it away with a possible murderess, or an accomplice to murder, and *that* was what you were worried about? Maybe it was, if you were a vicar. He shrugged it off.

‘You been home yet?’ He obviously hadn’t, but it was something to say.

Sidney sighed. ‘I missed the service.’

Geordie was shocked; somehow, despite the civvies and the overnight bag, he thought Sidney must have made it to—well, to do his job. His real job. He was going to have to put his foot down, if all this meant Sidney neglecting his responsibilities. Geordie hated professional sloppiness. It offended him. He hadn’t thought Sidney could offend him, and tried to pretend it hadn’t happened.

Sidney seemed less bothered by it than he was, continuing, ‘I have to tell Hildegard.’

‘You do that, and she’s off,’ Geordie replied, allowing some of his disappointment in Sidney’s negligence to colour his tone. ‘Unless that’s what you want.’

Sidney’s hangdog expression told him that it was exactly what he wanted. He couldn’t quite blame him for that. If your taste ran to Gloria Dee, and moreover, you could *have* Gloria Dee, then a German ice maiden you couldn’t even poke until you’d put a ring on her finger was going to be pretty cold comfort.

*

Geordie would probably have had more patience if he could believe Sidney really was afraid of hurting or losing Hildegard. But he wasn’t, not primarily: it was his self-image that had taken a knock. He hadn’t realised quite how much stock Sidney had put in chastity: to any man who could walk into a room without instantly attracting the attention of every woman in it, the thought might have occurred that he was merely making a virtue out of necessity. Sidney had to struggle with what was clearly a fairly lively appetite and more than the means to satisfy it. Nice problem to have, Geordie thought derisively, and then, softening, reflected that it didn’t make it any less of a problem.

He hadn't seen him listless like this before, though. Normally the sort of gen that Jones had dug up would have Sidney buzzing with investigative fervour.

'Have you ever been unfaithful?'

'No,' said Geordie automatically and truthfully, his mind on the late Mrs Johnson's infidelity. Then he saw where Sidney was coming from, and sighed. 'And you haven't either.'

'It's not me, Geordie. It's not what I do.'

If only he knew how many times Geordie had told himself that, and who it had been about. 'Don't dwell on it,' he said, irritably aware that Sidney might have an inkling.

'Don't *dwell* on it?'

He said it as if it were impossible, just to get on with things. To accept that you may not want to feel the way you did, but it was nonetheless the way you felt; you may not want to have done the things you'd done, but you'd done them; to accept you weren't the man you thought you were, but a slightly worse one. A stab of affection accompanied the annoyance—for all the trouble he'd seen, Sidney was still twenty years Geordie's junior, and in some things at least, touchingly innocent. He didn't have time to be sentimental, though, so he outlined the case as it stood, ignoring Sidney's protests.

'Maybe,' Sidney said heavily.

'Maybe? Wha—just maybe?'

'Why now?'

'Well, because—' *Served cold* was too much of a cliché even for a policeman's limited imagination. Geordie filled in the objection he had expected Sidney to make—why cover her up?

And suddenly, Sidney was himself, and the game afoot, again.

*

A few days later, Geordie dropped round to the vicarage with the news that Williams had been suspended pending an investigation. Sidney poured him a glass of whiskey, Jameson. He already had one in his hand, and something about the way he was holding it told Geordie it wasn't the first of the evening.

'Not getting my hopes up, mind. The Met is riddled. At best they'll probably use him as a scapegoat—is that what a scapegoat is, really?'

'Pretty much. Pile on the sins and let it go.' Sidney sank into the chair at his desk, making a vague gesture of dismissal. An LP sleeve, *The Gloria Dee Quartet*, lay beside the typewriter: the temptress herself expansively draped around the title. Geordie remembered her before Claudette's funeral, appearing out of nowhere to shield Walter with her voice so that he could lay his tribute, and his eyeballs grew hot and prickly. He was a soft bugger, but dignified

defiance always got to him. Saw too much of the undignified sort for it not to, he supposed. Sidney turned the sleeve over.

‘Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young.’

‘Come again?’

‘It’s a line from a play—a man has his sister murdered because she—never mind. It’s not that I’m a masochist. It was a present from Hildegard, and she was here for tea. If I hadn’t played it, she’d think I didn’t appreciate her kindness.’

‘Ouch.’

Sidney nodded and stared out of the window at the garden, the Meadows beyond. ‘I’m going to tell her, Geordie. I have to.’

‘You don’t. You really don’t. It’s—pride, in a way. Hurting her just so you can feel like a better person.’

Sidney turned his Head of House face on him, as if he’d said that he didn’t see why you shouldn’t welch on a gambling debt or shoot a fox if you thought you could get away with it. Geordie was glad he’d not said the other thing he’d thought, which was that it was a pretty cowardly way of dumping her.

‘I’m a clergyman, Geordie. I’m not supposed to—go out with a woman at all if I don’t mean to marry her. And how could I ask her, knowing that I’d lied—’

‘Do your lot have confession?’

‘Yes. It doesn’t have to be auricular—I mean, in the Church of England it doesn’t have to be to a priest. It can be between you and God. And before you ask, yes, naturally. I couldn’t take communion until I did.’

‘I wasn’t asking.’ That hadn’t occurred to him, though perhaps it should have, that Sidney hadn’t just been neglecting his duties that Sunday morning, that there were actually rules about things like leaping out of a jazz singer’s bed to shovel wafers and wine into the mouths of the faithful, and Sidney believed they meant something.

‘I mean,’ Geordie continued, ‘insofar as we were anything much, we were Catholics. My mam was Irish. And that was what put me off. The idea that you could just trundle along on Saturday night on the way to the pub and wipe the slate clean. No consequences beyond three Hail Marys and a Glory Be.’

‘That’s not how it works,’ Sidney said crisply. He reached for a packet of cigarettes and offered Geordie one, his arm rigidly extended.

‘Thanks. I know. But it’s how people think it works, ordinary people. And how it really works doesn’t do enough to convince them that it isn’t—look, I don’t know anything about religion. But I do know about being married. And one thing I know about being married is it depends as much on what you don’t tell the other person as what you do.’

‘Really? Are there things you keep from Cathy?’

‘Not much. But things about the job—that would just worry her, that can’t be changed. Some stuff about the—the past.’

That I’m at least half queer and in love with the vicar was not really an item that could be added aloud to that brief list, though he did too much concealing from others to conceal it from himself. *In love* wasn’t a way he’d phrased it before, but hell, it wasn’t untrue. He could feel shitty about it later; he would, anyway.

‘Hildegard was in Berlin when the Red Army came. I don’t think any of my war stories could discompose her much.’

‘Well, there you are then.’

‘It’s different. I don’t want to pry into her past. She’s entitled to her privacy.’

Oh God, not *privacy* again. He hated the way the word sounded in Sidney’s mouth, fluting and snooty, and it was a pretty inadequate noun to cover all the things that Hildegard might never be able to tell anyone about.

‘But when it’s something that you’ve done,’ Sidney went on, ‘while you’ve been part of one another’s lives—’

‘You do what you have to do, Sidney. That’s all there is to it.’

It had always been a useful inhibition, for him. If he betrayed Cathy with a woman, he would have to tell her, and that would be bad enough. If with a man, he would have to tell her, *and* that he was capable of it, all at once, which was, which had been, mostly enough to stop him even thinking about it. Looking at Sidney’s profile, softened by hazy evening light and cigarette smoke, he realised the flaw in his logic. It was honesty that was the preventative: if he had ever fallen for a young woman of thirty who couldn’t possibly be interested in him, he’d ruefully confess it to Cathy so he didn’t have the illusion of secrecy behind which to make an idiotic, humiliating pass at her. And it wasn’t different because Sidney was a man. Cathy had been around, she knew it wasn’t just the ones who wore eyeshadow and bracelets. Perhaps she’d even known all along—no, that was a bit much to ask. But this was part of him, unquestionably so, and she deserved to know it. Fidelity was about the things you didn’t let yourself do, not about the things you didn’t let yourself think.

Hearts

Before Geordie could find the time or the words to talk to Cathy about any of it, a heart with a mouth like chopped liver pointed a dagger at him and fired—no, that wasn't it. A man with a mouth like a chopped heart pointed a liver at *no* damn it he was all over warm wet like burning but wet and so much of it *blood* he had to hold it straight in his head a man with a heart on his sleeve *no* someone was shouting his name and he lost the thread shut up he was trying to think that was a bloody great ball of string what did they need that much string fuck it he needed to get it straight so he could tell a man with a heart and dagger on his revolver no on his *arm* pointed a revolver at his heart and his mouth was wet and warm like chopped liver and his heart no his hand shook like chopped liver and it a distorted telephone voice said his name again and did you hear that shut up he was trying to think that there was too much string altogether but then Terry was there and it was going to be all right not Terry the other one same differ bonny boy bonny Bobby Shaftoe fat and fair combing down his yellow fair enough he was fat compared to Terry anyway *Sidney*—O God he said Sidney had a mouth on him sometimes for a vicar but he never took the Lord's there must be something really wrong for Sidney to take the Lord's name if he could just tell him now that the man with the heart pierced by a dagger had pointed his arm it would all be all right but his legs were water hot and wet gone to sea he'll come back and marry me bonny bobby bonny bobby bonny bobby dazzler

He came to for a bit and there was moving and clatter like a football rattle and burning burning burning white hot but his hands were red and like water he reached for Sidney to tell him about the heart heart heart in his mouth but he hadn't any grip weak like water and for the first time since the man with the mouth wet and wide and wobbling like chopped liver he knew he was going to die how would he explain to Cathy that he'd gone and got himself killed she'd murder him—

'Stay down,' Sidney ordered. Officer class. Sexy, coming out of that pretty face. 'Stay *down*.'

Then there was a lot of white and green blur and bustle around him and when they lifted him again it was burning and breathing was bloody and he was going into the dark something kept catching his eye a billy can stuck in a tree except he was indoors and then he was moving again and there was a lot of clatter but not the football rattle and Terry said I've got you like he had when he slipped on the baulk and nearly fell a hundred feet except he was wearing a dog collar so he hadn't he wasn't Terry and he just wanted to sleep but he couldn't breathe burning he was going to die and it would have been nice to say goodbye to Cathy and the kids but they would understand there had been something he meant to tell her but it didn't matter Terry would tell her but Terry was dead the padre then he would tell her and he just wanted to drop off into the darkness and die he'd accepted his death but when he tried to say it to the padre it came out as I don't want to die and the padre said he wasn't going to in the fierce way that you did when you knew a man was a goner and no mistake burning burning if he could just breathe he could die in peace

Geordie wakes to a gurgling, metallic screech: some joker trying to blow a parody of reveille on a brass whistle instead of giving the usual sharp pips. It's pitch black. He lies on the hard pallet, listening to the rain on the hut roof: it doesn't sound too bad, just an everyday patter, not the furious dinning of a storm. His sacking blanket has got wet, though; he curls his feet away from the sodden, felted mass.

An obscene Brummie litany begins in the opposite corner of the shack: Wilson was sleeping on the matches to keep them from the leaks in the roof, and now he can't find them in the dark. It's eventually succeeded by a dim, flickering light that turns the hut into a hideous cavern of waxen, hairy, naked limbs, wriggling out of their damp sleeping shorts, reaching under the pallets for wet, muddy working clothes. Matterson's combing over his thin yellow hair, not because anyone could possibly care but because he still has a comb. No-one talks: the only sounds are the rain and the soft grunts of men forced into disagreeable proximity. Harris brings in a pan of rainwater from outside: taking turns clockwise round the hut, they wash their faces in it, as if it made a difference.

Geordie pulls a bit of towelling round his shoulders and collects his mess tin. He's not hungry yet, but the two hundred-yard shuffle to the cookhouse will change that, and the breakfast of pap porridge and tea won't fix it. His stomach cramps; he folds his arms and rocks on his heels until the spasm wears off. It has to get a lot worse for him to face the latrines before first light.

They creep like beggarwomen down the slope to the cookhouse. Harris falls on his arse, and Geordie manages not to. Long queues of men stand at the bamboo tables, the light from the coconut-oil lamps playing over half-naked bony bodies marked by mosquito bites, dermatitis and ringworm. Geordie no longer flinches from their shameful condition; he is one of them, this is normality. There's a soft buzz of griping conversation here, coughs and wheezes, the clatter of utensils and tins. As well as porridge there are rice rissoles today; they fill their tins and toil back up the slope to eat their breakfast in the hut. He hasn't seen Terry anywhere. That worries him, because Terry is hard to miss. He hopes he isn't sick.

Dawn means parade, an unimpressive display of mouldering hats, beards, rice bellies, muddy, sweat-stained loincloths, broken boots and bare feet. The men stand in groups of five; the officers come out to check the numbers. Mist, so dense it's almost grey, rises out of the green jungle all around. The tree canopy bears a bizarre freight of cloud, the jungle animals and birds chitter and squeal. You could find it beautiful, eerie, *fascinating*, if you thought you weren't going to die here.

The Jap admins and engineers show up in their cheap mackintoshes and queer bifurcated rubber boots, and the old sergeant with the limp goes round with a stub of pencil and a clipboard, detailing the different work-parties: felling, banking, bridging, cutting. Geordie, finding himself assigned to the big bridge, probably the worst of the jobs, though there isn't much in it, curses inwardly. He gawks around for Terry and for his trouble gets a clip round the ear from the Jap sergeant. Terry must be sick, he'll have to find out and try to see him that evening. They shamble off to the tool tent to collect ropes, spikes, crowbars and axes. Geordie thinks of Ino, brutal bastard, who at the beginning said that it would be skilled work, they'd grow to love it. Ino hates the officers worse than the O.R.s, though, it's the only thing to be said for him.

The baulks are in, and they have to haul up the cross-pieces. The Japs bounce about like mountain goats in their rubbers, dispensing contradictory orders and blows in roughly equal measure. It would be more efficient to leave them to it, he thinks for the thousandth time: they all know what they're doing, at this stage, you don't have to be Isambard fucking Kingdom Brunel. Geordie's told to oversee lining up the next timbers, a relatively cushy job, given in acknowledgement of his thirty-nine years. The young officer for their party, Brooke, is conscientious and rational, when really what you want him to be is pragmatic and cunning. The rational ones are prone to outbreaks of *seeing the Nip point of view*, or they become nervous wrecks with the strain of having to placate and interpret, procure breaks and so on. The officer is supposed to mediate between the Japs and the troops; most of them are shockingly bad at reading tone of voice and gesture, and in turn making themselves understood. Geordie wonders why that is: there must be plenty in a middle-class Englishman's education to teach him to negotiate arbitrary and inexplicable rules, anticipate an order, judge when it's politic to lodge a protest. But when the people in charge have yellow skin and an average height of about five foot three it all seems to desert them.

A curiosity is that the Japs seem to accept that two men must always be occupied in making tea; perhaps they think it is a British custom, religious in nature, and never query it. Brooke makes sure that those with the worst fever come in for plenty of char duty. If one particular Jap captain turns up the privates go berserk, though, kicking and slapping, bellowing the loanwords that are all they have for abuse, their language allegedly containing none. The captain never says anything, but there is no rest until he leaves again. But they don't see him this morning.

The rain has slowed to a steady drizzle; everything proceeds in its usual chaotic fashion for what must be a couple of hours. Brooke requests a break; the Jap private mumbles back the expected formula, 'Work more ten minute,' and after the longest 'ten minute' of their lives to date, they're sitting under a tree, smoking and drinking tea. The talk is solemn and muted; there've been rumours of cholera in a nearby village. Brooke quashes these briskly—cholera is a scourge of early Victorian slums, impossible that it should attack British soldiers in the year 1943, what they're hearing about is just some aggravated form of dysentery—but his eyes are uncertain. What, after all, separates the conditions in which they live from those of an early Victorian slum, with the added variable of tropical climate? But morale must be maintained.

Geordie shivers, cold fire under the skin, which is all he fucking needs. A long drag on his tab puts a stop to it, though, so it wasn't malaria, just anxiety and fear after all, which is a relief. There's no reason, no reason at all to think that Terry has cholera. He suppresses the immediate mental rejoinder *no reason to think he hasn't, either*. Mam left Ireland when the hotel where she worked had to shut down because of a suspected cholera case. The maid had gone to bed as usual, woken feeling sick to jokes about being in the family way, collapsed after spending most of the morning in the privy, and by evening she was dead. Her skin turned blue—at that point in the story Mam would always look around for some improbably azure or indigo article—as your shirt, that toffee tin, that advert for Player's Navy Cut. The thought of going back to camp to find Terry blue, dead, possibly buried, no, not buried, they would have to *burn*—he couldn't, he couldn't go on—

His attention is diverted by a kerfuffle a few yards away. Brooke calls him over but for once he can't make head nor tail of what the Jap wants either. They both get slapped across the face for their imbecility, and ten seconds later it's all forgotten and they're back to work.

Only officers return to camp for the midday meal, the men must stay near the job; the ration carriers go off at 12, but there's no hope of sending an enquiry with one of them, they can't afford to dawdle, let alone make a detour. He's just going to have to wait until the agonising work day is done, go down to the hospital at dusk.

As they are eating a rare, watery sun breaks through the clouds. Geordie decides firmly that it's a good omen. He used to argue with Mam about her inane superstitions, her peasant religion, keeping working men and women down by encouraging them to blame their condition on fate rather than the boss class. Now he's inherited all of it. During the mid-afternoon break he goes into the jungle for a shit; he's just squatting down when he sees a baby's grey face, eerily framed in a witch's white whiskers, peering out of the foliage at him—the bean sidhe, the Washer at the Ford—he'd have shat himself, if he hadn't already been— He screams hoarsely and the gibbon darts back out of sight.

He staggers back to the bridging, telling himself that it's meaningless, just a bloody animal; you hear them all the time, whooping like schoolboys given a half holiday, but they don't like to be seen so much. Lucky in a way, interesting. That half-Dutch fella said that when they start to come out of the jungle like that it's a sign that the monsoon is coming to an end. He has no idea if that's true. But he can't shake the sense of doom. It starts to rain heavily again.

One of the lads drops with fever; shaking and gooseflesh all over, burning up. Brooke gets permission to send him back to camp, which means that Geordie has to haul. Later on there's another casualty: Harris drops a timber on his bare foot, crushing it badly. Geordie sees his chance and joins Brooke, petitioning the Japs to let him help Harris back to camp; he can't walk unaided. The Japs are intransigent: it's probably as much as their hides are worth to let one man go, let alone three. It gets heated; one of the Japs picks up a shovel but Brooke grovels their way out of a real beating. He's a good bloke; Geordie repents his earlier hard thoughts. Harris sits under a tree, blank and sweaty with the pain. When they come to pick him up at day's end he's lying on his side, retching and groaning; sepsis has likely already set in.

The last hour is the worst: there's nothing that they can really do, the rain's coming down in sheets, and even the Japs daren't set foot on the baulks. They cut bamboo for the cookhouse fires and trudge back towards camp, taking turns to support Harris between two of them: he can't really walk at all, and by the end they're more or less carrying him. Brooke and Geordie take him to the hospital. The atap hut is low-lying and the M.O. is swilling around in six inches of muddy water, though he has gumboots, lucky bugger; there's dark talk of cholera three kilometres up the road in H.Q. Camp. Apparently a Russian diagnosed it; the British S.M.Os wouldn't take him seriously until he threatened to go to the Japs himself. All he can do for Harris is disinfect the wound and hope for the best. Dry-mouthed, pulse thundering, Geordie asks, as casually as he can, after Terry. The M.O. doesn't know; there's no Phelps in the hospital, as far as he knows, and no, he won't have all and fucking sundry prancing through here looking for their particular pals, with twenty cholera cases reported all but yards a-fucking-way is he out of his tiny fucking mind?

On the way over to the cookhouse, Brooke ventures a prediction that bathing in the river will be forbidden because of the cholera risk. Geordie hasn't thought of that, but of course he's right; another small consolation snatched away. Dusk is falling; the equal length of the virtually equatorial days still doesn't seem right to him.

But then he spots Terry, in the queue snaking from the netting-shrouded preparation table, large as life and in as fine fettle as anyone around here ever looks, lounging against nothing in the manner of tall, rangy men. Knackered as he is, it's about as much as Geordie can do not to break into a stumbling run and throw his arms round his neck; he thought he'd been worried before, but his relief now makes him realise its true extent and depth. Malnutrition and overwork doesn't help, but he's actually weak at the knees, like he's Pola Negri and Terry's Valentino or something. He makes his excuses to Brooke and squelches over.

'Aa reet, kidda.' He gives Terry a friendly dunch on the shoulder. It's daft, but it's their thing, playing up their regionalisms halfway round the world from where it could possibly mean anything. It's what they do.

'Wotcha, chum,' he says, offhand tone belied by a huge, gapped grin.

'Us missed you up at the works. Whaur'd you slope off to, you hacky get?'

'That would be telling. But I might, for a price. What's it worth to you, chavvy?' He shifts his weight, left arm akimbo, right flung in the air, wielding an imaginary cigarette holder; his jutting hipbones alarmingly prominent under the string of his loincloth. He licks his remaining incisor and lets his tongue skirt the inner rim of his upper lip. Terry's a public menace, sometimes, the way he just boots it right out into the open. But it's how he manages to get away with it too.

'Fuck you, Phelps.'

'Promise?' he mouths silently, continuing quickly while Geordie's still gaping like something on a slab, trying to reassure himself no-one else saw, 'It's me ulcer.' He turns out his bandaged thigh, almost elegantly, considering, but obviously for the purposes of information rather than invitation.

Geordie draws a quick, sympathetic breath. Ulcers have to be pretty nasty before you're let off sick with them: at least the size of a half-crown, with a hard, smelly, pus-filled core.

'Couldn't put any weight on it this morning, but that nice doctor with the Froggy name touched me up a bit, very bracing, *fucking* painful, but word is we've got tomorrow off.'

Any sort of holiday is better than work, but there isn't much to celebrate about this one. 'Aye, but d'you knaa why?'

Terry nods, biting his lip. 'Yeah. I'm—' he snorts mirthlessly, 'I was going to say shitting myself.'

'Chap once showed me a cure for that,' Geordie says, made reckless by fear. 'Only the metaphorical sort, but.'

‘You could bottle it. It’d be a tonic.’

Their laughter is pretty weak and it hurts, like everything that defies death.

*

He was in a bed. He reached out and found edges, and rubber—he was hooked up to a drip. The camp had been liberated, then. He remembered now. So Terry was dead. Not cholera. Malaria. The sort that went to your brain—died raving. Geordie was probably kidding himself to think that Terry recognised him, in that illusive lucid moment right at the end, but there was no harm in kidding yourself sometimes. But this wasn’t a Red Cross field hospital. It—smelled wrong. There was a tall oak locker to his left, and on top of it he could just see a vase of flowers. European flowers, freesias and pinks. There was a flask of water and a glass, too. Water. He was bloody thirsty. If he could just—a black wave of pain hit him full in the face and he went under, his lungs bursting—

—come back and marry me, bonny Bobby Shaftoe, a reet bobby dazzler. He had something to tell—he’d come into the warehouse office and the the man with the mouth like chopped liver and the heart pierced by a dagger was standing over the body in a caretaker’s brown coat and he’d turned and pointed a revolver and Geordie was a goner but his hand shook so much that he shot him in the side not in the head or the heart and when he got home Cathy was going to murder him. He had to tell Terry. But Terry was dead. He still had to tell him somehow. He said, ‘Terry. Terry, wake up,’ and the wave of pain broke on him again, stone-grey this time.

There was someone here. A dark presence in the chair, fair head nodding, his face in his hand, big dirty hands, like Terry’s. Not Terry, though his hair was red-gold like Terry’s. Terry didn’t wear so many—clothes. The padre, then—what was his—*Sidney*. *Sidney*. Christ on a bike. *Sidney*. The Reverend Sidney Chambers. He had to tell Sidney about the man with the mouth like chopped liver and the tattoo of a heart and dagger, and he had to tell Cathy about Sidney, his own cloven heart, cloven foot, left foot, cloak and dagger. She was going to murder him, because he had loved Terry, loved Sidney. Loved her too, but. Best of all maybe. His throat was too dry to speak. Where was it that the sailor bit his arm and drank the blood so he could cry out to a passing ship? He didn’t fancy that, lost too much blood already but he had to tell—

‘Sidney. Sidney.’

Sidney looked up blearily, and dithered. ‘Let me get someone.’

Geordie grunted and indicated the flask of water. Sidney poured some, then havered again before putting his cool, large palm under Geordie’s head and helping him to a drink. He could have stood quite a bit more of that, to be honest: whoever knew water could be so satisfying? But best not take too much, it would be taking the piss. Which—he wasn’t going to think about that bit of it yet, it was all being handled somehow, doubtless, down where he was still mainly just a soggy, seething morass of pain. Sidney sat on the edge of the bed, which was nice in its way, touching, yes, but the dent his thirteen stone made in the mattress didn’t do anything for the soggy, seething morass of pain side of things.

‘Did you pray for me?’

‘Of course I did.’ Sidney looked indignant, very young, and bloody *beautiful*. There was a fresh cut on his nose, which didn’t diminish the effect one bit. Geordie wondered how he’d come by it.

‘Praying for an old heathen?’

Sidney grinned. ‘It worked, didn’t it?’

You couldn’t even call it impulsive: one moment his left hand was on the sheet, just at the edge of where he became a seething, soggy morass of pain, and the next it was on top of Sidney’s, just a friendly pat, that’s all he’d meant, all for Christ’s sake he was capable of in this state, not even the Archbishop of Canterbury could object, but Sidney looked down at it nervously, surely he couldn’t think— Geordie could almost have wished the wave of pain to take him again, when Sidney clapped his right hand down and eased his left out from under Geordie’s so they were, unmistakably, properly, holding hands.

‘Don’t you ever do that to me again.’

Sidney’s voice was throaty and his eyes were brimming. He looked down at their clasped hands again, as if he were deciding something, and hung grimly on. Geordie shivered, thin fire racing under his skin. It was as much as he wanted, it was everything he wanted. It was all he could damn well have.

Reluctantly, he drew back his hand and indicated Sidney’s cuts and bruises.

‘Mrs Maguire finally lost patience with you playing Beckett at all hours, did she? Or did you walk into a standard lamp?’

‘*Bechet*. But she has been a bit *who will rid me of this turbulent priest?* lately, I have to admit. I deserve it, too. Look, I’ll call the nurses, they’ll get you a bit more comfortable, and ring Cathy. Then I can tell you all about it while we wait.’

*

‘So we found him,’ Sidney concluded, lighting a cigarette. ‘But he killed himself.’

Sensible enough, Geordie thought: he’d murdered one policeman and had a bloody good go at repeating the trick. There was nothing left for him but the tender efficiency of Pierrepont, and it was probably what he’d meant to do all along anyway. It wouldn’t be very respectful to Jonesy’s memory to say so, though, so he growled conventionally, ‘Coward’s way out.’

He’d half-forgotten that Sidney was apt to take things that people said about morality seriously. It came of being a vicar, or having a Double First in Divinity from Cambridge, or being lower-upper-middle class, or something.

‘It was the war,’ he said, frowning, reproving. ‘He couldn’t forget.’

Well, fuck that. Geordie couldn't forget either, and he didn't hunt men down and shoot them because they'd jeered at him, called him a coward and a poof; there'd be a bloody great pile of bodies if he had, not all of them Japs. And jeered at him for not committing a war crime, of all things. There were procedures for reporting that sort of stuff, if you felt that strongly about it. And anyway, Sidney only had a murderer's word for it, and if he didn't know what that was worth by now— Maybe Miller *had* shot those German boys, and that was what he couldn't live with. Maybe he'd not even done it on Heath's orders.

'That's no excuse,' he snapped. 'We all have that cross to bear.' The smoke of Sidney's cigarette reached him. How long was it since he'd had a cigarette? He made an uncouth *give-us-it-you-bastard-hog* gesture, right out of Camp 206.

Sidney passed him the cigarette and sat down heavily. Ever since Geordie had got to know him properly, he'd waited for the proselytising to start, but it never had. Now Sidney's hanging head and pleading eyes spoke of that other thing: confession. He wasn't sure he could take it, not now. The pain was subsiding under the influence of the drugs the doctor had administered: morphia, he supposed. He felt giddy for a few minutes, then sickly and lethargic. Mainly he wanted Sidney to hold his hand again. The bit where he talked about the boy Sandy saying *I want to go home* got to him because that was what Terry had said in his delirium. He felt tears on his cheeks, but when he rubbed his face, casually, as if it were just itchy with a couple of days' stubble, found them dry.

'He'd written a letter,' Sidney said, his face a-twitch and quavering. 'To his s—sweetheart—' *Sweetheart*. Where any other man would have said 'girl', or 'girlfriend', Sidney Chambers had to go and use a locution circa 1885.

'And I never sent it,' he continued, his voice rising out of control, 'because it was covered in his blood. 'And—and I thought that—'

Oh, hell, Geordie thought, he's going to cry, with me doped to my ears and hooked up to a drip and a catheter, less able than practically any man on the planet to make a tactful exit or even turn away—

But Sidney mastered himself, with a little puffing breath, '—I thought that no-one should have to see that.'

'You did what you had to do, Sidney. It's all any of us did.' He was empty of everything but platitudes. That's why there were platitudes, to have something to say when you were empty. They sounded all the more hollow for being carefully spoken by a man who was aware he was likely to slur his words.

The Irish nurse who had attended to him earlier trotted back in. 'You'll have to go now, Fath—' She froze in apprehension of a *faux pas*.

'It's all right,' Sidney said, uncharacteristically bumbling. 'I don't, but some of the High chaps do—I mean, it's not wrong to say. I mean. Never mind. Okay, I'll come tomorrow, if that's all right—Geordie?'

He got clumsily to his feet and made for the door, turning on Geordie one of those agonised defeated-captain-of-the-First-XI grimaces that he never knew how to handle.

‘Thanks, Sidney. Bye,’ he muttered.

‘Your wife’s here now, Mr Keating,’ the nurse said.

Oh, hell. But at least Cathy wouldn’t get complicated at him.

A Glorious Thing

Geordie was wrong about that, as it happened. Cathy's anger was righteous and it was, he had to admit, at least partly justified, but that didn't mean it was uncomplicated.

'You did *what*?'

'You heard. I told him to sling his clerical hook, bottle of whisky and all. Imagine, encouraging you to drink spirits in your state. I couldn't stop him visiting you in hospital, and if you want to go down the pub with him when you're well enough, that's none of my affair. You're a grown man—'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence.'

'Well, you didn't exactly behave like one. Either of you. What were you *thinking*?'

'Not this again. I was thinking *how do we catch the bloke who killed Jonesy*? Dry up, will you? I've got it all to come from Benson when I get back.'

'When? *If*, more like.' She shoved the carpet sweeper across the rug with unnecessary vehemence. 'Keep your feet *down*—you'll do yourself a mischief trying to lift—'

'I've made bigger things disappear. Look here, pet. I was a blithering idiot, but that doesn't mean it was Sidney's fault. It would still have happened if it had been one of the lads there.'

'Sometimes I don't think you—the girls, David—could have been left without a—' She screwed her face into something that looked like it might have been used to wrap stewing steak and turned to sweep a bit of the floor she'd already been over twice. 'And you still might be out of work—'

'I *won't* be, how many times do I have to—but it's still no reason to take it out on Sidney. It wasn't his fault. It was my own damn fault. You know what you are? You're jealous.' It just slipped out, probably because the *fucking* APC wasn't up to the *fucking* job, though that was no excuse. The M.O.s in 203 and 206 would've sold their souls for as much APC as he had in the bathroom cabinet. But he hadn't meant to say it, he hadn't ever meant to say it. For one thing, it wasn't really true.

'Jea—' she stopped dead and stared at him, baffled and bereft. 'What do you mean by that? I've never stopped you—having—having a life outside. I just don't want him here, in my living-room—getting you both kale-eyed and reminding me that you could have been—or that he could have been, for that matter. What would you have done then?'

'Don't think I haven't thought about it,' he said, though in fact his mind edged up to the idea of Sidney dead or injured and then sprang away, as if the thought were electrified. He sighed. 'Put that thing down and come here. There's something I've got to—'

‘I’m busy, Geordie. Everything takes twice as long with you under my feet. I’ve got to give David his bottle, and the girls will be home for their dinner at half-past, and I haven’t even started on the—’

‘Please. It won’t take that long. But it’s important.’

‘All right. I’m not going to like it, am I?’

‘Probably not, no.’

She sat down on the edge of the sofa, picking at a hangnail. ‘Look at my hands. No matter how much cream I use. Wish I could abide rubber gloves.’

‘Come here.’ He opened his left arm to her. ‘Nothing attractive about lily-white hands. Just means you never did a tap in all your puff.’

‘You sure? I won’t hurt you if I—’

‘Naw. That side’s all right, as long as you don’t lean too hard.’ She tucked herself under his arm, clasping her red-raw hands between her knees. He just had to say it, plain as he could. Trying to varnish it would only hurt her all the more.

‘When I was laid out, I was back—back in the war. It was all as clear as day. Well, it was monsoon season, so it wasn’t.’ She smiled up at him, but her eyes were wary, self-protecting. ‘There are things I haven’t told you. Not because I wanted to hide anything, or that I thought you weren’t able for it, though no woman should have to—’

Oh, fucking hell. How could he, of all people, have been so dense? *Sweetheart*. Sidney, so precise, so sensitive to language that he complained when Geordie said *hip*, blundering around for a word that conveyed the nature of the attachment but not the sex of the addressee. He had to see Sidney, he had to. As soon as he could.

‘Geordie?’ She touched his knee in gentle enquiry.

‘Sorry, pet. I—thought I could talk about it, but I’m not—I can’t, there’s no point. It’s in the past. You’ve just got to get on with things.’

She edged back along the sofa, holding her shoulders very straight and her face stiff. ‘Funny, because it seems to me it’s in the present just as much. You’d be able to tell *him*, wouldn’t you?’ She was actually trying hard not to sound bitter, and that just made it unbearable.

‘Aw, hinny, no—’ He reached out impetuously and yelped.

‘Oh, look what you’ve gone and done to yourself. You can’t have another dose, it’s only been an hour.’ She stood up, picking up a cushion. ‘Would it help to put that behind—lean forward—’

He shook his head, groaning. She tugged the corner of the cushion as if she were, as cleanly and quickly as possible, wringing its neck.

‘Right. Right, then. David has an auntie and uncle he hasn’t met yet, and I think the girls might like to see Bill and Doreen too. I’ll drop them a line, and if they’re free next Saturday I’ll drive over to Kettering for the day. Get him in here, talk it all out, whatever you have to do, and if things get out of hand—there’s to be no whisky, mind you.’

Geordie gulped and nodded, speechless now more with amazement than pain. Cathy walked to the door with the speed of someone who fears immediate and catastrophic loss of dignity. She paused, her hand on the door handle, and said, without turning around, ‘I’m not jealous. I’ll fight for you, though. Not over you. *For* you. Do what you need to, but don’t forget that. I love you.’

She bolted before he could reciprocate.

*

Sidney came dressed in mufti (which, Geordie considered, in defiance of general opinion, suited him much better than clericals) bearing a bunch of grapes, a temperate four bottles of Guinness, two packets of cigarettes and Leonard’s copy of *Crime and Punishment*.

‘Bloody hell. Couldn’t bear to part with his *Tit-Bits*, then?’

Geordie flinched at the unwitting pun he’d made, but Sidney, cheerfully clean-minded as ever, didn’t seem to notice. He sat down on the sofa, ran a quick, nervous hand through his hair.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Could be lousier. It hurts all the time, but it only hurts like hell some of the time. I can hobble about the house. Been for a couple of what the doc calls *short walks*, which came fairly close to killing me.’

‘I’m so sorry, Geordie. Bringing you whisky—I don’t know what I was thinking.’

‘I do.’

Sidney laughed. ‘But seriously. And everything else. Cathy had every right to be furious—it’s generous of her to let me visit now.’

‘She’s coming round. She’s still a bit soft on you, actually, despite everything.’

‘*Quite a catch*, wasn’t it? Gosh, the irony.’

‘There are still lots of—lots who’d think so. Sidney—’

‘Shall I make us some tea?’

Geordie wrinkled his nose. ‘Naw. I need building up, don’t you think? Lost a lot of blood.’

Sidney fetched glasses and a bottle-opener, poured out the Guinness. Geordie offered him a cigarette from one of the packets he’d brought. They sat for a few moments in silence, smoking. They were both the sort of people who, with a sufficiently close friend,

acknowledged thoughtful reflection as a social pursuit, but nonetheless, Geordie judged, he would have to take the plunge in a moment or Sidney would start a line of desultory chit-chat, and the precious time would be lost.

They said one another's names in unison. Geordie's mouth grew dry, remembering the last time they'd done that, and what he thought it might lead to. What, frankly, he still wanted it to lead to, though it mustn't. He took a drink.

'You first,' he said.

'No, you.'

'All right. The lad in your unit who you—was killed. The letter. It wasn't to a girl, was it?'

Sidney stared into the fireplace. 'No, it wasn't.'

'Did—did you—I mean, could you—was there really anyone to send it to?'

The effort that went into Sidney's attempt to keep the—which one was it? the Second—*thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God*—was exuberantly physical; the impression of a great tawny cat springing to the defence of its territory was overwhelming.

'What the fuck—I was his O.C., Geordie. What in damnation do you think I am?'

'All right, keep your wig on.'

Sidney sank back, recognition of what he had not denied spreading across his face in the form of a rather fetching blush.

'No. There was no-one to send it to. But I didn't know. I mean, I knew he admired me. You catch—the tail-end of a certain sort of look, you know.'

Well, *you* do, or in fact, mostly you *don't*, Geordie thought sardonically, but he just nodded and sipped his Guinness. An acute twinge in his side made him gasp; he shook his head at Sidney's look of concern.

'It was embarrassing,' Sidney went on, 'And I wished he'd hurry up and get over it. Finding the letter—it just made it worse. I already felt like a murderer. Believe me, I had no idea he was—in—in—love—' He wiped his finger and thumb across his eyes.

'Never exactly been your strong point, that.' Geordie's voice hit what was, to him, an unmistakable inflection, setting his pulse racing. Not so unmistakable to Sidney Chambers, though.

'Amanda? Today's the day, you know.'

'Amanda, yes.' Oh, ever-loving Christ on a penny-farthing. He should just *stop*. He extinguished his cigarette. Sidney was incorrigibly normal and completely oblivious, and he should be left that way, unspoiled.

‘And Hildegard, I suppose.’ Sidney looked at his knees and shook his head. ‘Mrs M. said—well, she gave me one of her little talks. I let it go much too far—’

Geordie took a small, shallow breath, and didn’t stop. ‘*And Hildegard, yes.*’

Sidney stubbed out his cigarette, and raising his head, caught Geordie’s eye properly for the first time. He held his gaze steady. *It means you ain’t scared no more.* And he wasn’t.

Geordie understood, then, how someone had come to coin the phrase *recognition dawned on his face*, because it really did, it was radiant, splendid, hot and glowing: the persimmon sun, burning away the grey-green jungle mist. It was like the old song that Mam used to sing, in her deep voice, deep as any man’s: *My love is like the sun, that in the firmament doth run, and always proves constant and true...* It was a sad song—*all ye that are in love, and cannot it remove, I pity the pains you must endure*—but she sang it for him as a treat, when he was good and made her happy.

‘Geordie? You?’

‘Mm. Me.’

All at once, Sidney was on his hunkers at the foot of the chair. He put his hands on the arms and leaned forward. Geordie caught his chin in one hand, relishing the rough warm heft of it, and passed his thumb across those miraculous full, pale lips. They parted obediently under his touch; he felt a momentary impulse to push his thumb between them, as the closest he was ever likely to get to the penetration he couldn’t pretend he hadn’t always wanted. But he did the chivalrous thing and brought his own to meet them.

Considering their perilous posture, and Sidney’s evident fear of bumping his wound, it was a very satisfying first kiss, which was to say it was clumsy, confused, over-earnest and didn’t last nearly long enough. He wanted to do it again, straight away, and find some means to keep doing it for the rest of his natural days. *And* the rest, which he wasn’t nearly up to yet, that made him light-headed even to contemplate, though that might be because his hardening cock seemed to be connected by some wicked sinew to the pain in his abdomen.

Sidney sat back on his heels, clearly struggling with at least one more *thou shalt not*.

‘You’re going to feel bad about this, aren’t you?’ Geordie asked, ‘I saw you after Gloria.’

Sidney’s jaw swung inarticulately for a moment. ‘I’m not sure. It’s different. But—you and Cathy?’

‘Well, to be honest, I’m not quite sure what she knows. She didn’t go to Kettering to see the sister she gets on least well with out of the four and the brother-in-law who makes us a new fretwork whatsit and matching macramé pot-holder every Christmas for the good of her health.’

‘Do people ever go to Kettering for the good of their health? I’m not even sure where it is. Nottinghamshire. Northamptonshire. It sounds like a gerund.’ Sidney blinked, rolled his shoulders and shook his head. It had a bizarre, innocent, fledgling look, and Geordie snorted.

‘Don’t make me laugh, Sidney. I might literally bust a gut.’

‘Sorry.’ Sidney retreated to the sofa. ‘I—my mind’s rather crowded. I mean, I never thought of myself as— Well, of course, at school. But it seemed like exploitation of the smaller boys, so I didn’t, and in the vacs there were girls, Jen’s friends mostly, who seemed to like me, and I liked some of them enough to kiss them. By the time I went up I had an idea of a vocation, which meant you moved in certain circles, but—sorry, I’m babbling.’

‘And then there was the war.’

‘Yes. There was someone, then, for you, wasn’t there? That’s why you thought Sandy and I might have been—’

Geordie nodded, knowing that a coherent story was utterly beyond him. ‘I’ll tell you about it sometime, maybe. Not now.’

‘Was he killed?’

‘He died.’

He saw some notion of the possible difference between their respective war service settle itself into Sidney’s consciousness. Good, Geordie thought basely, there were heavier things to lug about than an M.C. you felt unworthy of.

‘What was his name?’

‘Terence Phelps.’

Geordie recognised Sidney’s momentary stillness as a professional reflex: registering and filing away. He felt as if the flash and brief exposure of a photograph had thieved his soul.

‘What are we going to do, Geordie? Don’t mistake me. I—if it was going to be any man on earth, it would be you.’

That ragged, sincere voice: did he know how it melted people? Geordie supposed he did, and armoured himself accordingly.

‘It can’t be any *man* on earth, can it?’

‘No, of course not,’ Sidney said. ‘For about three dozen separate reasons, none of which have to do with how I actually feel.’

‘For me as much as you. So we stop here. Pretend it never happened. Never mention it again.’ There was a self-lacerating pleasure in saying it aloud. He knew it too for a species of self-pity, one Mam had specialised in: shifting the responsibility of coping with your fears onto others, by making them issue elaborate denials. *No, of course I won’t put you in the County Home.* She’d died in a former workhouse hospital, but there was absolutely nothing he could’ve done about that in 1944.

Sidney glanced from their empty glasses to the remaining bottles of Guinness, and then at Geordie with a wry look of enquiry. Geordie nodded. Sidney got up to hand him the drink and stayed on his feet, pacing in the cramped space before the hearth.

‘I suppose we must. It seems dishonest. Ben Blackwood said something to me—that tolerance, discretion, only take you so far. You’re—I mean one is—still lying.’

‘Bright lad. Will he be all right?’

‘Well, he couldn’t actually be anywhere better than King’s—the Provost, Sheppard—he’s, er, sympathetic. Ben matriculated under his mother’s maiden name, but of course enough people know who he is. When his father goes to trial, I don’t care to think. Geordie,’ he said abruptly, ‘how the hell do you stand it?’

‘What?’

‘The police.’

‘I could ask the same question about your lot, but I won’t. Your curate might have some answers. I’ve got Cathy, the kids. Most of the time it never even crosses my mind.’ The profound untruth of this did not quite occur to him until he had spoken. ‘Or it didn’t. Now it does. Quite a bit.’ He hoped that the creak in his voice had not suggested some of the wilder fantasies: Sidney’s cock in his mouth, his own between Sidney’s improbably plump lips, Sidney slack and purring, having just been fucked daft, the courteous urgency with which Sidney might himself fuck—

‘Oh, Geordie.’ Sidney’s decisive frown dissolved into compassion, which was humiliating. But it made him look more gorgeous than ever, and you took what you could get. ‘You’ve landed me with a bit of a facer, actually. Grave matter, full knowledge, deliberate consent.’

‘I didn’t know your crowd had that one.’

‘It’s a big and bustling crowd. With some Catholics in it, doctrinally speaking. I’m not one of them, and it’s not a definition I like much. But that’s not the problem, so much as all the remorse I’m not feeling.’

‘You mean—’

‘Yes.’ Sidney held out his hand; putting his own in it, Geordie felt himself raised and steadied, caressed and held with astonishing authority, a gentle instinct for what his injured body could bear, which all the same didn’t make him feel he was being handled like bone china. Though his was a different style altogether—impossible to imagine Sidney behaving with such casual obscenity of body and mind—Terry had had the same knack, the same unselfconscious way of communicating that your body was valuable in itself, to be cherished simply because it was yours. That had been necessary then, when all around them had been intent on demonstrating their singular worthlessness, but now it was surely greed, to want it and accept it from Sidney when he had promised it to Cathy alone. He remembered her words, *do what you need to*, and wondered if it was just self-indulgence to interpret them in the way he wanted, the way that meant he didn’t have to stop kissing Sidney Chambers or lift

his hands from Sidney Chambers' taut, brawny arse, except perhaps to unbutton Sidney Chambers' fly and release the erection Sidney was no longer bothering to hold away from him. He had a sudden, juvenile, barely sexual curiosity about Sidney's cock: was it as straight and handsome as the rest of him? It was certainly pretty firm and upright. The nagging ache and soreness in his side had receded to a low ebb, but that wicked sinew tugged again, the pain making him droop as soon as he got a start. He felt ashamed: for Sidney, he wanted to be eager, adamant, dominant.

'We—we should cool it,' Sidney murmured. 'Apart from *everything* else, you'll do yourself an injury.'

As Sidney, with gratifying reluctance, let go, the pain flooded back in full measure; Geordie repressed a scream but nearly crumpled to his knees.

'Shit—' Sidney caught him around the shoulders and helped him to the sofa. 'Can I get you something—'

'Painkillers—in the bathroom cabinet.'

Sidney returned with the bottle and a glass of water. 'APC? Shouldn't you still be on something a bit stronger at this stage?'

'Don't want to get addicted. Doc said my line of work hasn't a hope of catching up with his in that department, but it was probably wise all the same.'

'And mine, I wouldn't wonder. Here.'

Geordie took the pills. He'd have murdered a thimbleful or two of whisky, rather than water, to wash them down, but Cathy had distrustfully confiscated all the drink in the house.

Sidney sat down beside him, slung his arm along the back of the sofa in tactful invitation. Geordie accepted it gratefully, settling himself against Sidney's chest, as solid, hard and reassuringly warm as a dry-stone wall on a blazing summer's day.

'Can I ask you something, Sidney?'

'Of course.'

'After Gloria, you said you had to confess, and you couldn't, you know—until you had—'

'Take communion—your old-heathen embarrassment is delightful, by the way. I'll have to get Leonard to conduct tomorrow's services, I think—not sure how I'm going to explain that yet.'

'Poor sod. You overwork him.'

'And you can't delegate. Look at Atkins, champing at the bit—'

At the risk of disturbing the fragile respite that the APC was beginning to effect, Geordie gave him a hard nudge in the ribs.

‘Oof. And you say you never rough up suspects. Honestly—I feel pretty filthy about it—dumping things on Leonard, I mean. Not—’ he made an up-and-down, you-and-me gesture. ‘Which is a problem in itself.’

‘We’ve all got to do a lot of—’

‘—very unEnglish thrashing it out?’

‘You could put it like that.’

‘The right thing to do—I mean, in a rulebook sort of way, would be for me to go and see the Archdeacon. Confession to a priest is recommended, for obdurate cases.’

It was not the pain in his side that had Geordie temporarily winded. ‘You’re not *serious*?’

He hauled himself out of Sidney’s arms to see a face as earnest as it was lovely.

‘Yes—why?’

‘Because—because—’ The *News of the World* headline flashed before Geordie’s eyes. He planted his hands on the cushions either side of him and breathed heavily.

‘Our crowd, as you put it, have the seal of the confessional too. And no names, no packdrill. But I won’t, anyway. For some reason I don’t quite trust him. And he’d almost certainly pack me off for counselling with a fearful old wizard called Darrow, who still does exorcisms willy-nilly, or so they say.’ Sidney shuddered, the very model of a modern and rational young clergyman. ‘But look, I can’t imagine why I’m burdening you with shop—what about you —?’

Geordie was tired. Fashed, fagged, fit only for the knacker’s yard. He’d had, in greater measure than he’d imagined possible, what he’d wanted practically since he’d been mildly tickled to see a startlingly good-looking young man in a dog-collar politely rebuff Annie’s solicitations. Regrets? Well, maybe a few. But San Fairy Ann, as his Nanna used to say: he wondered for years who the hell *she* was before he heard a Thai girl say it and a French-speaking pal explained; it must have been a music hall catchphrase a century ago, for where would Eileen Keating of Elswick have picked up any French? He heard the sound of a familiar engine outside on the street, a car door opening and slamming, squeals and giggles.

‘You’ve just to get on with it. That’s all you need to say.’

Sidney looked dissatisfied. That wasn’t enough for him. He liked to analyse, dissect, study and debate, very unEnglishly thrash things out. But Geordie reckoned for once he had God on his side. *Sufficient unto the day...*

‘Put a record on,’ he said, waving a hand at the rack. ‘We’ll say I’ve been converting you to light opera.’

Sidney visibly smothered both his dismay at Geordie’s prevarication and his apprehension at confronting Cathy beneath a ritual groan and watery but determined smile. ‘How about the *The Pirates of Penzance*?’

Geordie nodded. There was nothing very glorious about it, but it was a thing. Better to let your black flag fly than play a sanctimonious part. And always be true to the song you sing, whatever song that turned out to be.

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