If the Invader Comes

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«HarperCollins»

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A critically acclaimed, Booker long-listed novel that is reminiscent of Pat Barker's 'Regeneration Trilogy'.Clarice Pike and Vic Warren are from completely different backgrounds. An impossible affair has already driven them thousands of miles apart. 1939 finds Clarice in Malaya where her father is an obscure company doctor, and Vic in East London, an unemployed shipwright badly married to Phylis, Clarice's cousin. As their feelings conspire to draw the lovers back together, the world erupts with a terrible violence. It is the relentlessness of male brutality that forces Vic to grope towards what real manhood might be.'If the Invader Comes' combines themes from Derek Beaven's previously acclaimed 'Newton's Niece' and 'Acts of Mutiny' to portray a wartime England where human relationships are threatened as much from within the family as from occupied Europe. Exciting, moving and ultimately optimistic, Derek Beaven's new novel represents a daring leap in British fiction.

Содержание

If the Invader Comes
Derek Beaven

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Dedication

For Peter

If the Invader Comes is a work of fiction. Except for historical figures, all its characters are imaginary, and their names were chosen for no other reason than euphony.

Contents

I A Contract

IT OPENS IN paradise, with my great-uncle. He was woken by a thud from the ceiling directly over his head, followed by a flurry of squeals, as the little cobra that seemed to have got into the roof caught another rat. In the darkness of the bedroom, Dr Wulfstan Pike lay under his mosquito net and listened to the drench hitting the bungalow thatch and the cascade of rivulets from the eaves on to the garden outside his window. He could distinguish, too, the pelt of huge globes of water into the puddles in the compound. The steamy rot smell from the old carpet mingled with the flavour of his own sweat.

He felt under the sheet for the woman lying at his side. Selama stirred in her sleep and turned over towards him; his palm traced the child-stretched skin of her belly to rest on the prominence of her hip. He smoothed the curve to her waist, and, as he bent his head near her hair on the pillow, he caught both the savour of the food she prepared, and the deeper note of her body's secretions. The spicy confluence in his nostrils was so tender that he woke her with his kisses.

Later, they slept until dawn. When he got up, he felt confident, as if the world these last two weeks really had not been shifting under his feet. Outside, on the veranda, the view towards the coast showed each leaf for miles rinsed and urgently viridescent. The huge sky was mottled with pearl.

He stood, taking it in, still hardly believing after so many years the sublimity that lay around him – until a waft of fresh coffee announced that Musa, the *kuki*, was up and doing. A queue of patients had already begun to form on the other side of the front steps.

The coffee pot, on its Chinese tray, had been served neatly to the sideboard in the dining-room. Dr Pike took his cup and clomped in his boots and dressing-gown to the teak table. Its top was completely covered with cut-out newspaper stories; but as if they were no more than a scrapbook in process he was at pains not to notice them.

Most mornings Selama sent the cook, Musa, off to do housework or buy groceries, and made breakfast herself in an old shirt she'd taken a fancy to, a frayed blue one with cooking splashes down the front. Most mornings during the last fortnight she had begun the meal by objecting to Dr Pike's mess of papers all over the breakfast table.

Today, however, she wore the red kimono he'd bought her once in Kuala Lumpur. And, seeing her like that, he wished he could hold time still with Selama sitting opposite him just as she was, her brown eyes looking up for a second, her quick smile showing the missing front tooth, and her fine, slightly greying hair spilling down on to red silk.

Isolated words from the expanse of print caught his attention: *Blitzkrieg, cathedral, armour-piercing, Bydgoszcz.* They flicked up at him with venom. He felt Selama watching him. She guessed exactly what was in his heart – of that he was certain. She knew he thought of quitting Malaya, of simply failing to return from his next leave. Part of him wished they could discuss his dilemma, another was relieved they never did. She knew he could never take her with him.

Neither spoke over a breakfast of last night's rice pancakes, heated up again and buttered. When they'd finished, he rose and went to kiss her cheek. 'Dear, you know how I need you.'

'I know and I don't know.'

'You know.' In the haven of her neck, breathing her, he was overcome.

'No, Stan.' She stood up, crossly, and rearranged her lapel. 'Haven't you got patients to see?'

My great-uncle sighed. Taking his quinine from the sideboard, he went to get dressed.

As always, he stood in front of the long mirror in his wardrobe door. It showed nothing youthful, nor romantic; merely an ample, red-and-white Englishman with grizzled body hair. He was no more than his reflection, and age had caught up with him.

How strange not to notice. Sag had occurred in several regions quite recently taut. And how thoroughly bald he'd grown. Only the eyebrows and moustache appeared to flourish, sprouting ever whiter and more luxuriant. Wrinkles he'd rather thought of as charm were bunched under the pale

blue eyes. Surely his nose had enlarged while he slept. The jowls, simian; the ears, elephantine – it all added up to little more than roguishness.

The *amah*, the Chinese woman who'd first looked after his daughter and still remained with the household, had left a jug of tepid water on the bedroom floor. A large enamelled tin bowl was the apparatus he generally used for washing his privates. Planting his feet either side of it, he would lower himself on to its rims and then work up a good lather by the action of his hands, diving all about, leaving no crevice of his life unexamined. But for some reason this morning found him too picturesque for his own good and he left the mirror. He went instead to the little bathroom which adjoined, in order to sluice himself from the monumental earthenware jar kept permanently there. The cool water slipped deliciously from his back and belly and disappeared through the slats in the floor.

As he returned, dripping, to rummage in a drawer for underwear, Selama knocked at the door. 'Stan! What're you doing? It's getting late. Are you lazy?'

'Just thinking.'

'You think too much.'

Dr Pike's old thatched bungalow was on stilts. Standing next to the bedroom window as he hauled on his khaki shorts and snapped his braces over his shoulders, he looked down on smiling faces. A child waved. He recognised her. Under his care, she'd recovered from a paralysis, which the mother had insisted was caused by an ill-wisher. On such matters he kept an open mind, for he'd proved the abracadabra of medicine himself, countless times. The body might be decently addressed with an instruction to heal – and quite often it really would, throwing off even the most tenacious bug. Therefore, he allowed, in wickedness it could be told to become sick, and might comply.

Shaving, he reminded himself that his daughter, Clarice, was arriving at teatime.

'They're waiting for you. Hurry up, dear!'

'All right, woman! D'you want to make a chap cut his bloody throat.'

HE LEFT THE bedroom as soon as he'd finished, and carried the little desk and cane chair out from the study to the veranda. There he called up the first patient to stand before him, and without more ado began examining the sore in a plantation worker's leg. With its ring of ooze, it was a bad wound to come across first thing. It lay beside the shin-bone, an obscene, pointless crater in the structures just below the knee.

In fact, his head swam at the sight of it. He actually felt as though he were going to pass out – something that hadn't happened since the day Clarice broke her arm. That had been on her seventh birthday, in England. His pale daughter had stood before him holding the shocking misalignment with her good hand and he'd fainted against the bookcase corner, the one by the door in the Suffolk house, and almost knocked himself out. Little use it would have been then to her, having a doctor for a father. All at once the plantation worker's lesion meant nothing to him. His brain refused to focus, and he lacked any notion of the routine treatment called for. The only thing he could sense was that the sufferer seemed unusually sullen and unco-operative.

Dr Pike was an intuitive. As a healer, he relied on the inner 'click' – that moment when body responded to body – by which he'd know how to begin. Just now, its absence was unnerving, and, while the sweat broke out on his brow, his skin grew incomprehensibly cold. The sore mocked him. It threatened to widen and erupt before his eyes. He felt his other patients waiting, watching from the garden. A fly settled on the raw flesh; a couple more. His relationship with Selama was racially illicit. It was September 1939. The paradise was altering around him.

There had once gone out in that world an imperial edict, the Concubine Circular. After its issue, 'native women' had become less and less permissible in a government or company bungalow, no matter how unpretentious. While new men sat at the famous long bar at the club in Seremban, older Malaya hands would describe the passing of the Romance of the Orient. Before the Great War, most white officials had Malayan mistresses; the practice had been so ordinary as to be beyond comment.

Nowadays, men brought out their wives from England. There were roads, cars, telephones. Among the English there was a polite society of sorts, an urban sentiment, and with it a heightened racial feeling, for white women looked on the natives as unfair competition. Dr Pike brushed the flies away. The accumulation of fester was already dangerous. Tentatively, he began cleaning the mess with a spirit swab, trying to gather his wits.

He hadn't set out to take up with a Malayan woman – nor was he the typical imperial servant I might already have led you to suspect. He'd left England in desperation because his young wife Mattie's family couldn't be trusted, and would never suffer her to be free of them. From London the couple's first escape had been to East Anglia with the child, Clarice. When Suffolk failed to lighten the marriage, my great-uncle had prescribed this more drastic relocation and trained for the tropics. But Mattie had taken sick: of climate, of separation from home, of jungle fever or falling fever, or perhaps wilfully of some yet-to-be-identified complaint.

He and Selama had met at the cottage hospital. A ward sister, she had been recently widowed. In the way of doctors and nurses, they'd worked together over a period, brought close by several problem cases and their shared determination not to give up on them. Gradually, they'd become attracted enough to risk love. Both had been gratified. He'd immediately found a happiness, which had lasted.

But their liaison broke rules and crossed boundaries. Even after Mattie died, they thought of themselves as an embarrassing throwback, a white man and his 'keep'. They were inadmissible among either his or her people, tolerated only so long as they kept on the very edge of society.

Now his daughter was a grown woman, and only last month a Mrs Christopher, a Perak District Officer's wife *en route* northward through Seremban, had sent in a complaint about him: that Dr Pike's liaison made his daughter's social position impossible. Everybody knew about it except the girl herself. The plantation worker flinched at the swab's touch. There was a dull hatred in his eyes, as if this *tuan doktor* were cause rather than cure. Dr Pike pressed into the weeping tissue, trying to do the right thing. Or was even this called in question, he asked himself? Had one person ever the right to intervene in the condition of another? It was his duty, surely, at least to clean up the damage. The man groaned and muttered through clenched teeth.

A whole region of clotted blood and pus finally came away. In the exposed corner of the sore, just under a film of partially healed skin, Dr Pike spotted a blue-grey shape, like a gaping comma, sharply defined. He stared at it in surprise. It was the head of something. 'There's a good chap,' he told his patient. 'You've been very brave.'

He finished off with the swab and rinsed his hands. Then, as if the treatment were complete, he prepared a fold of powder at his desk. 'I'd like you to take this, three times a day after meals.' He repeated the formula in his best Tamil, and handed over the paper.

The patient relaxed, visibly.

'Oh. One thing. Sit down here.' He stood up, and gestured to his own chair.

The man complied, and, apparently half-amused, settled himself in.

Dr Pike picked up one of the sharp slivers of bamboo he kept ready and split it to make a springy clip. He returned almost casually, before pain could be anticipated, knelt down, and inflicted one deft but absolute stroke.

A sharp scream echoed round the compound. It was still dying away as the doctor stood, triumphant. From the bamboo in which its head was trapped, a strange marbled worm hung curling like three inches of theatrical macaroni. 'Found you, rogue. My God, but you're an altogether different kettle of fish.' And it was true: he had not seen the like before.

Laughter and applause broke out in the queue below the veranda. He could have sworn he felt the thing twitch at the sound; and he called over his shoulder, 'Selama! Come and look! Tell me if you've seen one of these!'

The plantation worker darted a strained glance behind him towards the bungalow's interior, from which Selama's voice came back, high and still irritated, 'Whatever it is, I don't want to see!'

'Don't be silly. Come here, woman. Just take a look at this.'

There were calls for Selama from the lawn. At last she came out, an apron round her fine red kimono and a feather duster in her hand. 'You're dreadful, Dr Pike. Get away with you. My, my, a very bad animal.'

Everybody laughed, except the worm's host, who looked offended. As for doctor and nurse, it was imperial farce, and the incident restored them. Dr Pike made up a dressing, sent both his patient and his lover away, and found himself able to proceed.

BY TWELVE THIRTY he'd finished. He'd treated three vitamin deficiencies, a lethargy, a broken toe, the child with the paralysis, two toothaches, two animal bites and a knife wound; advised one man to smoke less, another to smoke more; and monitored, through their husbands, the progress of several pregnant women. His last patient left a chicken in a bamboo cage which would answer for tomorrow's dinner, and which also reminded him of East Anglia, where a parish doctor might find a brace of dead pheasants on his doorstep in lieu of payment.

The worm lay in a dish, faintly convulsing. He spoke to it. 'What have you been up to, eh? Don't imagine I don't know.' He took his trophy to the larger, mahogany desk in the den, poured himself a Scotch, and turned to his books to attempt identification.

He had small hope. There was such great variety in the forest, so much speciation. Manson's *Tropical Diseases*, he knew, was both limited and soggy: the pages clung one to another at this time of year. Usually, he didn't mind – the rubber company got him new volumes whenever the print started actually coming away. Today, however, it put him out. He unpeeled the relevant chapter and read. For large worms there was always the Hippocratic method, whereby nematodes such as *Dracunculus* were teased slowly out of the human lymphatic system, poulticed, rolled week by week around a piece of stick. Manson also listed a biblical technique for them: Moses had once nailed a brazen snake to a pole. Though Dr Pike lamented the lack of such kit from his issue, he dismissed these findings as irrelevant. In this part of the world *Dracunculus* was not a problem.

His own specimen began in a sightless head, was bloody, much shorter, and fringed with liverish stalks. It had visible segments. He imagined sharing his own body with such a thing, while it strove and grew. The sweat broke out again, this time soaking his collar and the armpits of his shirt. He prescribed himself another whisky.

With the usual filariases and helminth infestations, the difficult ulcerations, the mysterious wastings and crippling diarrhoeas, Dr Pike was generally more successful than science alone could have made him. Obvious incurables were packed off to the government hospital in Seremban, but where there was a chance, flair could tip the scales. He did see strange cases, and story-book monsters of the kind that lay in the dish seemed to long to be understood. Sometimes he had literally to wrestle with them; at others they required a long and teasing dance. Dr Pike was prepared to entertain the notion of a medical borderland, and was unconventional enough to meet the jungle half-way.

It was a far cry from an English surgery. The little lurking ticks, the mischievous snails, the local threadlike *Wuchererias* and *Brugias* concealed themselves within the abundant Malayan woodland, glued under leaves, afloat in pools, suspended from threads, or cunningly ciphered in the bodies of insects, waiting only to hide yet again in the tissue of a passer-by. They reproduced by threading species and air, being and space in the most ingenious stitchwork. Parasitical colonisation was the defining disease of Malaya, and Dr Pike felt both the worm's malice, and its repulsive yearning to find a place for itself. Nature, so secretive, so abundant, so enterprising, actually craved attention. The worm *desired* a name. Dr Pike spluttered into his glass.

The creature was beginning to dull into a mass. There was already a putrid stink to it. It made his gorge rise again, as if today he lacked all stomach for research. To stretch it out and examine it thoroughly, to take the omens, how revolting. Thankfully the Scotch was always in good supply. In the heat it went straight in at the mouth and out at the pores, hardly touching the bloodstream. He splashed in another couple of fingers.

Now Selama knocked on the study door. ‘Stan! I’ve made lunch.’

She served him neat vicarage sandwiches filled with spiced *egg*. Afterwards they went to the bedroom. He undressed her, and the kimono cascaded round her feet in a silken rush; but when she responded to his embrace and huddled herself close, the room suddenly emptied for him, as though a plug had been pulled, and he was left afloat on nothing. He recalled his lapse of mind on the veranda, that feeling of being lost, disconnected.

‘Sorry. Sorry, dear.’ Horrified, he turned away from her. ‘The bloody Scotch, I expect.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘No. Sorry.’

‘Stan. It doesn’t matter.’

‘No. I expect not. Sorry. I’m so sorry.’ He couldn’t think. Her body, always so desirable, like a home, a flame, a frontier, had become strange. Because of his failure, she was almost unbearable to him. ‘Must be getting old,’ he said. The forced chuckle sounded like a rattle. His mind offered him only the image of the worm.

She held out a hand. ‘Come. Lie down.’ He obeyed, and allowed himself to be led to the bed and settled. Naked, she lay beside him.

He tried again, pouncing on her, almost; capturing her breasts and kissing them, pressing her belly, prising her legs apart.

‘Stop it! Stan, you pack that up!’

‘Yes, of course. Sorry.’

‘What are you playing at?’

‘Well … Hasn’t done any good anyway.’ The bedroom seemed far away, tinged with a juiceless aerial light, her anger terrible, but so remote. ‘Hasn’t done any bloody good.’

THEY LAY ON the bed, in the heat of the afternoon. He wished he could be sure she was asleep, but fancied she was merely pretending, lying there hating him. After an hour she got up and stretched in front of the window. Her silhouette, the back he knew he loved, the waist, the fullness of her hips, all struck him with fear.

‘Clarice will be here soon, won’t she?’ she said. ‘I’m going to Ibrahim, then. Straight away.’ Her son’s family lived closer to Seremban itself. ‘I’ll be back tomorrow after dark, when your daughter has gone. Don’t worry yourself, though. He’ll bring me.’ She faced away from the doctor as she tied on a batik skirt, slipped into a brown cotton jacket and left the room.

He followed, useless. He found her by the print-strewn dining table, and struggled for words. ‘He’s good to his mother, Ibrahim.’

‘Yes, Stan. He is.’ She picked up one of the plates left from their lunch and placed it waitress-like on her arm. Then she waved her free hand crossly at the strewn cuttings. Outside, it was about to rain again.

‘So what’s happening? Eh, Stan? You tell me what’s happening.’

He had no answer, but only peered down at the evidence he’d assembled. There were reports out of the *Straits Times*, the *Malay Mail*, the *Tribune, Planter*, and clippings, too, from the English *Times*, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* – in fact whatever of the Fleet Street press had managed to find its way up to Seremban, hot off some RAF plane into Singapore and already quite overtaken by events. Shamed, he shifted his weight from foot to foot like a schoolboy up before the beak. Selama stacked the other plate on top of the first, and disappeared towards the kitchen.

‘Shall I drive you?’ he called after her.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Till later then. Goodbye, dear.’ He handed the umbrella out of the bamboo hall-stand. ‘You’ll need this.’

From the veranda he watched her go down the length of the garden path, the umbrella under her arm, still rolled even though the first warm drops had begun to fall. Musa, the *kuki*, hovered with

a broom in his hand on his way to the back bungalow, pretending not to look. At the mud road Selama turned in the direction of the town, refusing to glance back and wave. Failing her, betraying her, he watched until she was hidden in the tunnel of large, overarching trees at the bend.

Almost immediately out of the same gap a Malayan lad appeared on a bicycle, coming towards him, bringing the latest paper. The boy hurried to where the doctor stood on the veranda. '*Selamat petang*.' He presented the broadsheet. '*Tuan*.'

There was also a letter, from England.

'*Terima kasih*.' Stan Pike fished a small coin from his pocket, and then remembered himself. 'May your deeds also be blessed.'

The newspaper contained flashed accounts of the Russians going into Poland from the east, together with more evidence of German barbarities as they'd made their way through from the west. The letter was from Phyllis, Mattie's niece, whom he hadn't seen since she was a scrap of a kid.

Then Clarice arrived in the town's ancient taxi.

'DON'T BE RIDICULOUS, Daddy.' Ensconced in a cane chair, Clarice held her cup and saucer balanced in one hand and brushed with the other at the rain splashes on her shoulder and sleeve. Dr Pike was proud of his daughter's looks: Clarice had Mattie's features, fine and regular. Her hair, though, had always tended towards his own sandy colour. It was now further bleached and streaked from her trip up-country. Today, she wore it pinned, visibly ridged with the traces of a perm.

He was proud, too, of her dress sense. She'd put on a cool, belted day dress in pale grey crêpe de Chine. Leaning back somewhat languidly, with her legs elegantly crossed, and conducting a minute rhythm with the toe of one slim black shoe, she appeared more assured and sophisticated than he'd ever seen her; more mature, certainly, than her twenty-three years. As for himself, he stood facing her from the doorway to the dining-room, holding the teapot, with sweat already sopping the armpits of his shapeless tropical kit. 'I'm not ridiculous,' he said.

'Who in their right mind would choose just now to up sticks? And England of all places. Even if they're not bombed to bits, I certainly don't want to go back to England. What was it you said once? Malignant middle class, beaten working class, and Mummy's relations. I thought you *never* wanted to.' She squinted at him, with a puzzled expression.

'There comes a point when one thinks of retiring,' he muttered.

She chided him. 'And don't be lame, either. There's years in you yet. You're not the retiring kind. Anyway, Malaya's your life. Weren't you planning to go up to the hills? Gunung Angsi, buy a little place?'

He changed the subject. 'What about this young man of yours? You might have brought him with you.'

'Oh, Robin,' she said, airily. 'I would have done. But he said he had some business at the club. You can meet him when he comes to pick me up in the morning.'

'A nice trip?'

'Fine, thanks. Absolutely fine.'

Clarice got up, still holding her tea. 'Daddy, you're looking terrible. I didn't like to say it as soon as I came in, but honestly … What is it?'

'It's nothing.'

She placed the back of her hand on his brow. 'Hadn't you better sit down? I'll get your medicine, shall I?' Taking charge, she moved past him into the dining-room. 'And what on earth have you been doing here?'

He saw her put down her cup on the strewn table. 'Don't do that,' he said.

'Why not? I'll just see if I can find a sponge for you – and some water, too.'

'No!'

But she went off despite him towards the bedrooms. He sat down to mop his own brow.

He sometimes wondered how much Clarice had suffered, lacking a mother, trailing about the world alone like a lost soul, sometimes at school in England, at other times mured in this old-fashioned colonial bungalow, back and forth. Her mother's death had come when she was fourteen and she'd taken ship directly back to Malaya for a period of mourning with him. Selama had moved discreetly out.

Then Clarice had gone home to finish her schooling and Selama was reinstated. Clarice had returned once more, and, once more, he'd kept up appearances. Now Clarice moved in higher social circles than his own. Singapore was a fortress.

But even if he could maintain her there indefinitely, he wasn't sure what her place was in the scheme of things. Daughters were supposed to be married off. Or she should have some career? Whatever, there was some strong element in it of a father's duty; though Clarice had shown little sign of knowing for herself what she wanted.

At times she'd thrown herself into helping him on his rounds, like a devoted nursing auxiliary. Dr Pike had distrusted her motives; they smacked of spinsterism, possibly of religion. In any case, if he'd wanted a nurse he had Selama, and Clarice muddled his drug cabinet. But now she seemed the composed one, while he sat baffled, ghostly, and afraid of his decision.

He dabbed at himself with his handkerchief. The core of his fear was the subject no one at the club would discuss: that the Japanese would come as they had to China, and there'd be nothing anyone could do. People at the club said he was being alarmist. They seemed to lack the imagination to grasp the meaning of what had gone on in Nanking. Dr Pike had been left alone with the vision culled from his newspaper cuttings: of the Japanese Army occupying a Malaya left defenceless because Britain was suddenly locked into a struggle on the other side of the world – of the merciless rape of the two women in his life over his dead body. Nobody believed it could happen, yet for the two weeks since Britain had declared war on Germany he hadn't been able to shut the thought off.

He wondered whether he really was in for a bout of his fever. His preoccupation might be delirium. He tried thinking of Selama, of all his familiar textures, the closeness of his house, the rattan chairs, the boxed discs of chamber music for the wind-up gramophone, the pictures on his walls, his specimen cabinets, his rack of Dutch cigars.

Clarice returned with the sponge. 'Call yourself a doctor, Daddy? I can't leave you, can I? Thought you'd have known better. And why have you left those wretched pieces all over the dining table?'

Eyes screwed shut, he tilted up his face for her. How he wished he could put aside the buzz in his ear which said, Take Clarice away from Malaya, go now while you can. Or was it in his bones, his blood, this gathering intuition of crisis?

'I'm not being ridiculous, Clarice,' he repeated. 'I really think we have to leave.'

'I've no intention of going anywhere except Singapore,' she said. 'Now take some of this.' She held out the quinine bottle.

Later, he staggered out of his bedroom just as Musa was serving Clarice's dinner over the arrangement on the table. He did try to explain. He picked up a cutting from the *Times*. Dated 18 December 1937, it was by C. M. Macdonald, the only British correspondent to have remained in Nanking during the Japanese army's entry into that city. He scanned past the descriptions of murder to the part of the report which glared by its tale of omission, *But it is a fact that the bodies of no women were seen.*

Clarice was firm with him. 'Daddy, I'm terribly tired, actually. Would you mind awfully if we did the political lecture another time. I know you've probably got something gruesome to demonstrate, but to be honest I'd rather not hear it just at the moment. I'll have to make an early start tomorrow. You won't be offended if I call it a day, will you? Just go back to bed. Come on. This way.'

'We have to get out.'

'You have to get some sleep.' Stifling a yawn, she kissed him good-night. 'And so do I. Now you'll take care of yourself, won't you?' She turned to go.

'Of course,' he said, submissive now. 'Sorry. Sleep well, darling.' He still held the cutting in his hand but was glad, after all, that he didn't have to explain to her how the missing women hadn't been chivalrously spared.

IN THE NIGHT he got up. He was very frightened. His desire to put things right, to do his duty at last as a father – that was what had turned him into this parody of a supreme commander, pacing agitated, solo, around his dining-room table as if it contained the relief map of the theatre of operations. If he could assess the situation accurately, the enemy's strength and disposition, then and only then would he know how to act. The evidence was laid out before him. Thousands of miles away, Poland, a fully functioning European state with a considerable army and a fine cultural history, had been reduced to rubble in a week or two. Some terrible permission had been given. Reports confirmed both the astonishing German tactical brilliance and the brutality of the assault. He tapped his foot on the floorboards. Rain outside drowned out the sound. What if Britain and France got drawn in and bogged down? If America stayed on the fence? What of the imperial supply lines if the thing really got going? Any ship between Singapore and the English Channel would increasingly become fair game for a U-boat.

He rummaged for Selama's sharp sewing scissors in the sideboard drawer and cut out a piece from the newspaper that had just arrived. It counted the total sinkings as two dozen British ships, so far. No such announcement had come through on the short-wave radio. The liner *Athenia* had been torpedoed by a submarine.

If his vision was right, Clarice must not stay. But he couldn't just send her away – to nowhere, to Mattie's family – cast her adrift as she'd been set to drift already, this time on dangerous seas. He'd been a wretched parent, if the truth were told. Booting her out once more would be to fail her utterly. The whole thing was repeating itself. Supposing England were more fire than frying-pan, and he were deliberately hurrying his daughter under a cloudburst of bombs. Then, as her father, he should at least go with her. But he couldn't take Selama. Nor could he leave her. Every delay made the seas more perilous. The fever beat up and up; and then broke in another drenching sweat.

In the morning, in the lull, he put on a brave face. A sultry sky showed the monsoon weather, and Clarice maintained, over breakfast, her refusal to discuss change. By way of diversion, he read Phyllis's letter. It had been weeks delayed.

Dear Uncle Stan,

I know you will have forgotten all about me. In fact when Auntie Mattie passed away you probably thought you would have got rid of us Tylers for good, and here we are turning up again like a bad penny. I'm sure I did write on the occasion of my marriage and again on the birth of our little boy, Jack, but unfortunately received no reply. Normally I wouldn't trouble you except Victor, my beloved husband, has lost his job, he is a shipwright at the boatyard, and is finding it hard to get another start. If there was any way you could see your way to help us through this difficult time, I can assure you we would be very grateful. I hope this letter finds you well. I always remember how kind you and Auntie Mattie were to me when you used to very kindly have me to stay with you in your country house in Suffolk.

I remain

Your loving niece

Phyllis Warren (Tyler as was)

'"I remain",' Dr Pike quoted, sighing. 'She wants money, of course.'

'Who?'

'Phyllis. Her husband's lost his job.'

'Phyllis! Your letter's from Phyllis.'

'Yes.'

Her father saw the blush come to Clarice's cheeks; and I can feel it too, as I describe it.

'Is anything the matter?' he said.

'Nothing. Nothing at all.' She struggled to compose herself. 'Will you send her some? Money, I mean.'

'Not sure I've all that much left.' Dr Pike eyed her meaningfully.

'May I see?'

She took the letter, stood up, and hurried out to the veranda. The blush still prickled violently in her cheeks. Her hand was unsteady, and her knees had gone to rubber, making the short walk feel like a lurch into unsupported space. Outside, by a gap in the chick blinds, she read the letter over twice, three times, and then stared intently out at the sweep of countryside and rain forest – as if she could see all the way to England. *Victor, my beloved husband …*

No, I'm not Jack, the 'little boy' of Phyllis's letter. I am not yet born. I must draw up this landcape of privilege and make my portrait of the woman who should have been my mother, though her world has nothing to do with me. The past is a fable of desire, a romance, an illusion.

Why then, curled as I am, tucked away in the story, do I make these imaginative stitches, pulling Clarice Pike and my father together again? Why linger with the family connection, suturing a gash in time? And why, like my great-uncle, Dr Stan Pike, do I tackle certain monsters? Because of the hope for love, of course.

Clarice held on to the timber pole that propped the veranda roof. She tried to reinstate Robin Townely, her man of the moment – who ought to have been here by now to pick her up. But with the letter in her hand all she could think of was Vic, and London. Three years and she could still be visited by these heart-racings and shakings, these physical clichés. And still she couldn't tell whether they were genuine, or merely symptoms of her own dislocation.

On her mother's side was East London and a poverty she'd lived protected from. That was the London out of which her father had rescued her mother. That was also the London where her cousin, Phyllis, had grown up, so distressingly unrescued. But there, paradoxically, Clarice had found Vic. And what was Vic but an ordinary working man, a dockside shipwright …

Vic had been engaged to Phyllis; and yet instantly, shockingly, Clarice and he had been drawn to each other. They'd met for concerts, been to lectures together, stolen hours in cheap cafés. Staying at her grandmother Tyler's house, Clarice had not had long before her return to Malaya. There'd been a secret affair; then a realisation, followed by renunciation. She'd left for Southampton and her ship. He'd consented to his marriage.

Now in her mind's eye he was caught by cross-hatchings, staring hopelessly back at her out of darkness, trapped back in that Dickensian ménage of cobwebs and candlelight that Phyllis's letter evoked for her. She pictured too, unwillingly, the marital bed, with its creaking springs, the couple panting at each other, Phyllis something triumphant, and the man who had so startled her with a meeting of minds made weak and run of the mill, ruined.

From the distance, somewhere in the plantation compound, there came the chime of gongs and a burst of drumming. She guessed there was a rehearsal for the festival to mark the end of Ramadan. Later there would be a shadow play. She turned back into the house. All the while, as she was collecting her things to meet Robin, a faint metallic music hung about her efforts. It seemed the moist air finely shook, and took on almost discernible curlicues, insinuating tendrils of sound.

AT THE COAL HOLE night-club in Betterton Street, people were ready to dance again. The band was coming back after its break, and the spotlight waited, a large empty moon half-way up the spangled backdrop. From a table beside the dance floor Victor Warren stared into the illumination. Shortly, his wife would occupy it; tonight's *chanteuse*. It was her lucky break.

Since he'd last seen Clarice, my father was not at all ruined in features. At first glance, his looks appeared quite dashing. Some negative quality, however, had certainly leaked into the rest of his

appearance, and sitting with Tony Rice and Frances, the girl, he looked badly out of place. His grey flannel jacket was disreputable, his tie was skewed, and his shirt collar had too obviously been turned.

On closer inspection the face, which was thinnish with slightly Slavic lines, revealed a brow contracted and a mouth tightened. He wore his brown hair slicked away from his face, so that his dark moustache gave him a worn and dangerous cast. It belied his earnest eyes – and his twenty-six years.

He had good reason to look grim. The feeling all along that he'd been playing for the very highest stakes seemed entirely borne out. Having done his best with Phyllis, he was sure she was trying to destroy him. In fact, it could have been the circle of his own death that glittered back at him from the stage. He, like Dr Pike, felt mightily scared. As he touched his drink to his lips he tried to convince himself he was being irrational.

The club was full. In one of Covent Garden's least promising streets, the Coal Hole was something of a find for a certain set. Or it was stumbled upon by theatre-goers after a meal at Monty's or *L'Escargot*, who told their friends. From a narrow, sandbagged door in the face of an old tobacco warehouse, a staircase led down to the cellars, where there was not only late-night alcohol but a resident dance band of four black jazzmen. If it hadn't been for the war, people said, the Coal Hole would have been set to 'take off'. In the absence, so far, of bombing or gas attacks, it was still open, still defiantly humming. For once, thank God, the idiotic situation across the Channel could be shoved firmly to the back of the mind – so long as the band proved authentically rhythmic, the singer sufficiently charming.

At the Coal Hole it wasn't a requirement to be dressed to the nines. Ordinary suits mingled with evening wear; there might be artists, addicts, a boxer or two, even an obstinate Blackshirt. There were types of unescorted girl. The Saturday-night clientele was unpredictable, and a frisson of intermixture ran in the smoke-filled air. The only real entrance qualification was a little spare cash, a commodity Vic clearly lacked. It was Tony Rice who'd brought him and Phyllis along, and it was Tony Rice, the perplexing, charmed and upwardly mobile gang boy, whose hand lay over Phyllis's career.

Yet it wasn't Tony of whom my father was afraid – it wasn't a physical fear at all. His desperation lay deeper. He was permanently wrought up, on edge.

He picked his wife out as she emerged from a side door. Her slim figure made its way towards the light. The stage was a shallow pedestal, no more than a foot high, and he watched her pause in front of it as her long dress threatened to trip her. Clutching the slink out of harm's way, she stepped up. The gown's plunge back exposed nearly the whole of her spine.

All week she'd been crippled with nerves. She despised her looks. She believed she was disfigured by a shame no amount of make-up, no glittery evening get-up could conceal. Her vocal cords, if she could force them open, would only humiliate her. All week he'd coaxed her through it, reassuring her that it was the actions of others that had left her so insecure; privately reminding himself that he'd put aside his feelings for Clarice in order to do what was right. Now he willed himself to believe that for once Phyllis could be straight with him.

When eventually she faced her audience he knew he'd been outwitted. She was completely at home, and the long wait seemed calculated. Her eyes glittered wide under plucked and pencilled brows, the cheeks were a rouged mask, the mouth a bait. For her sheer knowingness he was unprepared. She looked sly. When she let her head droop, he held his breath.

Light fell on her close-waved dark hair, the silver threads glinted in her gown, and the few bars of introduction poised on the arpeggio of a suspended chord. Chatter from the tables subsided. She lifted her eyes, childlike; and then the voice launched itself high, virginal, and with a fashionable flutter.

Think of what you're losingBy constantly refusingTo dance with me

From behind her a saxophone and muted trumpet picked up the phrase, and the bass threw a squib of rhythm. It was a safe number. After the success of the Branksome Revue, everyone was

singing it again. The lover needed encouragement; she delivered it. With her one gloved hand on the edge of the piano, she seduced.

Then she played the man's role. Setting her head at just the coy angle, she scolded the audience with an artful smile.

Not this seasonThere's a reason.

They held up with her, and she hit the refrain:

I won't dance! Don't ask me;I won't dance! Don't ask me;I won't dance, madame, with you.

The brash denial swelled out. The band swung, the bass player's free fingers vaulted the board to the springy dub-dub of the beat, and couples got up to dance. From the tables all around rose that buzz of relief which comes when the entertainment will do. Parties returned safely to their concerns: cigars were lit, and corks were popped. Aproned staff holding their trays high slid once again between casual encounters and established liaisons.

Where Vic sat a waiter hovered.

'No more, thanks.'

'I said I'll get them, Victor. We'll need three more of these, mate.' Tony indicated the cocktail glasses in front of them. 'No, make it four. Have one ready for Phylly when she comes back. Should really.'

Tony Rice was clean shaven, fleshy. He had the street looks of certain cruel young men and sported black silk lapels and neat white bow with all the sharpness Vic lacked. 'A winner, isn't she? You think so, don't you?'

'Yes.' My father glanced at his wrist-watch again: half an hour after midnight. Every passing minute ticked up feelings he couldn't cope with, costs he couldn't cover. 'She's divine,' he said. 'It's turned out a success. But I think we'd better leave as soon as she comes off. If you don't mind, Tony. Thanks so much and a bad show to break up the party, but …' He looked up at the waiter. 'I'd like the bill, please, actually.'

Tony cancelled him and signed the man to leave with his order.

'But our boy,' said Vic. 'Jack's on his own. We really must go.'

'Don't throw it back in my face, Vic.' There was an edge to Tony's voice, a hint of the dockside razor. He held Vic's gaze with narrowed eyes, then backed off. 'It's Phyllis's night and she deserves a break. Doesn't she, mate?'

Vic lit a cigarette, and looked over to where Phyllis was beginning her next number. Her body, such a battlefield in their marriage, seemed at ease. There, on the miniature stage, she was the idea of enchantment. There was no denying it – she was a good performer.

So he was being churlish; he was turning everything into melodrama. Tony was right, she deserved her break. Her pretty mouth, the nakedness of her neckline and arms … While she sang, while the music flowed, he could see her as if in a movie, briefly disentangled.

'That's more like it, Vic.'

FEMININITY FLICKERED EVERYWHERE in the smoky club. Vic's gaze wandered. There were more attractive women than he'd ever seen, wearing less. Out of his element, at home neither with his own class nor the posh one, he was wretchedly alert to them. The flash of one braceleted wrist caught him like a blow. Voices, laughing or languid, tempted at his ear; they underscored the chirruping of his wife. Everywhere he looked he mustn't look, at the eyes he mustn't meet. The place scandalised and fascinated him.

'You're a lucky bloke, Vic. You'll want to hang on to a skirt like her. *I should like to have one, just the same as that.*' Tony chanted softly as if all Phyllis's melody wanted was a secret fight. '*Where'er I go they'll shout hallo where did you get that … tart.*' He grinned. Vic saw his hand under the table squeeze the thigh of the girl; he also saw the wince that crossed her face. He was momentarily excited. 'She deserves better, Phyllis does,' Tony said.

Vic tried to smile. ‘Better than what? Better than the Coal Hole? Or better than I can give her? That what you mean?’

‘I don’t know what you’re playing at, Rabbit Warren, keeping a woman like that in the manner you do.’

‘Thanks.’

But Tony compelled him, turning to his female companion. ‘Eh, Frankie? The boffin and the songbird. What do you think of that?’ The voice was level, the grin emotionless.

Frances opened her mouth disbelievingly at Vic. The drinks arrived. She took hers and held it in front of her with her little finger raised. He looked back. Thickly made up, she might be about twenty, the same age as Clarice Pike when they’d met, and fallen in love. …‘Are you, though? A boffin?’ Frankie giggled.

‘So I heard.’ Tony’s grin became a sneer.

‘Evening classes,’ said Vic. She even looked a little like her, like Clarice, he thought.

‘Can’t you just see him, duckie, with his chemistry bottles and tubes?’

‘Marine engineering. I used to go up to Imperial College. On the bus. Three times a week after work. Trying to cram my physics,’ Vic said again, quietly. ‘It’s over now. It was daft anyway.’

‘Oh, *physics*, Frank. Only joking, Vic.’

Frances looked blank for a second; and then she giggled again nervously. ‘I wouldn’t know what that was.’

‘The science of bodies,’ said Vic.

‘Really?’ She looked him full in the eye. ‘So what do you do now, then?’

‘Nothing. Can’t you tell?’

The girl stared one moment longer. Then she complained that Tony hadn’t asked her up to dance.

At the completion of her spot Phyllis made her way through the applause. Vic stood up to greet her just as Tony and Frankie arrived back from the floor. She was breathless, on the verge of tears. ‘Was it all right? Tell me honestly! I was terrible, wasn’t I?’

‘Knocked ’em cold,’ said Tony.

‘No, I was awful. I’ve spoilt everything. They’ll never ask me back. Vic?’

He reassured her. ‘It was terrific, darling. You were superb.’ As he kissed the proffered cheek he heard Tony mimicking ‘darling’ to Frankie.

But Phyllis hardened. ‘You’re lying,’ she said. Her ice-cold look was close up and intent.

‘Honestly,’ Vic said. ‘Look around. They’re still clapping. They loved you.’ He licked his lips.

‘I can’t look.’ Phyllis clenched her fists. ‘I was so nervous.’ She snatched her handbag from the table and sat down at the vacant seat, her back to the scene of her triumph. ‘So bloody nervous. Is that one for me?’

‘You deserve it,’ said Tony. The party resumed their places. ‘Doesn’t she, Vic?’

‘Was I really any good?’ Phyllis looked from one to the other, her garish eyes again childlike over the glass, the flutter of lashes too naïve. But she allowed herself to be persuaded. ‘Truly? I get positively sick. It is all right, isn’t it, Vic? You don’t mind?’

‘You were marvellous.’ Vic made himself smile. ‘Completely bowled me over. I’d no idea. And the voice. I mean, I hear it at home, but …’

‘My voice. I thought it was going to die on me. Did you hear that note in “Mexico Way”? I right muffed it, didn’t I?’

‘Never heard any such thing. It all sounded perfect.’

‘Really, Vic?’ She seemed winsome.

He smiled more genuinely, relieved, off guard. ‘Perfectly perfect.’

‘You hear what the engineer says. Another round, then, shall we?’ Tony clicked his fingers at a waiter.

Vic tried to insist. ‘Darling. I know this is boring of me …’

The atmosphere changed again in an instant. She was fierce. ‘Vic, I told you. My sister said she’d look in on him.’

‘It’s incredibly late.’

‘This is my night, my chance. For Christ’s sake. This is my kind of place, for once. Jack’ll be fast asleep. He’s not a baby any more, you know.’ Crossly she took out her compact and opened it. ‘Oh, my God. Just look at me. Frankie, you’ll come with me if I go and put things right?’

‘All the same, if Tony wouldn’t mind I do think we really should …’

Phyllis hit the table with her fist. ‘No!’ She shook her head, petulantly. ‘No! No! No!’

‘Darling, I …’

Tony was decisive. ‘You spoil that kid. Come on. Drink up. You’re a smart girl, Phylly, and if you weren’t married to drearyface here …’

‘Tony, really!’ Once more Phyllis appeared the innocent. ‘Whatever will you think of saying next?’ Colour spread from her cheekbones and up across her forehead – the streaked powder could do nothing to contain it. Where the shaken wave of hair had worked loose from its kirby-grip, a bright little gash on her temple was visible. Her hand sprang up to touch it. Newly glazed, it reopened. A spot of blood appeared like a red pearl and fell to the table. And another. ‘Christ!’ It was on her fingers.

Tony cooed in mock concern. ‘Now that’s a nasty one, isn’t it. How did you come by that, Phyllis?’

Her eyes flashed and she fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief, holding it up to the cut. ‘This? Walked into a door, didn’t I.’ A stain spread under her varnished nails and into the cloth.

‘A door, was it?’

‘Yes. A door. This evening, as I was changing. Just now, in the ladies’ room. Before I went on. I’ll have to …’

Tony leant across and touched her hair. ‘You’ll have to be more careful, won’t you, girl?’

She stood up and held out her other hand for Frances. ‘Coming, Frank? Quickly!’ Together they made their way off between the tables.

AT THE SIGHT of the wound he’d said nothing, done nothing. His fingers shaking, Vic lit another cigarette. The band thumped out a Latin number and the couples on the dance floor stalked each other.

Close to Phyllis there was always deceit, always pain, and he wore her chaos almost closer than his own skin; but the detail of the cut was more than anything he’d expected. Its implications stole over him like a dead faint. Tony had hit her, and she was protecting him.

The regular singer, a slight young man, was dapper in his white dinner jacket with a rose in his buttonhole; he sermonised from the stage, pinned by a searchlight:

Keep young and beautiful, it’s your duty to be beautiful,Keep young and beautiful, if you want to be loved.

Tony got up for the gents. ‘Might as well go for a drain-off myself. Don’t go away, will you.’

Vic dragged at his smoke. Despite her blushes, Phyllis wore the shiny little injury as an adornment. They were already lovers. She’d given this pimp what she always contrived to deny her husband, and Tony had taunted her with it, barefaced. They’d been carrying on here, right in front of him, knowing he was too simple to see – that even when he saw, he’d do nothing, nothing. He stubbed out his cigarette. His mouth was parched. He drank the glass in front of him too quickly. It tasted trite, bitter.

Then the others returned. The girls were quite natural, and they laughed, comparing make-up and quipping one to the other. Tony, seating himself once more, was bluff. ‘There, Vic. Told you not to go away.’ His eyes were clear, the sculpted lips a design on the fine skin.

A table next to them erupted with laughter. Someone was standing up on his chair, holding a champagne glass in his teeth to roars of encouragement. Phyllis turned round, clapping, and then smiled in Vic's direction. 'All right, Vic?'

He smiled back. 'Fine.'

Another crackle of laughter went up. Through the din she mimed the words 'Thanks' and 'Sorry'.

Soothed, he smiled again.

Tony set the next round up, and the next. Then Vic drank wilfully. He told himself he needed to lighten up. *You're a lucky bloke, Vic. You'll want to hang on to a skirt like her.* He was confused. He wanted to dissolve the fierce nag of not knowing, never quite seeing, and to drown all the other issues, the kid, the money, the war, the awful round of his futureless days. A man at a further table held a woman's hand to his lips, nibbling the fingers; he thought of Clarice.

The club became a whirl of sensations. Noise and laughter from the tables reverberated almost visibly in the low vaults, like strips of newspaper hung out; and on the spotlit floor, bright couples wove in amongst each other. Bodies swayed, clasped, parted. A woman's naked spine was crossed by a man's hand and the crowd at the next table was trying to form itself into a conga dance. People were crying out, 'Come on, then! Are you with us?' To the frugg of the band they were a counter-chorus. Cut-glass accents aped in cockney a popular song:

Oh we ain't got a barrel of money,Maybe we're ragged and funny …

Jack would be fine, probably.

'Vic!' Phyllis was speaking to him.

Tony was insisting on something to her. He was shouting above the swirl of noise. 'Vic here wants to make some money, Phyll. He told me.'

'You're not kidding me he does. It's only my earnings keeping us, to tell the honest truth. If he won't do it, I have to. Don't I?'

'Eh?' Vic fought to concentrate. Frankie's young eyes were contacting his. She really did have the look of Clarice Pike, the shape of the nose, something in the line of the chin. Tony and Phyllis were linked together. There was something between them, but who was he to police her friendships? In the marriage he'd been too rigid, even a little inhuman, unfaithful at the heart, and that was why Phyllis … He could see now. She was right. Of course she was right. No one's life was really at stake. Truly he *should* try to be less of a bloody Nazi.

There was a twenty-pound note on the table.

IT WAS LONDON cobblestones banging under the wheels, and the car was racing east through the starlit port. Phyllis was in the front beside Tony, her mother's fox fur draped around her shoulders. The fur cast a shadow on her hair so that there was only the clouded trace of her white neck. She was resisting sleep – her head nodded and jerked as if an outside force had it in mind to break her.

Vic was slumped next to Frankie in the back. The window had been wound right down. Unlit gas lamps hung where the wind came from, then swept past. Forbidden headlights made the iron beaks of warehouse hoppers poke from speeding, eyeless cages. The night was a tall sack ripped by a car's roar, and the air driving to meet his face tasted of coal.

Still his evening replayed itself. He mustn't close his eyes. 'It's your money, Vic. Yours, mate. All you have to do is pick it up.'

He'd been wary. 'Me? Don't expect to see that kind of item in a month of Sundays.'

'More ways to skin a cat, aren't there? Come on, pick it up. Think what a difference a twenty would make. And twenty more like it.'

The tyres screeched in a left-hand corner. Frankie was forced against him. Vic's shoulder hit the right door and he was pinned under her. The car swung again. Her eyes screwed tight, she raised an arm and clung on to his neck. Then her other hand slipped across into his. He clasped at it. She made words in his ear he couldn't catch.

He'd danced with her. To the muted trumpet and the whining sax, she'd answered his arm's inclination and the nudge of his hip. When they'd sat down again Phyllis and Tony were drinking through straws from each other's glasses. Blatant and provocative, the twenty-pound note was still on the table.

Now beside them careered the black brick ends of streets, the outlines of sheds, the ironwork of a bascule bridge. A pub sign hung above the scream of another high-speed turn. Beyond Frankie's perfumed hair Vic saw the city momentarily framed, a hard silhouette that touched low cloud. He'd made a deal. The food was taken care of, the rent, and shoes for little Jack. He and Phyllis could tide themselves over, pull themselves up … but there was a condition attached, some codicil that he still couldn't recollect.

'Well, Vic? What *am* I worth to you, Vic? What *would* you do for me?'

Tony thrashed the engine through the gears. Tall cranes angled darker strokes on dark. A ship's hull, huge, loomed almost within touching distance.

Vic had come back from the gents, his legs loose, his brilliantined hair flopping over his eyes in strands. Through them he'd stared at the persistent banknote. There were glasses and ashtrays around it. He'd been taken up with the detail, the King's head, the faint lettering, the fine lines that looped and scrolled.

His own head reeled with the thought of it, and with the weight of the girl thrown now this way, now that by the lurching car. Frankie's fingers held on. She was managing to stroke the side of his face. So like the girl he'd fallen in love with, he could almost imagine … The sequence was scrambled. He'd stretched out his hand over the note, poised to give it back, or reluctant to touch it. 'Did you drop this? Tony?' The note was a test. It was Frankie's eye he'd caught, and not Phyllis's. 'I know what you mean, Tony, but you can count me out of all that.'

The engine raced hard, accelerating. 'It's yours, mate. Yours for the taking.'

The straight run was a relief, a lampless high street. Frank's eyes remained closed. Her breath was warm and damp and she was naked in his mind. No, she was slipping out of her purple evening dress and the flesh-coloured underwear. Or his hand was against the suspender hitch, where the silk of the stocking met the silkier skin of her thigh, still bearing the bruise of Tony's fingers.

Vic saw Phyllis's head loll on to the back edge of her seat. Now a long bend bumped it against the pillar and she must have felt the hurt. Her fur stole rucked up over the leather as she shifted down, curling herself out of view. Frankie moaned and hardened herself against him. He tried to speak. Literally behind his wife's back, his drunken imagination was unbuttoning a prostitute to the jazz, there on the dance floor. Or here in the car, and all the time wishing for Clarice Pike. There was a fox fur caught up on Phyllis's seat back, with its little cub mouth and eyes and sharp suggestive teeth. What *would* he do for her? 'For you, Phyllis, anything. You know that. You know that, don't you, darling. I love you … beyond measure.' They'd all laughed.

Vic pulled himself away. Tony braked hard, swore, and then jumped a red light. The girl's face lifted for a second, her eyes suddenly open in surprise, her lips slightly parted. On an impulse, Vic met the mouth and held the kiss. They broke off just as Tony shouted back to them, 'Enjoying yourselves, you two? Just goes to show. You can never tell with snobs, can you?' The voice had a hint of triumph. 'What do you think, Phylly?' There was no reply from Phyllis. 'Must be asleep. Tell the missus later, shall I, Vic?'

Vic recognised the occluded shop fronts of Beckton Road, Canning Town. Once more, the car accelerated fiercely. Soon there was nothing but the long stretch over the East Ham levels, the stink coming off the marshes of rot and salt and the oily wash. They were going too fast into the night and Tony had caught him red-handed – hadn't he? 'You should've gone left,' he said.

'Scenic route,' Tony called. 'Any objections?'

He'd taken the money. He remembered picking it up. The kiss, was it good or bad? Clarice would always be the other side of the world. Suddenly desperate, light-headed, Vic played up to his

wife's manfriend. 'You know. We've got this little place in the country, Phyllis and I. We go there at weekends. We'd love to see you. Why don't you all come down?' He shared the laugh.

At Ripple Road he was looking into the child's room. If Phyllis's sister had called in she'd left no trace of herself. But Jack was fast asleep, as though in the child's mind there'd been no alteration, nothing of the bounce of the music and the foxy, foxtrotting on the dance floor. Frankie's kiss still stung Vic's lips. He'd made a deal.

In the chamber-pot the mess of his vomit reeked. The couple who ran the shop below had the only bathroom, half-way down the stairs. The chain cranked in the iron cistern. He cleaned up and rinsed his mouth. Back in bed there was Phyllis's body, its familiar and unfamiliar smells.

At last, the deal held its focus and he realised what he'd agreed to. It was to do a job with Tony Rice. If he loved Phyllis. His heart thumped in his chest.

'And no backing out.' Tony had sealed it, laughing.

'Yes, Vic. No backing out.' She'd hold him to it. His head ached, cracking up. In the darkness, the bright, jazz-hard lines around his wife horrified him.

AWAKE TO THE SHRILLING of birds, Jack carried his box of toys into the front room of the flat. Through half-drawn drapes the sun made a glinting, near-horizontal bar, and the child sat in the gleam of it, where the dirty brown rug stuck a plaster over the join in the floor. All along the length of the join, except for the rug, the striated, mustard-coloured lino had chipped away to show the string and glue inside it. The join was the edge of England, and when the tin bomber came Jack's mother would be all right because of the soap packet. That stood for the wooden house, lifted by low hills, which his parents always reached when they rode on the tandem. If he sat, so, on the rug, he believed he could save her.

Jack didn't like Ripple Road. There was a dog's muzzle in the coal scuttle. It was a brass creature whose gaze had cracked the leather in the two chairs. Pugs and griffons lurked behind the hat-stand; sometimes he ran at them with his wooden sword. The war was a dog in a gas mask with eyes like dinner plates. Any moment it would burst in, carrying the tin bomber on its back. Jack's mother said Ripple Road was in Barking, and from that the three-year-old imagined a perpetual canine gape ready to swallow his family.

Vic Warren stepped around my brother, or half-brother, to draw the curtains. Through dirty uneven glass, taped crosswise, the sunrise hurt his eyes. Below him, on the opposite pavement, a shirtsleeved newsagent was putting out a sign for a Sunday paper: LONDON – 200,000 CASUALTIES STILL EXPECTED.

One or two cars were parked by the post office, and a solitary Home and Colonial van stood further along. Two old men were stopped on the Vicarage Road corner to exchange greetings, and by the sandbagged shop front of Wallace's, the chemist, a black labrador sniffed and cocked its leg. The long, dry September had left all surfaces the colours of dust, and even the moist morning air was stained with tar haze.

Vic looked along the road towards the East Street traffic lights. Turn left, and, from Barking straight through the metropolis to Brentford in the West, terrace followed terrace for twenty unbroken miles. London was a working-class concentration – of window-cleaners and war cripples, clerks and typists, slaveys who lived in, skivvies who lived out, shopkeepers, journeymen. London was full, in fact, of people just like himself. Why, then, had he been singled out? His head pounded. Having slept, he wasn't sure now which ought to trouble him more, the girl or the money. The girl in the night-club had reminded him of someone he should have forgotten, and Tony had seen him kissing her. He tried to rationalise: they'd all been in high spirits, he'd drunk too much. My father was not well, but his illness was more than just a hangover. He really was cracking up.

He thought of his own parent and the little place in the country to which he'd so grandly invited Tony. It did exist. Before 1914, Percy Warren, my grandfather, worked in the same yard as Vic, at Creekmouth where they repaired the Thames barges and wooden lighters. Blunt, working craft,

the staple of the river trade, they required the attentions of blunt men who knew the limits of their materials and could knock the grimy vessels back into shape.

Perce was the kind who could build a durable cabin, and did – in the countryside miles downriver, while the family watched and picnicked. That was in the one acre of England where you could buy a square inch of land – never mind that it was an Essex farmer's private racket. When most working men had scant hope of owning much at all, the tiny wooden house was something unique, a triumph, a place for holidays and sunny Georgian Sundays.

Perce had got a roof on, and glazed the windows, and would have begun decorating the inside if the Great War hadn't broken out. At Loos, he inhaled several chestfuls of gas, British, when it characteristically blew back on them. At home in East Ham he was convalescent. Vic remembered the pair of them, himself and his dad, playing together, despite the cane that lived on top of the bedroom wardrobe. Like mischievous children they avoided the mother's bitter tongue.

Most particularly he remembered all three of them at weekends, the little party going out on the train to the wooden house, where the mending rifleman pottered about with his hammer and nails. That was his true father, who loved him; and not the tetchy, shell-shocked side of the man. Vic held the good face of his dad like a precious coin kept always mounted one way. It was himself who was the 'wrong'un'. He couldn't stay the course. A marriage forced, a heart elsewhere, a perfectly good trade thrown away. Look, now, how he'd spoilt everything again.

He left the window-pane and sat for an hour, and then another, playing ludo with Jack, trying to keep his eyes open and his craziness at bay. The child insisted on the game only to sabotage it. Over Jack's breakfast leavings, Vic read him the story of the tinder-box; and at the bad end of a bad tale refused to begin again. On the Somme in 1916, Perce got a machine-gun slug that grazed the lung before passing clean through, and he came home for the second time from France. Vic was five.

A chapel bell started in one of the neighbouring streets, a monotonous clang; and Jack played up until he got slapped. His cries threatened to wake Phyllis and the Wilmots downstairs. Vic issued more threats, sick at the trap of having to back them up. During the start of the German May offensive, 1918, Perce was gassed on the skin. The shell landed right next to him on the earth parapet, tore open his uniform and splashed raw mustard compound on to it, while the fumes were sucked the other way along the trench. The contact raised a tented blister down the whole of his side – which healed in a month and spared him once again to return home alive. Vic's father, Perce, had character.

JACK UPSET HIS DRINK. There was no change of clothes. Vic sponged him off, grateful for the continuing warm weather. At half past nine, able to bear neither his son's company nor his own, he risked making Phyllis tea. Jack fidgeted round her in the bed, plucking at her nightdress. But she was laughing awake. 'I did it, Vic, didn't I.'

The room with its heavy wardrobe and bilious walls lightened suddenly and unexpectedly. 'You were marvellous.' He sat down on his side of the mattress.

'And we had a good night out on it, didn't we? Draw the curtains, Vic.'

He obeyed, still wary, afraid his guilt would show.

A prospect of hot slates and bright sky washed in as she lifted her hand to her head. 'Christ, I've got a bloody hangover.'

'Mummy!'

'Splitting.' The cut looked sore and crusted, the two laps of skin heaping on either side the neat gash.

Jack pointed: 'That's a hangover!'

A frown fleeted across her brow. She touched the place. 'Oh, that. No, it isn't. When you drink too much. Like Dad.' Her eyes were alight. She teased Vic amiably.

Relieved, he went and bustled about, heating the kettle again, finding the scissors and some lint, bringing a pudding basin of hot water from the kitchen. He settled it down beside her. With his one hand he smoothed her hair back, cradling the head on to the pillow. With the other, he hooked

the warm lint out in the scissor blades and stroked it gently across the place. Her head felt small and still. There was the warm female smell of her, the damaged female skin. 'This should help.'

'That's nice.'

'You know, we ought really to get you to hospital. It ought to be stitched.'

She flared. 'I don't want someone else touching me. I don't want to think about it.' The emotion subsided. 'Anyway, they'll reckon you did it, won't they?' Her mouth softened and she smiled up at him. 'Won't show under my hair. What's a war if no one gets wounded? More important to get out to the country. Work on the cabin. That's what you want, isn't it? That's what you think. You don't want to be hanging about on my account, do you, Vic?'

'Well …'

'That's what you want, isn't it?'

'If you're sure. There.' He finished with the lint.

'Now we've got a bit more cash.' Her gaze followed him as he stood to go.

He paused at the door. She was genuinely compliant. Her affection confused him, and suddenly the agreement with Tony presented itself in a new light. Phyllis hadn't seen the kiss, wouldn't trouble about it if she had; it was the deal that held power with her. That alone had been the test, the chance to prove himself. What she'd really needed all along was for him to measure up, to show he cared for her. She wanted the gesture – no one would seriously hold him to it.

How grateful he was. Clarice was just infatuation. Some of the sunlight of the day filled his heart and he believed he'd broken through with his wife. There was a chance; the boy was provided for. And Tony, in the only way he knew, had been trying to help.

Soon, Phyllis was behind him on the tandem. In their shorts and shirt tops, they cut a dash in the Barking back streets. Bareheaded, healthy as Germans, they were a sculpture of modern life, threading through to the Longbridge Road with Jack in the miniature side-car they'd bought when he was a baby, holding his miniature fingers up against the breeze. Vic was taking care of his wife and child. Further out they'd be bomb safe – if it came.

Through Hornchurch and on into Upminster they steered the accustomed route. Householders were piling more sandbags, still installing Andersen shelters, digging slit trenches across prized front lawns. Under the Cranham railway bridge scuffed kerb sides gave way to verges where weed bursts frayed. He was excited, almost aroused. When he glanced down he could see her pretty feet in the toe-clips.

Soon enough, real country appeared, bright as a poster. The shorn fields stretched away, dark edged, flawless. Dotted in them here and there the last stooks were browned by the fine weather. Soon, too, solitary old oaks held ground in pastures, with gangs of cattle in their shadow. Ashes and quickbeams stood up from thorn brakes. Greenfinches from the hedgerows looped beside the bike, their beating bodies almost close enough to grab. Grasshoppers shrilled from copper tufts and dun-coloured butterflies meddled with the late white flowers.

In rhythm with the lowland, the road undulated gently, an edge of the tidal basin. Every so often a car passed. Redeemed, daring the bubble to burst, Vic breathed deeply. There was still no job for him at Everholt's, but if Phyllis was *with* him he'd find something else. His old bag of tools was strapped to the side-car. And once everything was set to rights they could uproot and do well at the little house, war or no war. He could maybe find a bit of wallpapering, distempering, odd jobs. He could sell vacuum cleaners, superior gas masks. They could live off the land, and she'd be away from the temptations of London. …

The heat was soon freakish; their tyres slicked a little on the tar. At Horndon, women were covering a rick in a cornfield; he heard the sound of a threshing machine in the distance – that, and a flourish of church bells driven faintly on the wind. The Englishness touched him. Then came a run-down, rather desperate stretch. No one could miss the doorless car at the back of a farm cottage, or

the unusable tractor abandoned in a field further on, the harrow still attached. Barns and sheds were patched with rusting corrugated iron, doubling for pig pens, degrading into chicken runs.

They overtook a traction engine. They passed a party of hikers, tousled lads who waved, and would soon be holding rifles, being likeliest for the call-up. All along the way, telegraph wires strung out the distances. In a paddock just before the main road a dispirited cart-horse stood in the heat haze. The notion of it troubled Vic like a presentiment, and he was instantly assailed by the truth of the matter, shocked by the situation he was in. His family, all on the same bike, began the slow climb into Laindon.

HE'D TELL HER NO. He sawed new gabling for the porch, climbed up on his dad's old pair of steps, and nailed the strips carefully into place. From the roof he could see the river, wide and grey-blue in the distance. Behind him the clutter of cabins, holiday shanties, miniature follies and disused plots stretched over the roll of hills as far as the arterial road and along eastward to the village of Basildon. The locals called the settlement Slum Farm.

But Vic had always loved it. People had made dwellings out of anything, flotsam and thievings, offcuts and salvage. There were clinker-built homes, and boiler-made homes. There were railway carriages and self-assembly kits. Closest to his heart was the converted bus, six plots along the lane, where the Flatman family had lived with their ungovernable brood. Over the open top it had a crazy pitched roof with a stove-pipe sticking out, and barefaced roses groped and wrestled up the conductor's spiral staircase.

Roses grew everywhere on the encampment. They straggled over cabin porches, trailed under tiny, curtained windows or were clustered upon brick chimney stacks. They made bold and prickly hedges inside the picket stakes. Unpruned, they burst right through the tumble-downs, the failures, scratching at roofing felt and asbestos fibre. Now hip-laden in the Indian summer, they rioted.

Vic climbed down to finish the glazing he'd pinned the previous weekend. He pressed a strip of putty against the pane, shaped it deftly to the joinery with his thumb, and looked over at Phyllis. She was singing a nursery rhyme to Jack, cuddling and kissing him. He caught his breath at the slope of her shoulders, her wrists, the whiteness of her legs. In his imagination he ran his hand all along the flesh from her sandal strap to the cuff of her shorts. She was his wife. He left his work and went to put his arm around her, touching her neck with his lips whenever the boy looked away. In her ear, he whispered, 'After lunch, eh? Shall we? When he has his nap.' But Jack was hungry, and Vic stood up to lay out the picnic.

And while they were eating he plucked up his courage, a grown man, and told her that the deal was out of the question. And to his surprise she merely nodded, and frowned, and looked away. Then he imagined it was all right.

Jack licked the jam out of his last sandwich until the red sweetness was the same as his tongue. Always his mother was beautiful when they came to the wooden house. He thought of the slips of complicated words that had just flown between his parents. 'Twenty quid and my three, Vic. What about that for a night out?' He held on to the shape of them.

Still tasting his bread, he wandered away from his parents and over towards the little house. By the window where his father had been working he put his hand in the putty tin. 'The fact is, Phylly, the twenty's out of the question. You must see that. I'll have to go and see Tony and give it back.' The plump, oil-smelling stuff was warm and smooth.

Then his father caught him, picked him up, kissed him too and swung him round. His head high up next to his dad's, Jack gazed down at her, there, lying in the deck-chair. The putty lump was a feeling squeezed in his hand. She had frowned when they couldn't keep it. A crease appeared in between her eyes, just to the left of centre, and Jack remembered the cut. On the floor at Tony's place there had been red blots, as if large wet buttons had come slipping out of his mother's head and fallen to the floor. And her cream blouse dripping red.

Jack watched her as she lay in the deck-chair, her face clear now, her eyes fallen shut. He struggled to get down, and next thing he was climbing on her, his knee on her stomach, his head down on her soft chest, looking up under the dark wisps of curl.

'Christ, Vic. I thought you were looking after him.'

But Jack could see it, still there, a small line coming out of her hair and opening the top of her forehead with black and red. He wanted to point to it, put his finger in. Now she had her hand up to touch the wound, the ring on her finger a gleam of yellow, bright as sunshine. She had told him not to tell. He liked the gold, how one point of it shone.

Vic pulled his son off her. He said, cautiously, 'If I can just stop up that bit where the rain came in over the door. Then we'll need a couple of new panels for the sides because of that mould. I'll bike over and order them. Churchill Johnson's, that place at the station, they've got asbestos. Maybe next weekend.'

Phyllis straightened her blouse where it was tucked up. 'You're turning Tony down, then.'

'You can't seriously expect …'

She, too, seemed to check herself, as though she were fighting her impulses, as though she were really trying. 'Look, Vic, it's only me keeping us going, isn't it? No call for you to be looking down your nose any more at me, or my family. Or my friends. D'you think I like it or what, standing up in that club making a spectacle of myself? Those men, Victor. They do pass comments. If it wasn't for Tony … You do respect me, don't you?'

'I have to give it back, Phyllis. I can't get involved in all that, no matter how much we need it. …' He looked away.

'You say you love me, Vic.'

'I do love you.'

'*Do* you, though? You don't. You don't love me at all.'

He sighed and turned back to her. 'Look, darling. A bloke like me has to stick in the lee of the law. That's loving, isn't it? That's for you.'

'You don't want me. If you loved me you'd do what it takes. You think I've got no morals, don't you? How could I have, where I come from? Down by the docks. That's what you think. Well, love means more than lying down and taking it, Victor. It's more than, Yes boss, No boss, Thanks for the sack, boss. A man would be on my side but you never are.'

'I'd had too much to drink, for God's sake. I want …'

'I know exactly what you want.'

'What do I want?' he responded crossly. 'You tell me what I want. Tell me.' Then he sensed the trap he'd fallen into. 'No … Phyllis.'

But a line had been crossed. 'You just want to get rid of me, don't you? You want me dead.'

VIC FELT EACH colour of the world click off as the frame changed. It was always so sudden, and he always walked in. He knew every detail of what had to come next – and on, and on, until the man in him broke. Her eyes were already glazed over, hard, like an old one. Phyllis had drained out of her; she was terrible, unreachable. 'Come on. You just want me dead, don't you? You just want rid of me.'

'For pity's sake, don't start.'

'You do, though, don't you? You hate me. You do. Why don't you admit it? Go on. Admit it. Why don't you, Vic? Face facts. Well, if that's what you want …'

'Please …' Vic looked at Jack. The boy was playing ostentatiously with the tool bag, trying to save his father. 'Please, Phyllis. Not now.' Vic lowered his head into his hands. 'Look, we're having a nice day. I thought we were going to …' The lover's plea was feeble.

'Mummy! Stop.'

'And you can shut it,' she called. 'You and him, the two of you ganging up.'

She ran across to Jack and grabbed his arm away from the tools. The boy went limp by her side. Tears began to stream from his eyes. She shouted, 'Why are you crying at me? I'm your mother. Why are you crying? Eh? Tell me, you ungrateful little brat!'

'Stop that. He's only a child. He doesn't understand.'

'Of course he understands. He hates me. Don't you? You both do.'

Vic went to separate them. There was a byplay of hands and arms, a brief scuffle. He took Jack, quivering, and set him in a no man's land a yard or so off, triangulated between them. Neither should appear to take sides against her.

Phyllis called, 'Come here, Jack. Come to your mother.'

'Leave him be, Phyllis. Can't you see he's upset? The kid's crying, for God's sake. Can't you see? He's a child.'

'He's my child and I can do what I like with him.'

'No.'

The stare was icy in her; but Vic watched her attention as it lifted from the boy and was directed back at him. Her fists clenched and unclenched. 'If you two hate me so much, if you'd both get on so well without me, then I'll go. That's what'll make you happy, isn't it? The pair of you. You want me out of the way. Come on. You do, don't you? Face up to it, you'd both be better off without me. I'm dirt. I'm rubbish. It's a simple fact. Well, I'll do it for you. All right? It's only what you want.'

'Get inside the house, Jack. Shut the door. It's just Mummy and Daddy talking. Do as I say.'

Vic watched the boy go to the cabin, mute and sniffling. He saw the cabin door shut after his son – the hostage she kept to her demands. It was for the child's sake he held on. It was for the child's sake he'd been reduced to this. If he could break down first, she might relent; but the hurt wasn't yet great enough and nothing he could do would alter the weary routine of what was about to occur.

'I'll go then, shall I?'

'That's not what we want.'

'You do. No, listen. If I was dead you'd be free. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you, Vic? Vic? Answer me. That's just what you want. Tell me the truth, Vic. It would solve everything if you got rid of me.'

'I don't want to have this.'

'Why don't you kill me, then? Then I'd be out of your way. That's what you think. That's what you want, isn't it?'

'Damn you!'

'What did you say?'

'Nothing, Phylly. Nothing. I didn't mean it. Truly I didn't.'

'I'm evil, aren't I? You think I'm the devil. All right I'll go, then. I will.' She made as if to gather her things. 'If that's what you want.'

'You're his mother. He needs you. We love you, Phyllis. Stay. Please stay.'

Phyllis stood, half turned away with her maroon cardigan in her hand. Vic stepped towards her and took her arm. 'I need you.'

'You don't want me. I'm filthy. That's what you think. Say it. You'd be better off without me.'

'I love you.' He wanted to smash her head. 'Phyllis. Think of the kid. Try, Phyllis. We've been through all this.' He sank down, holding his face again, turning away himself now and crouching towards the ground as if he were being beaten.

'Why don't you kill me, Vic? You know it's what you want.' She cast about as if for some implement. His bag lay in the long grass. She bent to rummage in it. He heard the scrape and edge of his tools. 'Here, then.' She had hold of a large, one-inch-wide chisel. 'Here, Vic' She held it out to him by the blade, thrusting the yellow handle at him, its hammer-burred top fractured like the crown of a wooden dandelion. 'Take it!'

'Phyllis!' He tried ignoring her, presenting his back. But he needed to watch what she did as she jabbed words at him.

'I'll do it for you, then,' she said. 'If you're too weak. If you're not man enough, Vic, to do it yourself, I'll take it out of your hands. I will, Vic. If that's what you're after, I'll save you the bother. Save you the trouble.' She clamped both her hands on the chisel. 'Here. It's just what you've been hoping for all this time. Haven't you? Eh? Look.' Gripping the shaft of it with both hands, she poised the blade at her neck, forcing him to look.

'Phyllis!'

'It's what you want, Vic.'

'It's not what I want. Listen to me.' He dared not move. 'Let me talk to her. Let me talk to Phyllis. I know she's still there. I love her. I don't hate her.'

'You want me dead. Don't you? Then I'll do it. I'll give you what you want. I'll give you exactly what you want.'

He was on that edge for minutes. Then he broke out and grabbed a wrist. 'No! I love you, Phyllis. You know that. Sweetheart. Come on, let the thing go. Can't you? Please.' He tugged at her forearm. The chisel glinted. 'For pity's sake! Stop it!'

'Mummy!'

Vic caught a glimpse of the little face in the window he'd just glazed.

Then, once again, nothing else was alive in the garden but the chisel and a voice, half stifled, grinding, coming remorselessly out of the fixed features.

'No. Think how much better things'll be. Think how much you want rid of me. See, I'm doing it for you. Why don't you let me? Then you'll be happy. Won't you, Vic? Won't you? You'll be happy. With me gone.' The chisel stood, pent in the inches, juddering at her throat.

All at once Vic saw himself through Jack's eyes. His one arm was around her shoulders, and he was using all the force in his other against her two hands with their woman's strength conjoined, endlessly driving the chisel towards her own throat. 'See! See! This is what you want!'

She would succeed. She was determined. This time he fully believed she would finish herself, and he felt excruciated, invaded; his soul would burst and there'd be hell to pay. He had brought her to this. At last, to his infinite relief, the pain and despair broke out of Vic's eyes. He wept in terrible, gasping sobs.

'Oh, Vic. What's the matter, love? It's all right.' It was as though she knew nothing of the steel in her hand. She ignored it, and broke her grip. The tool swung down. She might have been holding the rolled-up newspaper she'd used to chase a wasp. She wouldn't have hurt a fly.

Slowly Vic straightened and, smiling, dashed away the tears from his face. 'I thought you meant to do it that time.' His good humour was automatic, once the punishment had stopped. He wanted to soothe her, to tell her it was all right. He was strong, strong enough for both of them. Strong enough also to hide the guilty secret that in his thoughts he had held on to Clarice.

They were standing together. 'Oh, come on, Vic. Don't be so bloody daft. You know I didn't mean it.'

'I didn't know, Phyllis. I didn't.'

'Course you did.' She smiled.

Her smile was like a blessing. He was so grateful.

'Yeah.'

'Vic? When Tony comes.'

'All right, Phyllis. I'll do it. I'll do whatever he wants.'

'There,' Phyllis said.

Later, Jack watched his father sitting in the doorway to the wooden house with his long, safe legs tucked up under him. His dad was pumping the Primus until flames lapped up the sides of the kettle. In a tin box which he called his tinder-box there was a piece of thin metal, spoon pale with a wire in it which his father took and poked into the middle of the flames. The Primus roared suddenly,

and hissed, and the fire turned blue so they could see holes in rows. The flame was a blue flower that never went away.

'There we go.' His father smiled at him and pumped the pump again. The metal had the same shine as the ring on her finger. Jack loved the hot smell of the Primus, the heat on his cheeks.

Much later still, when the sky was colouring up, he was clutching a piece of wood like a stick. His mother was sitting on a box drinking a cup of tea. Jack must get the wood into the cut on his mother's head. Needing both hands, he tried to bring it down from above in one clear swipe but she was too big, too high above him for it to be right. His stick was too heavy and he couldn't reach.

She smacked him hard and put him in the side-car. Then it was getting dark. Her shorts were next to him, moving. The sound was the hum, hum, of the tandem back to Ripple Road. The cars had their faint lights on. Up high were stars.

II People and Property

CLARICE RETURNED FROM Singapore to Seremban in December. Both the monsoon and the Robin Townely affair were virtually over, and she intended to stay for Christmas. Now the sun beat down each day and the rain confined itself to half an hour every teatime. In the intense mid-afternoon, she and her father were inspecting the back garden. She wore a loose white linen dress, and her broad-brimmed straw hat was trimmed with a violet ribbon. The straw matched the raffia colour of her heeled sandals. As medicine for her feelings she held a whisky tumbler.

Glass also in hand, her father stared in silence at a large bougainvillaea plant. Then he turned and looked back at the bungalow. Clarice followed his gaze. The house appeared so old-fashioned, such a relic of the last century. The stilts pushed up and the rectangular bonnet of fringey palm thatch hung down. Sandwiched in between was her home, the only one she had. Its blue canvas awnings were pulled along most of the veranda; as far, in fact, as the servants' cottage, which was tacked on to the back with poles and more thatch. Through the one gap in the blinds was disclosed a shaded region like a winking eye next to the back steps. Clarice could see Ah Sui, her belated *amah*, moving about inside – a busy shimmer.

'I'm allowed to make up my mind,' Dr Pike said at last.

'Have you mentioned the idea to anyone else?'

'No.'

She gave an irritated laugh and surveyed him, as though for the first time in his own right. He had put on his old khaki bush hat, the item he tended to brood under whatever the weather. Despite his customary brown boots and gaiters, his great shorts and the loose, pocketed, sweat-stained shirt worn outside his belt, he looked anything but familiar, suddenly ineffectual.

'And this is all on my behalf?' she said.

'Yes.'

'*Why* is it? I'm grown up, aren't I? Do you think I can't take care of myself in the world?' She felt cheated. 'I've had to enough times.'

He wouldn't meet her eye, but swung his attention away now, out beyond the orchids and the young banyan tree which the turbanned gardener was busy pruning. Once again Clarice shared the prospect, past the fat-leafed succulents, the red pepper bushes and frangipanis at the fence, as far as the plantation compound, and right to the tall wild trees. Freighted with greenery, the trees reached up behind the rubber plantation towards the ridge; and would then stretch, she knew, to the next ridge, and the next, and onwards unbroken to the remote hill country. Malaya was a place of endless fruits and hardwoods, with their vines and hangers-on. She was a hanger-on herself, to the strange country that had offered her anonymity, given her a freedom she hadn't managed to claim for herself in England.

But bears and tigers and pythons dwelt in the forest, and all manner of legendary animals. Just now, near at hand, a troupe of monkeys was feeding, high up, and shooting back glances amid a continual discard of twigs, peel and droppings. The sky was streaked with fishbone cloud, growing tarnished as if baked from above. And where was truly home? Averting her eye from the stunning view, she made herself watch instead how her father shot the remainder of his whisky back into this throat. Eventually he turned to her.

'All right,' he conceded. 'It would be my last chance.'

'Your last chance at what?'

'At being a father to you.'

That made her gasp, and she sipped her own Scotch, taking it neat, as he did. Its grainy sting helped with the tears that sprang suddenly to her eyes. 'Don't be bloody silly. You've always been that.'

'Technically.'

'But why?' She dug at the lawn with the toe of her sandal like a child. 'And why England, for heaven's sake?'

'Where else is there?'

'Most of the globe, I should say. Shouldn't you, Daddy? Most of the globe would be a darned sight safer, just at the moment. Hmm?'

When she was a girl, England had just meant boarding-school, and before that a place with a train journey inside it. At one end of that railway line was the country practice in Suffolk with her mother and father. At the other was London and her cousin Phyllis. Then she'd grown up; and there had been Vic. England would force her to open up all that heartache again. In order to protect herself she was desperate to stay, and yet – dare she admit it – she also ached to see him. In her heart she was all but ready to collude with her father's wishes. The matter was beyond endurance. She half wished Robin Townely would write and take her mind off the subject of Vic Warren; for, since she'd held Phyllis's letter in her hand, she'd hardly thought of anything else.

'You've nothing to live on and most of the world's turning nasty,' Dr Pike said. 'Haven't you been reading the papers, Clarice?'

'Nothing's happened since Poland!' Exasperation filled her tone.

'Oh, nothing!'

She clicked her teeth. 'You know what I mean.'

Once, after a party at Port Dickson, a convoy of Clarice's friends had driven with her up into the villages. There she had seen her first shadow play. The performance had been done under the stars by means of a large stretched sheet. But the boozy young crowd she was with hadn't understood the formalities. The language had been poetic, a far cry from the basic chat the English had to master for their servants.

She'd been mystified by the play, its lengthy preambles, and the hesitancy about committing to the action, but had grasped there was a reason. To the accompaniment of drumbeats and the clash of cymbals, the drama had lasted late into the night, by which time most of her party had fallen asleep. Even then the story had been only half told. It was the ancient epic of the *Ramayana*: of the lovers, and the forest; of the hermitage, the war, the wickedness of the abductor; and of the great bridge across which the avenger went forth upon the sea. It occurred to her that the new war might have the same self-indulgent pace. The thought chilled her.

She stooped now to poke at a web in the flower-bed. The cords were strung thickly under the great speared arch of a leaf, and the spider came running out into the sun. It stopped. She agitated the threads again. 'I'm being a butterfly. Look. Come on, then. Can't get me, can you?' The spider raised one minutely furred leg, in suspicion. It failed to budge. 'Can't be bothered, after all.' She straightened up. 'Just like men.'

Her father's laugh was brief and preoccupied. She plucked a thought. 'Did you send Phyllis anything? Dear Phyllis and … Victor. And their brat. What was its name, I forget?'

'Not pregnant, are you?'

'For heaven's sake, Daddy.' He astonished her. 'Just because I mention … How dare you!'

'A girl without a mother. Someone has to ask. Once in a while.' He was embarrassed amidst his red mottle and doctor's manner.

'If that's what you mean by being a better father …'

'Sorry. I don't know how a woman would go about it. Doesn't *someone* have to? Keep tabs, I mean?'

'No, they damn well don't. And I'm not – as far as I know.'

He coughed and adjusted his hat. 'Jack. I sent him a suit of clothes.'

'All right, then.' She found herself putting her arms around her father's neck, hugging him more fiercely than she could understand. Then she broke away. 'All right, Daddy. It won't be "over by Christmas", as all the barroom experts have been predicting. It has that in common with last time.

And all right, there's an expeditionary force in France. But nothing's going on. That's why they call it "phoney", Daddy. It isn't happening.'

'It's happening to the Poles.' He shamed her. 'And something's happening to the Finns, the Jews, the poor benighted Chinese.'

'But it's not happening to me. Is it? It isn't happening to me.'

'For God's sake, Clarice!'

She bit her lip. 'It's just I don't understand you. There's always something going on in the world. Always something awful being done to someone. It's not like you to come over like this. You're not yourself. You always said, didn't you, look after the next man and the world will get better. I thought that's what you did, as a doctor. That's how I imagined you, Daddy. I admired you. I thought we were safe here. I thought you were happy. Aren't you?'

'Happy enough.' He looked sharply at her.

'Well then. Why ruin it all because of some potty idea – about *me*? What's making you like this?' She felt Singapore slipping away, Malaya itself receding. Terrified – and piercingly glad – she seized on the next unkind remark that came to mind. 'Not the Scotch, is it? You're not going the way of all white men?'

Yet he seemed in such a pinch, and she was sorry. She caught the implication of something serious going on; sensed almost his impotence. Was he in love, she wondered? Had some affair at the tennis club gone awry?

'What troubles me is that I'm probably too late. I've failed you.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. This is where we live. You're needed, Daddy. You can't leave.' She checked her emotions again, but knew he'd seen her.

'You sound just as though you were six.'

'Don't be stupid,' she said.

This time he put his arm around her. 'Look, darling. Take it on trust, will you? There's nothing for it. I've got to take the risk now. If it all goes well and everything calms down … You know? If there's a stand-off of some kind … Well, I can come back easily enough, can't I?'

'Can you? Can we?'

'Just another leave, eh?'

'If you say so.' She stood quite still. 'If you say so, Daddy.'

'*Tuan*!' Musa called to them from the veranda. Her father went to enquire. Then he came back, black bag in hand. A company employee had sent about a sick child.

'Sorry,' he said. She watched him stride up the garden and thought how he was growing old. 'Probably shan't be long,' he called over his shoulder. Then he disappeared round the side of the bungalow to get the car started.

BUT HE WAS a long time. And, yes, I do hold matters too much in abeyance, lingering here in Malaya, in paradise, because of the payment that was demanded later that evening. It was a sacrifice in return for a fair wind, so to speak, and it was Selama who chose to make it. We try to avoid coming to the pain of such things; for if Vic and Phyllis were bitterly joined in England, Dr Pike was anchored to his spot by a supreme tenderness.

It had rained and was dark before he returned, and he brought with him the Malayan nurse, Selama Yakub, whom Clarice had met several times before. She watched from the veranda as her father helped the woman out of the car and past the puddles; then she went down in the glow of the lantern to greet them.

'My assistant, Mrs Yakub,' her father said. 'Working on a case at the hospital. Of course, you know each other, don't you.'

The nurse wore a neat, white uniform, but had exchanged her headgear for a scarf. She clutched it around her face as she entered, then threw it back. 'How are you, Miss Clarice? So nice to see you again.'

'Oh fine, thanks. Nice to see you.'

'So kind of Dr Pike to invite me – after so long.' Mrs Yakub darted a piercing glance at him, then looked straight at Clarice. She seemed about to say more, but turned away instead.

Their meal of lamb curry was conventional, and the conversation strained. Selama Yakub sent the *kuki* away. She served as though she were the mistress of the house, but hardly touched her food. Clarice felt uncomfortable. The inkling of disturbance she'd felt earlier continued in the air. She hadn't known such an atmosphere for years – in fact since her mother was alive. Selama's lack of appetite did not help.

Clarice's mother had used to excuse herself from table, saying she felt a little ill; and when she thought no one could see her out beyond the veranda, Mattie had a method of making herself sick, leaving most of her meal in the back of the flower-bed – where by morning, the younger Clarice had noted with interest, all evidence of distress had been eaten by less troubled creatures.

After dinner they sat, she and her father, in the study, playing old-fashioned dance tunes on his wind up gramophone. They were alone. Selama Yakub had claimed she wanted to dispense some of the doctor's prescriptions; but when Clarice went to use her bathroom she bumped into the nurse bringing in a tray of cups from the veranda. And someone had obviously been tidying the sitting-room.

On her return Clarice said nothing about it. With the Aladdin lamps aglow in the study, the various insects constantly getting in to crash at the flame, the air fugged and prickly with cigar smoke, she thought neither of Selama nor her mother, but of Phyllis, because of the dance tunes. She saw more vividly that leggy girl in plimsolls who, out of her element on visits to the house at the end of the railway line, would cling to the gramophone and put on certain records again and again.

She had always hated her cousin. Older than she, Phyllis claimed to know everything, to have done everything. When they'd played together Phyllis had been unremittingly spiteful. Yet Phyllis had loved the cheap songs – because a gramophone, indeed music of any kind, represented more luxury than she could imagine.

Clarice broached the subject of her father's fever again. Like his drinking, it was a touchy one. 'Has it really been troubling you?'

'Turning jaundiced, am I?'

'Why are you so difficult?'

'Clearly not wasting away.' He slapped his stomach. 'As you can see.'

'All right, Daddy. Don't take it out on me. You still enjoy work, don't you?' Ambrose and his Orchestra finished their quickstep. She got up, rewound the clockwork motor, changed the needle and set it back on the other side of the disk. A crackly tango emerged. Her father refreshed their glasses.

'I do. Except that lately …'

'You *are* needed, Daddy.' Something was definitely up. She wanted to pre-empt it. 'You're needed … to make people better.'

'How simple you make it sound.'

'I'm not naïve. I'm not.' Her fingers tapped the armrest of her chair.

He put out an awkward hand to touch them, smoothed her wrist and then drew back. 'Self-sacrifice, Clary. Yours and mine. We think if we sacrifice ourselves we can have what we want. Eh? Or have I unwittingly sacrificed my own daughter?'

'What?' She threw back her slug of whisky.

There was a knock at the door. It was Mrs Yakub. 'No need to hurry, Dr Pike. Paperwork to do,' she added with a tense smile at Clarice as if to account for her continued presence. 'Is it all right if I sit at the dining-room table? You don't mind? None of those newspaper cuttings now, I see. In your honour, no doubt, Miss Clarice. He's promised to run me to my home. My son's house. So kind, Dr Pike. You don't mind, do you? Perhaps I'd better look after this, however.' She gave another knowing grimace at Clarice and darted in to pick up the whisky bottle from beside her father's chair. Then she left, almost apologetically.

'You *are* overdoing the booze.'

He grunted. 'No more than usual. Not to excess, if that's what you mean.'

'If that's the truth then why was she so keen to take it away? And what newspaper cuttings? Did she mean all that mess I saw before?'

'Perhaps the bloody woman likes to boss people about. Perhaps she's got it in for me. I don't know. Bloody natives. Nothing feels right. Everything's out, askew.' His hand lifted suddenly, and sliced at the air, startling her. 'This war … Everything that's happening now seems to me so cleverly … planned, Clary. Down to the details. I don't know what that means but it troubles me, a scientific man. It scares me rigid. There's nothing to counter it with, no case notes, no precedent, nothing.' The gramophone needle hissed round and round in the groove at the record's end.

'I simply don't follow, Daddy. Do you go to the club? Do you speak to people? That woman, Mrs Yakub …' She twitched her head in the direction of the dining-room. 'Your assistant. Do you talk to her?' Under her breath, she added, 'What's she doing here? What was she up to in the sitting-room? She's been putting things away in the sideboards.'

He grunted. 'Oh, Selama likes to keep me in order. Bored, I expect. Waiting for me to drive her home. Salt of the earth, though. Damned good nurse.'

'Selama? Is she your …? Daddy?' Clarice remembered another scene, of her parents by her piano. The Broadwood he'd shipped over for her had lasted only two months. From the moment of arrival its sound had become more oriental by the hour. Rust and mould had attacked it with dullness, and then excrescence. The hammers warped and the felts rotted. Whole octaves of its keyboard refused to play at all, while small lizards made homes in the soundbox. She recalled there'd been an argument.

'Good Lord, no. I'm past all that. Past all that sort of nonsense. Just good friends, I can assure you.'

'Does she often come here, then? And keep an eye on your drinking? And take a proprietary interest in your housekeeping? Do you talk to her?'

'Not much. My grasp of Malay isn't up to the subtleties of things I can't even put into English. And her grasp of English …'

'So there is something the matter!'

'Nothing special, I assure you. Nothing special.' But the sigh appeared only partially to discharge his feeling. She watched his lip quiver. She watched, too, as he got up and went to his desk. He took up a piece of paper and handed it to her. It was a photograph, an Associated Press cutting of the Emperor of Japan. It showed a young gentleman in a perfect Western suit and high collar posed next to Lloyd George outside a country house. And I cannot but allow my great-uncle to make his fatal speech, though the minutes were slipping away.

'Britain and Japan, Clarice. People say they're wily Orientals, inscrutable yeller fellers. People at the club explain the war in China as the Asiatic mind. They say we're safe, it'll never touch us. As though we're almost a different … species. As though they hardly see us, or see us as gods. Think about this, child.' He crossed the floor and turned abruptly to face her as he reached the jardinière. The potted palm on its mahogany stand fountained up next to him, and loomed over his balding head. He looked like some famous old anatomist discussing the organs.

'Two insulated, legendary pasts,' he was saying. 'Two similar knightly traditions; of kingship, honour and reticence, of the obsession with class distinctions and "the decent thing". Think, child. Isn't Japan an extraordinary mirror, as though the map of the world could be folded on to itself? The Japanese aren't like the British; no. But very like them. That small off-continental cluster's need for industrial strength … And sea power – Nelson is as sacred in Yokohama as he is in Portsmouth. Did you know that? Think. Each of us has the same absolute conviction of racial superiority. What then? Is there truly a new order in the universe? Is there something bloodstained and Darwinian? Or have we just been mistaken about the old?'

Clarice stared at him. Now he was wry, disturbing; his delivery was enigmatic. She couldn't follow him.

He strode back to the far side of his desk, and swung round again to rest his hand on the narrow top where a lamp stood, smoking slightly from its glass. 'Japan wants the British out of the East. She hates us. The only reason British nationals were relatively safe in Shanghai was through the difficulty of murdering them. If Japan is to strike for dominance she'll need oil, rubber and tin.' He gestured at the walls of the bungalow. 'If they come …'

She wondered if he wanted Mrs Yakub to hear. Was he trying to tell her something? 'Robin says it'll never happen.' She bit her lip. 'As for the new order. There's something in it, isn't there? I thought it had been proved scientifically. Hasn't it?'

'People become ill,' he said, 'when they're told things that aren't true. The power of words, of suggestion – it's up to us to use it … lovingly. The more I practise, the more I believe that medicine is a kind of charm. *Influenza*! My mother – your granny – died of it. They all did. It means influence – an evil spell. Clinically, they died of magic. How primitive. It puts the doctor on the side of the angels, Clary.' He smiled, and she was relieved. 'Take my fever? Malaria means wicked air, you know. I confess to you I have such a feeling in my bones. These words, these names. You need to pay close attention. You should question what your Robin says.'

'He's not my Robin any more,' she blurted.

'Then we're in the same boat, darling.'

'I see,' she said, although she didn't.

'Except I *have* made up my mind.' Then he took a brown envelope from under the stand of a heavy brass microscope. 'I bought these. They came this morning in the post. We've simply got to get away.'

From the brown envelope he took out a slip of paper and showed it to her. It confirmed the booking of two cabins on the Dutch liner *Piet Hein* from Penang to Marseilles. The tropical night rasp seemed to force a way in through the blinds.

'You've left me no choice,' Clarice said. 'No choice at all.' Her voice was icy, but the secret yearning sprang up in triumph. 'What time do you have to drive Mrs Yakub home?'

'Oh, in a little while. Finish your drink. Put another record on, why don't you.'

She did as she was told.

But when they found Mrs Yakub in the dining-room she was already dead. She was slumped at the table, her head right against the wood. An arm dangled uselessly beside her chair, and the weight seemed to drag at her neck, stretching the skin and blurring the features lopsidedly into a gap-toothed mask. The head, at its awkward angle, had its hair partially wrapped over again, where the scarf had fallen forward. Scattered about it, there were pages torn from an opened account book. In the centre of them all, close to a fold in the fabric, lay the empty whisky bottle and the remains of the practice's digitalin supply. The keys to the drug cabinet lay in the hand that reached across the table – as if to say, by way of note, Here you are, *Tuan Doktor*. I've put everything in order.

DECEMBER. IN BARKING, in the flat, their breath was like smoke. His father sniffed at the piece of haddock on the larder shelf. Then he lit a match and touched it to the top of the old gas cooker. There was a small dull sound under the brown saucepan; but Jack was alert to his mother. He ran to watch her singing in the bedroom as she changed her clothes. She'd seen three ships come sailing in. On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day.

Then she whispered something, and the words confused him. One light bulb hung from the ceiling, and the yellow altered her skin. The bulb filled the wall with her outline.

She put on her girdle, and then a slip; only then did she shoo him away for looking. He listened outside her door. Her stockings brushed, one against the other, her dress faintly slithered. The knock on the boards was her heels as she turned herself about in front of the mirror, and when the handle rattled he stepped back against the banisters. She came out tense; he could feel the fierceness in her

body. She spoke to his father in the kitchen, demanding his attention, until there was another flare-up and suddenly she was leaving again.

Down in the shop the dusty display of weighing scales was lit only from the stairs. The faces of the machines were like shadowy fish eyes. In the dark his mother kept her hand on the catch and the door was half open. Jack was cold for a long time even though he was four, now. When they all came back up, the kitchen was full of steam and the potatoes had boiled dry. His father laughed as he always did, and made a joke; but at last there was the sound of a motor bike outside in the street, and Jack remembered the words she'd used: Tony Rice was taking his father up Waltham to do the job.

Tony wore a belted mac with the collar raised. He carried his goggles in his hand as he came up the stairs. Behind him there was another man, fat and red-faced, who was unslinging the large satchel he had over his shoulder. Jack knew his name; it was Arthur Figgis.

'Don't mind if I bring Figgsy, do you?'

Arthur Figgis winked. Jack hated him. He tried to hide. His mother held him.

'All right, Tony.'

'Like a bad penny.' Tony laughed. 'All right, sonny? You're up late. What's the score? Couldn't wait?' He laughed at his rhyme. His smooth cheek hurt Jack in a way his father's rough one didn't. 'You coming with us, Jacky boy? Eh? Coming to screw a bit of swag with your old man and his old mate?'

'Tony. Keep it shut in front of the boy.'

'What's the matter, Phylly?'

But his father spoke. 'Tony! I wasn't expecting … It's been so long. I thought …'

'Thought I'd forgotten, did you, Rabbit?'

'No, I … Well, yes, as a matter of fact. It can wait, can't it? I'd no idea. Tonight of all nights. Of all the bad times.'

'No time like the present. Eh, Figgsy?'

His father said, 'Tony, I …'

'Yes?'

Arthur Figgis said, 'Deary me.' He took his hand out of his coat. It had three heavy rings on it. Jack saw his father's face was pale. His eyes had opened wide. He'd become smaller. Tony Rice always made his father look as though he were someone else, as though Jack too should call him Vic, or Warren, or Rabbit. Tony Rice had a glitter about him, like a decoration, with his wit and sharp voice.

'Figgsy's walking home, Vic. You're coming with me.'

Jack's father was a grown man wearing his apron at the stove and holding a fish-slice. His wife's face had the faintest of smiles.

'Are you coming, or what? Eh, Rabbit. I'm talking to you.'

'Yes, Tony. I'm coming.'

'Attaboy.'

Jack saw Vic Warren put a hand in his trouser pocket and give some coins to his mother. He saw him get his raincoat from the stand and go meekly out of the house behind the other two men. When Jack ran into the front room, past the decorated tree, his shoes clumped upon the floorboards. He watched the men from the window. Vic Warren on the back of the bike was hugging Tony Rice. It was the same person doubled. The motor bike roared, and the streak appeared from the headlight, a white finger pointing the way between the lightless gas lamps on either side of Ripple Road. Vic Warren had the large bag strung over his shoulder. Gone to fetch a rabbit skin. To wrap the baby bunting in.

The bike swung and roared until he lost all sense of where they were, or how long they'd been going. In every corner the back wheel threatened to go away from under him, and all Vic could think of was that his fingers would be frostbitten and useless when he hit the ground. Then, though the road was unlit, he recognised the fringes of Epping Forest. Old crookbeams rose up on either side of them. Their bare branch tops hooked and clawed at the streaked cloud. He clung to Tony Rice's greatcoated

body, sheltered his eyes from the iced and blinding wind behind the nape of Tony Rice's neck. The band of the goggles made a blank strip in Tony Rice's neat, clipped hair. The bike roared on.

They cornered sharply, leaning over together, and there were houses again, sedate black shapes, in the rushing air. Tony pointed a gauntletted hand at one of them, in a spacious row set back. It was large, detached; the bike's exhaust note rattled at its moon-glazed windows. They passed some villas, timbered and countrified. Then round in a side road, they came to a halt. Tony killed the engine. They turned the bike and left it ready, kick-start cocked.

Vic's guts churned. The side road ended in deeper darkness topped over by the shapes of trees. Tony led him into a path through the murk. Rime had formed on the iron kissing gate; it glistened. They scouted along, the two of them half crouched, feeling the leaf mould and fallen twigs through the soles of their shoes, picking their way by the flash of a torch beam. A branch creaked overhead in the trifling wind. Tony sniggered.

The way was overgrown. So long since the Coal Hole, one part of Vic had counted on Tony forgetting the deal. But another had prepared for this moment all along, dreading it, knowing with certainty that it would come to pass. It had lain between him and his wife. She'd sung at the club while he'd remained uninvited. Cash had appeared; he had no work. Though the cabin was finished he had little energy, for the child would wake in the night, twice, three times, and he would get up to calm him, or sit up with him. He and Phyllis camped out in the wastes of marriage – when she was at home. Nothing else would shift. There was only the continued ritual of her threats.

In the freezing glitter the forest hinted at its past. Twisted, silhouetted limbs took on a desperate, sardonic nature. The two men came to a fence. Five feet high, the larch strake tops wobbled underfoot. Vic landed in a vegetable patch. Among sturdy brassica stalks he stood ashamed. The tilth crunched minutely as his shoes broke the forming crust, and there rose a smell of cabbage rot. He caught the sweaty whiff of his own coat, heard his own heart. His stomach cramped him. He looked ahead and saw the black bulk of Tony ten paces further on, his breath steaming.

Vic was amazed at himself. His life was a fairy-tale. Only the bombs, when they came, would make sense of it. Who'd stolen him and brought him here – the apprentice boy, hoicked out of his grammar-school place at fourteen because of his dad's lungs? That boy had once ridden off each morning wearing his too-manly flat cap, his jacket, waistcoat and clipped-up long trousers – as his dad had gone before him along the marsh track. Who'd picked him out – pedalling over the Roding at the Abbey Works, and then down the River Lane to the wharf to earn the family living?

As a young man he'd made cross-London voyages night after night on buses and tubes in hope of some engineering degree. He'd attended cheap concert halls, libraries, public lectures. Who had crippled his almost superhuman effort to lift himself out of the dockside backstreets?

His marriage had put a stop to it. Between lust and marriage there'd been Clarice. But he'd done the decent thing. And then Jack had been born. So why couldn't Vic Warren be left alone to make his way, bring up his family? He reminded himself that it was because of the child he was here. It was Jack who was at stake. Phyllis couldn't help herself. Nor was it the threats of violence from Tony, or Figgsy. Not really. It was what would happen to Jack, his son, if he didn't go along with her.

My father wasn't deluded. Phyllis had grown up the plaything of criminals. Now, unless Vic acted, the same fate would befall Jack. It was almost inevitable. The only chance he had of bringing Jack and even his wife out of it was to take all the guilt of the situation upon himself. The predicament was real; the trap – like all such traps – was cunning.

Therefore Tony led the way. The moon's edge slipped into a cloud, and then out again. Before them roofs, copings and chimney stacks showed up sharp against the streaked, star-pocked sky. A path cut through the garden; it led under a trellis arch and then across the lawn. There was a shed and an outbuilding. Listening for the first shake of a chain, listening for the interrupted snort of canine breathing, they stood completely still, waiting a full minute. A snuffling sound from next door made them both start.

'Nothing. Couple of hedgehogs at it, most likely.' Tony shook his head and laughed under his breath. 'Spiky fuckers. Supposed to be asleep, aren't they?'

A cat screamed in the next garden, electrically loud. Vic jumped again. Again Tony shook his head. 'Not scared, are you? Don't you worry about a thing, mate. You've got your Uncle Tone to look after you.' They carried on. The french windows were right in front of them 'All right. Give me the doings.'

Vic had the brown paper and glue; he fished for them in the bag he'd taken over from Figgsy. The moonlight caught the fine teeth in Tony's elegant smile. He was grinning, holding the glass cutter. 'Nice, eh?' He indicated the house. 'Hope they've all hung up their stockings.'

There came the gritty score of the cutting wheel on the pane. Vic looked up at the dark building and nodded. He stood back a step, even as Tony was easing the glass. He held the two torches, ready. It was only a second or two's work to get the door open.

STRAIGHT AWAY, TO the right of him, Vic's torch beam picked out the smoked-gold frame of a painting that hung from the picture rail. Then the light sweep opened up the interior. There were several more pictures along the wall – large canvases, and some smaller. The place was lined with a distinction quite unexpected. Between and around the pictures the flickering, searchlit wallpaper showed up a drab floral blue; but a great polished table was dressed with silver furnishings. It had carved upright chairs tucked beneath, and it filled much of the centre space, though there were smaller tables and a sideboard in the distance. All the surfaces were cluttered with objects, many of them glittering, cut glass, silver. There were no Christmas decorations.

Embers glowed in the grate. The torch showed the chimney breast with a poor brick fireplace, yet over the mantelshelf an astonishing high gilt mirror was mounted. Vic looked up from the eerie reflection. The ceiling had plain mouldings, but from the central rose hung a vast glass chandelier. The signs of wealth reminded him of the time when a kindly foreign professor had invited the external students to Prince's Gate for drinks. A tang of cigar smoke drifted in the air.

Chest high under the pictures ran shelves of books, so many in the torch's beam. He moved closer. The spines showed old-fashioned letter shapes which he couldn't read. Tony, gone ahead once more, was already about his own concerns.

'Come on then, brains. Finger out. No use standing here gawping. See that clock. And this bloody sideboard.'

Vic tiptoed to the far end of the room, and made himself lift the old gilded clock from its shelf. But the light from his torch was fading – the batteries must have been dud. With one hand he unhooked the long pendulum and tried to wriggle it free. The lever flicked back and forth like a live thing. He silenced it. The torch went out. He shook it back to life. A wonderful engraved bowl lay on its own tray on the sideboard. On either side of it, among the rest of the silver, stood two fine twisted candlesticks. They felt weighted by more than metal, clanking wretchedly against the clock. He imagined Tony's laugh. Ten quid, maybe. Even twenty, the lot. Something told him what he knew already – that, financially, Tony had no need of this job, or his help. A sound of ripping filled the dark beside him.

The sideboard drawers hung open, revealing cutlery in disorder. Now Tony's shape, the torch gripped under his chin, stood at a small bureau in the corner. 'Get me your light on this lot,' he whispered.

Vic shone his weakening beam on to a riffle of letters and bills. There were storage envelopes too, and a wadge of personal papers, with a passport, nipped up in a bulldog clip. Tony shook out the envelopes and snatched at the papers. 'Not this, you bastard. Where's your bloody ill-gotten? Come on.' He flung the documents on to the floor and snickered. 'Who knows, eh?'

Vic felt a movement behind him, and smelt a trace of hair oil. His torch beam suddenly caught Tony, slipping his fingers around the edge of a long drape. The door behind it gave a moaning swish. 'Tony!' But Tony had disappeared from view, and Vic stood rooted to the soft rug by the sideboard.

Character, Perce had so often said, was about not cracking up. Vic's father had seen men crack up: men who couldn't move – either towards the enemy, or back. Those buggers, Perce had said, were sitting ducks. A picture by the tapestried door hanging was caught in the beam. From it a man of property in sober seventeenth-century dress stared dimly back at Vic. There was reproach in the painted eye. Beside the figure were brown water scenes with boats and houses.

He heard noises in the hall beyond, as if Tony were trying to prise something away. 'Tony!' He turned and, in the dark, inadvertently swung his own bag against the back of one of the dining chairs. The rattle was deafening. Now his torch came to rest on the large canvas above the sideboard he'd just looted. Bold smears of red might be lips, or nipples; and there were eyes, gilded, female eyes, pale, laquered skin.

It was slashed, and the hardened paint near the bottom had come off in chunks, revealing the canvas. Below the cut Vic caught a signature in the bottom corner which he couldn't read. It was as though he'd brushed up against Clarice's naked body, there in the room. He stretched to feel for the table and began backing towards the french window.

'Tony!' His nerve failed. 'Tony. I'm going back to the bike.'

'That's what you want, isn't it, Vic.' Like a tinkling whisper, out of nowhere.

He plunged after Tony into the hall where the wrenching sound had come from. A floorboard creaked above him. Across a vast chequerwork of tiles, he could just make out a front door and a large newel post at the foot of the staircase.

His torch went out and he groped for the banisters. And then holding fast on to them, he stepped sideways, several paces, still feeling for the woodwork. Above, in the stairwell, there was the faintest of gleams, the merest sense of outlines, no more.

Then a thump, and a woman's scream and footfalls overhead. Vic panicked, his arms outstretched. He heard a man's gruff voice upstairs and the sound of a door handle being turned. Something on the landing went over with a crash and there were footsteps on the stairs. Tony rushed past him in the hall and Vic turned back to follow. In the dining-room he clattered into the heavy chairs, and fell against a small table, dashing the glassware.

He was at the french windows. As he burst his wrist through a pane, a light switched on. He heard a run behind him, felt a blow to the back of his head and he swivelled, enraged, hitting out at the pyjamaed figure, raining and pummelling blows with his strong fists against the righteous protective arms, the plump sides, the grunting, wet, tobacco-smelling face, feeling the glass of spectacles against his bare knuckles, and its give.

He was escaping down the garden, his ludicrous sack bouncing and jingling on his back. A low wall tripped him. He crashed through stalks, was whipped by branches. He scrambled at the fence. Next he was paralysed and the forest was a sightless chaos. His chest was scraped and his foot hurt. A motor bike in the distance kicked into life: once, twice and then the roar. He inched his way towards the trace of its sound, shuffling with his feet for the path, feeling for tree trunks with his hands, but there was only the unexpected ditch, the unremembered scrub, the wicked bramble thorns. The back of his head ached with a dull, throbbing pain and he put his knuckles in his mouth, tasting blood.

Someone was shouting. He attempted to retrace his steps. But he could find no fence, no house. The ground was dropping away and frosted spines rose up and stung his hands. He straggled back again. Then he plunged in a different direction, and again.

He was relieved when they arrested him. His nails were torn and his shins were barked, but the blood on his hands showed up quite dry in the flash beams, only ten yards or so from the back of the burgled house.

Jack wasn't dreaming when he heard the motor bike. He was in his bed, listening, waiting. He recognised the sound of it and knew how it stood revving in the street at the front of the shop. Then it stopped. He got out of bed and went into the front room. His mother and someone else were coming up the stairs. He heard their voices.

'Where is he, then?'

'How should I know?'

Jack retreated to his bedroom and stood just beside his door.

'For heaven's sake, Tony, he is my husband!'

'What?'

'What's happened? Where is he?'

'I'm not his fucking keeper. All right. Maybe he slipped up. Maybe there was just a weensy bit of a fucking hitch.'

'A hitch?'

'Yeah.'

'What do you mean? I want to know. Where's Vic? Tell me!'

'Shut up, woman! Leave me alone, you stupid bitch. I don't know. Maybe he'll get back later. Maybe he won't. Knowing him he'll run smack in the wrong direction. And if the shite get him he'd better not open his bloody trapdoor, that's all.'

'Tony! What do you mean? What do you mean, Tony?' She was almost screaming.

'Some old Jew got fucking damaged. Rabbit was careless, that's all. All right? What's it to you, anyway?'

'Oh, Tony. What am I going to do?'

'You're going to keep quiet. That's what you're going to do, Phyllis. You're going to keep quiet for Tony, aren't you, dearest? Aren't you? Rabbit's going to keep quiet. And you're going to keep quiet. Aren't you, darling Phyllis? Poor old Bun, eh? Poor old Bunny Rabbit. Maybe he'll show up after all. And maybe not. Eh, Phyllis? Come here, then, you bloody halfwitted bitch.'

'Don't call me that.'

'I'll call you what I like.' Then Tony's voice changed. 'Come on, Phylly. You know I don't mean it. Come on, eh? There's my girl. That's what you like, isn't it? That's what you want. Eh, baby? Just like it used to be. Eh?'

Jack left the door with its rim of light. He sneaked back to his bed, touched the bristly wool of his stocking, and pulled the covers over him because he was cold, and because of the noises. He sang her song in his head to shut them out. That there was a man and his lady, on Christmas Day. It was on Christmas Day. His father would take him down to Creekmouth. Swinging their great brown sails, the three ships would come in on the tide. On one of them, the wounded lady would be standing, her arms stretched out for him.

THEIR BOAT HEADED from Penang out of the Straits of Malacca on the voyage she'd made too often before. The gesture of Selama's suicide, the pure speechless act, had drawn out from her father the story of his private life, of the dilemma of duty that had led to his buying the tickets home, and of the consequent betrayal of his lover. Clarice felt angry and let down by what had been going on behind her back; and which had come to so violent a termination.

Her own affair had drifted to its inevitable end. Robin had received his posting and with it a promotion to captain. He'd gone back to his wife, leaving Clarice only his Christmas gift of some scented notepaper. Now she saw Robin Townely just for what he was: a fairly ordinary and not particularly attractive army officer with a roving eye and stronger arms than hers. She wanted to punish both the men in her life.

But there was that triumph, too, inside her. How her heart raced every time she thought of Vic. In England her feelings would be heightened only to be mocked by the fact of his marriage. It would be a torment. Yet part of her longed to arrive. Another regretted that she would put herself through it all again.

Upon the high seas, the contradictions in her emotions made her listless. She suffered from want of spirits, putting on a brave face. She also drank and played poker for pennies with Ted Crow and Alf McCoy, two superannuated planters trying to get home. They were both absurdly indulgent

and amusing but beyond that made few demands – upon either her feelings or her conversation. On tropical evenings the three of them hung over the piano in the ship's saloon. She played popular songs: 'I've Got You Under My Skin', 'Red Sails in the Sunset', and 'Blue Moon'. They sang together, '*She went to heaven and flip-flap she flied*', and '*One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow*', and laughed, and walked about the deck under the huge stars.

More obviously distressed, Dr Pike drank to anaesthetise himself. Then he would stand on deck for hours, it seemed, watching the horizon. Clarice struggled to forgive him, with all his former talk of medicine as love and charms – and of honesty. How he'd pulled the wool over her eyes, how he'd kept up his affair behind her back. And the woman, the suicide had, yes, been very shocking; but then she'd hardly known her, Selama Yakub. Once the body had been taken away she'd cried, uncontrollably, all night in her room. She was annoyed with her, too, taking herself off like that before she even knew she might have had a stepmother.

There were U-boats in the Atlantic, which was why the *Piet Hein* ended its run at Marseilles. From there Clarice and her father made the last part of their journey across France. What should have been a fine adventure began well. She loved Marseilles the port. But the skies beyond were lacklustre. A change occurred during the rail journey up the Rhône valley; after Lyons everything grew tedious and craven cold. She saw herself and her father as two poor insects scuttling right under a web of fear and bad weather, stretched across the gloomy north from Siberia to Connemara, from Scapa Flow to the Caucasus. Her own nerve suffered, and a sense of foreboding began to preoccupy her. If Malaya had been spoiled for her, this headlong scamper over thousands of miles was pure folly.

The hotel they found in Paris had damp beds. The staff scowled, or sneered, pretending to find difficulty with her schoolroom French. Her father was even harder to manage. When there was no suitable train leaving the Gare du Nord until quite late the next morning, she had to ration his alcohol. At eleven forty-seven, an engine dawdled northwards through the Paris *banlieux* before at last getting up steam enough to tackle the countryside. By then he'd sobered up, but after Amiens and at an almost wilful snail's pace, the train turned to reconnoitre the lines of the old British trenches. She saw Albert, Bapaume, Arras, Vimy, Loos and Béthune, all under traces of snow. Trees had regrown, the broken villages had recovered; yet against an eerie little sunset framed by the train window the ordinariness of those places gave her another sharp taste of anxiety. Calais was windswept, and the Channel crossing no more than a choppy dash under the cover of night.

The final stage, from Dover to London on the morning boat train, ran them up through snow-covered hop gardens under dirty skies. The Kentish suburbs were house backs, coal dumps, or overgrown depots; and Victoria Station, heaped up with sandbags and slush, showed no interest in their arrival. Clarice noted with disbelief the air-raid shelters, the slit trenches, and the government posters about how to behave. Overcoated guns in Hyde Park looked upwards at phoney skies. Any patriotic nostalgia she'd concocted on the way evaporated. The old country was profoundly uninspiring. As for the English, how unlovely they were. After the ease and colour of the tropics, everyone looked shabby.

And would Vic look shabby too, she wondered, if by chance she ran into him – as around every turning, almost, those first few days, she was sure she would? Would she even know him, remember his face? Perhaps she'd already passed him in the street. Urgently and involuntarily, she stopped in her tracks where she and her father were walking along the Bayswater Road, and looked behind her. Nothing – of course, nothing. But suppose he should appear; would she feel the same about him?

Her father lectured her on Disraeli's two nations. 'At least the Malayans know how to take a pride in themselves.' He held forth from Marble Arch, staggering slightly amid the traffic. 'In England there are the Privileged and the People, Property or Population. Each hates the bloody sight and sound of the other.'

'And which are we, Daddy?' she asked, steadying him. He looked her blankly in the eye, and then they crossed back to the corner of Park Lane, jinking their way by inches out of the path of a bus.

There was no relief from the cold. A bone-invading chill came in from the streets and sat down with them in their hotel, unchallenged by any of the stoves in the corners of drab rooms, the puttering gas fires or the lukewarm pipes. Ice patterns on the inside of windows persisted all day, and wherever Clarice went she took the frosty trace of her own breath. Outdoors, its shapes dissipated against the grey; inside, it mingled with the various odoriferous steams caused by boiled cabbage, by brown soup, and by the chamber-pots borne along corridors by clumping maids. Again, she wondered what on earth they'd set out upon, the two of them.

Every evening the guests in the hotel lounge tuned in to Lord Haw Haw. Londoners claimed the Germans had got what they wanted: Hitler would soon sue for peace, and be accepted by both Britain and France. It was the Bore War, they said, pleased with themselves. They were bored with the blackout and bored with rationing. Some believed the bombing threat had turned out to be an elaborate hoax. The Nazi menace would simply wither away and the kids could all come home. She latched on to the idea, and held it. She shut her mind to newspaper tales of Finnish casualties, or the continuing deportation and savagery in divided Poland. These days, apparently, it was more to enquire about the next fall of snow that Londoners surveyed the skies, than to care about Stuka dive-bombers. The winter, they said, was one of the coldest in memory. Well then, they kept on adding, it would all eventually thaw, even Hitler. About Vic, possibly so near at hand, she began to convince herself that she could feel a touch blasé. She had got through so far without seeing him; now she was perfectly in control.

The family solicitor was visited. It turned out they were Property – and therefore Privileged. By the skin of their teeth the old house in Suffolk still belonged to them. So it came about that Clarice and Dr Pike found themselves running down to the country again, this time north of the Thames through Essex and on into prettiest blanketed Suffolk. She did stare intently out of the window as the train inched through the tawdry environs of Wanstead Flats, Ilford and Seven Kings – having seen on a map how close they were to Barking, the address on Phyllis's letter. She paid particular attention as the train crossed the River Ripple. Then, past Becontree, her thoughts were a mixture of relief and overwhelming regret.

The train was ice cold, full and filthy, with soldiers sitting on their kitbags in the corridor, and trodden cigarette butts everywhere on the floors. She allowed one of the boys to engage her in conversation but disdained him a few minutes later, savouring his blushes.

After a while, as ever-thickening snowflakes began to race past the carriage, she grew excited, piqued that her window was grimy, and that smoke from the engine billowed past in such smutty reels as to blot out what might amount to a childhood recaptured. The prospect seemed to lift her father, too.

When at last the train drew up at Manningtree, she stepped out into the flickering white with amazement. The platform, the fields, the station roof were blanketed with fresh snow. She was coming to her old house; everything could be beautiful again.

AN ANCIENT MAN with a horse chaise was all the transport there was to convey daughter and father and their travelling cases the last seaward miles. She didn't mind. She clapped her hands to keep warm, and listened to the slow drawl in which the driver was remembering Dr Pike, no really, from all these years gone. His 'growen gel' Clarice smiled and offered herself to be admired. Snow-garlanded, they clopped through the village of Holbrook, after which a dip in the road and a swirl of the miniature blizzard brought them to their destination.

She dashed the snowflakes from her eyes. Pook's Hill was in the old manor-house style. Under its weight of white, the cat-slide roof seemed at once hoisted by, and sagging from, the off-centre chimney stack. At either end of the property there were gabled wings. It looked quaint as its name, touching as the scene on a card, though smaller perhaps than she remembered, with the mullioned windows of the original modest hall squeezed under the roof's vast blank perfection, and all the leads and ledges delicately iced in casements of peeling green paint. There was a simple wooden door cut

in the left-hand section of wall. Snow-capped weeds had grown up on either side, while great dagger icicles hung from the eaves. Untrained stalks of a snowdrifted, leafless creeper reached away in both directions across the brickwork.

Clarice led her father inside. All at once the long journey caught up with her. The interior was only mould and damage: walls were peeled, areas of ceiling had fallen. There'd been a tenant, but nowhere had been cared for. In one of the rooms a lapse of soot had blackened everything. Her elation was dashed in a pervading smell of fungus and old rags.

A local Miss Farmer was supposed to have laid a fire and left a meal. In a dim, oak-beamed and barely furnished parlour they found a flicker in the grate; and, in the flagstoned region adjoining, a pot of unlikely stew sat on the kitchen range. Eventually, while her father prowled the bedrooms, Clarice brought herself to rummage for kindling in an outhouse. Then she perched on her high heels at the edge of the hearth, trying to revive the embers. The sticks were cold and damp and the flame did its utmost to resist.

Frustration overcame her. She stood up and stamped. Then sobs burst out, and all she could think of was Selama Yakub. Once more she cried secretly, uncontrollably; and when eventually the tears subsided, she was left drained and utterly dismal. The fire sulked. Her father's footsteps sounded somewhere overhead like the walk of a troubled ghost. Forced out of the compensations of her bright life in Singapore, whisked past any second chance of meeting Vic, she'd been thrust into an agrarian confinement so severe that the prospects of love, freedom and fulfilment were almost infinitely remote.

The phrase 'a want of spirits' had first been planted in Clarice's head by Mrs Christopher, who'd taken her under her wing in Singapore. During the voyage its elegant understatement had fitted her exactly. It reminded her of certain literary heroines she'd admired – the passionate girls held captive by circumstance or relatives, while forbidden by duty to think so.

She'd once wanted to be entirely useful: to save the world, discover radium, inspire a great composer with her playing. She'd gone on to find a man, Vic, whose flashes of warmth and intellectual openness seemed to make such things possible – had he not been trapped himself. Now her father had rushed her to the moated grange. The wooded soil of Suffolk ran away to two rivers on either side of her. Their salt and frozen mouths were only a mile or so away. An old physician and his daughter caught in the snow; it was simply too melancholic. She heard him come downstairs and go out at the back through the kitchen.

But in reality she knew she couldn't blame him. After Selama's death and the hasty inquest, her father had had half a mind to tear up the tickets. It was Clarice who'd insisted on using them, and Dr Pike had done what she told him. That was the truth of the matter, and she should come clean about it.

She pulled herself round, and was glad. The fire, too, flicked up around the sticks, the spent char deigning at last to glow. She dried her face and shouted to her father to bring in more coal.

A far-off scraping came by way of reply. Then Dr Pike appeared with the coals held out in front of him on his shovel. 'Good girl. Good girl. You make everything better.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.