INTRODUCTION

Lucky Jim was first published by Victor Gollancz in January 1954. It went through ten impressions in that year, and reached its twentieth by 1957. I myself read it for the first time in the summer of 1955, a long-postponed treat after finishing my BA course in English literature at University College London, where the syllabus stopped well short of contemporary British fiction. I consumed it with exquisite pleasure, and read each succeeding novel by Kingsley Amis as soon as I could borrow it from the public library. (New fiction was beyond my means in those days, and paperback publication lagged years behind the hardback. The first paperback edition of Lucky Jim did not appear until 1959, tied to the Boultling Brothers’ disappointing film of the novel.)

In 1963 I published one of the first academic articles on Amis’s work, subsequently incorporated in my Language of Fiction (1966). Since then I have taken down Lucky Jim from my bookshelves on many occasions, and skimmed through it or dipped into it for the purposes of teaching or quotation, but it is some time since I reread it carefully from cover to cover. Doing so for the purposes of writing this introduction, I found it to be a rather different book from the one I remembered, and from the one that is described in most surveys of post-war British fiction. It is not so much that I — we — misread the book in earlier years, as that we seem to have screened out some of the elements of which it is composed.

‘The novel that changed a generation,’ declares the blurb on the back of my present Penguin edition. ‘In his hilarious send-up of academic life, Kingsley Amis poked devastating fun at a very British way of life, and gave post-war fiction a new and enduring figure to laugh and laugh at.’ As far as it goes, this is a perfectly accurate description: Lucky Jim is indeed a classic comic novel, a seminal campus novel, and a novel which seized and expressed the mood of those who came of age in
the 1950s. But there is more to it than that. Lucky Jim is not, for instance, as continually funny as one remembers it being, or as its legend might lead new readers to expect. There are many passages in it where we are not invited to chuckle, or even smile; passages, usually to do with the hero’s sentimental education, that are surprisingly serious in tone and import. More about this in a moment. First let us pay due tribute to its comedy.

This derives from two sources, situation and style, and while the comedy of situation is inseparable from the style, the reverse is not always true: the style can provoke laughter on its own. Both, however, depend on Amis’s flawless sense of timing: the way he controls the development of an action, or a sentence, to create that combination of surprise and logicality that is the heart of comedy. Comedy of situation is exemplified by such memorable scenes as Jim’s accident with the bed-clothing at the Welches’ and his efforts to conceal the damage, his attempts to deceive Mrs Welch and her son Bertrand on the telephone by disguising his voice, his hijacking of the Barclays’ taxi after the College Ball, and his drunken lecture on ‘Merrie England’.

All these episodes involve the violation of a polite code of manners and contain an element of farce; they belong to a tradition of British comic writing which goes back through Waugh, Wodehouse, Dickens and Fielding to Restoration and Elizabethan comedy.

The comedy generated by Amis’s style was more original, and introduced a distinctively new tone into English fiction. The style is scrupulously precise, but eschews traditional ‘elegance’. It is educated but classless. While deploying a wide vocabulary it avoids all the traditional devices of humorous literary prose – jocular periphrasis, mock-heroic literary allusion, urbane detachment. It owes something to the ‘ordinary language’ philosophy that dominated Oxford when Amis was a student there. It is a style continually challenged and qualified by its own honesty, full of unexpected reversals and underminings of stock phrases and stock responses, bringing a bracing freshness to the satirical observation of everyday life. The italics in the following quotations from the opening pages are mine:

He’d found his professor standing, surprisingly enough, in front of the Recent Additions shelf in the College Library.

To look at, but not only to look at, they resembled some kind of variety act.

He and Welch might well be talking about history. At moments like this Dixon came near to wishing they really were.

‘... and the resulting confusion... my word...’

Quickly deciding on his own word, Dixon said it to himself...

‘Don’t laugh at me if I say I think the Board did a better job than they knew when they appointed you.’ He hadn’t wanted to laugh then, nor did he want to now. What would she be wearing this evening? He could just about bring himself to praise anything but the green Paisley frock in combination with the low-heeled, quasi-velvet shoes.

‘In considering this strangely neglected topic,’ it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what?

The last quotation is Jim’s private interrogation of his own scholarly article, on the publication of which his professional future depends.

Lucky Jim was the first British campus novel (as distinct from the Varsity novel, about the goings-on of young people at Oxbridge) – the first to take as its central character a lecturer at a provincial university, and to find a rich seam of comic and narrative material in that small world. According to Amis himself, the original inspiration for the novel was a glimpse of the Senior Common Room at what was then University College, Leicester, in 1948, when he was visiting Philip Larkin, who was a librarian there:

I looked around a couple of times and said to myself, ‘Christ, somebody ought to do something with this.’ Not that it was awful – well, only a bit; it was strange and sort of developed, a whole mode of existence no one had got on to from outside.

Thus is the genesis of Lucky Jim recalled in Amis’s Memoirs (1991); but he put the story about Leicester into circulation a long time before, perhaps to deflect attention from University College, Swansea, where he taught from 1949 to 1961, as a possible source for the novel. In any event, Lucky Jim certainly started something, a distinctively British version of a
kind of novel that had hitherto been a peculiarly American phenomenon. My own novels of university life, and those of Malcolm Bradbury, Howard Jacobson, Andrew Davies et al., are deeply indebted to its example. Jim Dixon’s anxiety about his professional future, his dependence on the patronage of a senior colleague whom he despises, is a recurrent feature of the genre, and in Professor Welch (’No other professor in Great Britain, he thought, set such store by being called Professor’) Amis drew an immortal portrait of the absent-mindedness, vanity, eccentricity and practical incompetence that academic institutions seem to tolerate and even to encourage in their senior staff (or at least did before the buzz-word ‘Management’ began to echo through the groves of academe in the 1980s).

But academic politics in the broader sense, intellectual competition and intrigue, taboo sexual relations between staff and students, and the social and educational dynamics of the seminar and tutorial, which are the stuff of most campus novels, British and American, have little or no place in Lucky Jim. Its university setting functions primarily as the epitome of a stuffy, provincial bourgeois world into which the hero is promoted by education, and against whose values and codes he rebels, at first inwardly and at last outwardly. The longest and most important piece of continuous action in the novel, extending over six chapters and some fifty pages, centres on a ball, a device for bringing characters together that goes back as far as the eighteenth-century novel, and one which might equally well have been associated with some other hierarchical institution, such as a bank or a business.

This brings us to the question of Lucky Jim’s historical and sociological significance. In 1954 it was acclaimed as marking the arrival of a new literary generation, the writers of the 1950s, sometimes referred to as ‘The Movement’ or ‘The Angry Young Men’. These were two distinct but overlapping categories. ‘The Movement’ was a school of poetry, of which Philip Larkin was the acknowledged leader, and to which Amis himself belonged, along with other academics like John Wain, Donald Davie and D. J. Enright. The anthology that launched them was Robert Conquest’s New Lines (1956), and they consciously set themselves to displace the declamatory, surrealistic, densely metaphorical poetry of Dylan Thomas and his associates with verse that was well-formed, comprehensible, dry, witty, colloquial and down-to-earth. Several of them besides Amis also wrote novels that cultivated the same qualities. Philip Larkin, for instance, whom Amis met and befriended as a student at Oxford, had published Jill in 1946 and Girl in Winter in 1947, though without making much impression on the reading public. The first of these novels anticipated Lucky Jim in having a hero of humble origins ill-at-ease in a university milieu. Amis showed Larkin an early draft of Lucky Jim around 1950, took his advice about cutting out superfluous characters (see Memoirs) and dedicated the finished novel to him.

‘The Angry Young Men’ was a journalistic term, originally put into circulation by a leading article in the Spectator, to group together a number of authors and/or their fictional heroes, who appeared on the literary and theatrical scenes in the mid-to-late 1950s, rigorously expressing their discontent with life in contemporary Britain. They included John Osborne/Jimmy Porter (Look Back in Anger), Alan Sillitoe/Arthur Seaton (Saturday Night and Sunday Morning), John Braine/Joe Lampton (Room at the Top) and Kingsley Amis/Jim Dixon. The category was soon stretched to include any interesting new young writer who came along – for example, Colin Wilson, whose existentialist tract The Outsider had nothing whatsoever in common with the above named works. Amis himself explicitly repudiated the label of Angry Young Man, but it stuck to him as such things tend to do.

Although these writers ‘arrived’ in the 1950s, their education and careers had in many cases been delayed or interrupted by the Second World War, and their formative years were really the 1940s. If one looks carefully at the text of Lucky Jim it becomes clear that it is a novel about the 1940s, and distinctly under the shadow of the War. Jim’s oppressively keen student Mitchie is an ex-serviceman ‘who’d commanded a tank troop at Anzio when Dixon was an RAF corporal in Western Scotland’. Jim keeps his lecture notes in an old RAF file, and visualizes the streets and squares of London by
remembering a weekend leave during the war’. Even Welch, in an unwonted display of compassion, remarks that ‘It’s only to be expected, after a war’ that young men should find it difficult to settle into a job.

No dates are specifically mentioned in the text. It cannot be set later than 1951 since a Labour government is in power. Bertrand’s remark about their inability to ‘pour water on troubled oil’ may be a reference to the Persian Oil Crisis of that year. (In his Memoirs, Amis attributes this witicism to Dylan Thomas, and accuses him of having rehearsed it in order to impress a bar-room audience of university staff and students at Swansea.) In that case the action would be taking place in the summer term of 1951, but we know that Amis was working on the novel earlier than that. The point is that although it was published when the Tory government elected in 1951 was well into its stride, encouraging consumerism and free enterprise, the atmosphere of the novel itself is clearly that of socialist, ‘austerity’ Britain in the 1940s, when a young university lecturer might plausibly possess only three pairs of trousers, live in a lodging house, surrendering his ration book to his landlady, not even dream of owning a car, and keep anxious count of his cigarette consumption, not on health grounds, but financial ones.

By the same token, the lifestyle of the Welches has a quality of the pre-war bourgeoisie. They live in a house that boasts a music-room, and have maidservants. (This degree of affluence, untypical of a professor of history at a provincial university, is explained by attributing a private income to Mrs Welch.) The two Welch sons, the ‘bearded pacifist painting’ Bertrand and the ‘effeminate writing’ Michel, seem in many ways hangovers from pre-war Bohemia. Indeed Bertrand’s pacifism is hardly consistent with the Toryism he expounds in his political arguments with Jim. For his part, Jim’s socialism is not ideologically sophisticated: ‘If one man’s got ten buns and another’s got two, and a bun has got to be given up by one of them, then surely you take it from the man with ten buns.’ It is not entirely surprising that once progressive politics became trendy, as they did in the 1960s, Kingsley Amis and his heroes turned against them (see his 1967 essay, ‘Why Lucky Jim Turned Right’); indeed, in Jim’s tacit agreement with Beesley on the decline of educational standards one can already see a premonition of the slogan, ‘More will mean worse’, that Amis later applied to the expansion of universities. The left-wing stance of Lucky Jim, in short, is an emotional, intuitive matter, more concerned with class and manners than with politics as such.

The received wisdom of the 1940s was that the Second World War, the ‘People’s War’, the landslide victory of the Labour Party in the General Election of 1945, and the establishment of the Welfare State, with free secondary and tertiary education, had genuinely democratized British society, and got rid of its class divisions and inequalities for good. But to many young people who grew up in the post-war period, and benefited from the 1944 Education Act, it seemed that the old pre-war upper classes still maintained their privileged position because they commanded the social and cultural high ground. For myself and many others, it was doing National Service in the peacetime army that opened one’s eyes to this fact. For Jim Dixon, it was taking up a university post at a time when provincial universities were all mini-Oxbridges, aping and largely staffed by graduates of the ancient universities.

Jim is ill-at-ease and out of place in the university because he does not at heart subscribe to its social and cultural values, preferring pop music to Mozart, pubs to drawing rooms, non-academic company to academic. Looking into the face of a not particularly attractive barmaid while fetching a drink for Margaret, ‘he thought how much he liked her and had in common with her, and how much she’d like and have in common with him if she only knew him.’ He feels a fraud as a teacher. His students ‘waste my time and I waste theirs’. Why did he take up this uncongenial profession in the first place? He gives a revealing answer when Beesley asks him this very question: ‘feeling I’d be no use in a school and so on’. When he loses his university job, however, Jim resignedly prepares to take up schoolteaching (at his own school) as if there were no alternative. A huge proportion of first-generation humanities graduates in the 1940s and 50s went into educational careers not because they had a vocational call, but because entry to the other liberal professions — administrative civil
service, the foreign service, law, publishing, etc., was still controlled by the public-school-Oxbridge-old-boy network. They were the ideal readers of *Lucky Jim*. Nowhere is Jim's scorn for the protocol and pieties of the academic life expressed more pungently than in his private commentary (already quoted in part) on the scholarly article he is hoping to publish.

Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. 'In considering this strangely neglected topic,' it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what? His thinking all this without having defied and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool. 'Let's see,' he echoed Welch in a pretended effort of memory: 'oh yes; *The Economic Effect of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485*.'

The note of self-accusation in this passage is crucially important. For most of the novel's action, Jim's rebellion against bourgeois values and institutions is purely mental, or physically expressed only through the pulling of grotesque faces when he thinks he is unobserved. His desire to take violent action against those who oppress him is discharged in harmless private fantasies of a childish nature (though no less funny for that) — plunging Welch feet first into a toilet bowl, beating him about the head and shoulders with a bottle, pushing a bead up Margaret's nose, etc. After one such fantasy, Jim sadly reflects that, 'He'd never be able to tell Welch what he wanted him to tell him, any more than he'd ever be able to do the same with Margaret.' The first occasion on which Jim's inner and outer speech exactly coincide comes after he fights Bertrand and succeeds in knocking him down.

The bloody old trouser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation, Dixon thought. 'You bloody old trouser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation,' he said.

After this, Jim's fortunes begin to improve, in spite of deceptive appearances to the contrary. In his drunken lecture on Merrie England he again expresses, albeit involuntarily, his true self; and though he gets the sack in consequence, this turns out to be a liberation. Shortly afterwards he is liberated from his emotional bondage to Margaret. He is rewarded with the job, and the girl, of his dreams.

Several critics have perceived a fairy-tale buried in the deep structure of *Lucky Jim*, in which Jim is the Frog Prince, Christine the Princess, Gore-Urquhart the Fairy Godmother, and Margaret the Witch. But Jim's relationship with the two women is more subtle and complex than that analogy suggests. It is the most serious strand in the novel, and is pursued with particular attention in the chapters leading up to Jim's fight with Bertrand. The character of Christine, admittedly, rarely rises above her archetype, the blonde, beautiful, virginal yet voluptuous object of male desire, and the conversations between her and Jim are often embarrassingly banal. The dark, skinny, neurotic Margaret is much more interesting. Her claim on Jim's emotional loyalty is analogous to the university's claim on his professional allegiance. Just as he goes through the motions of being a university teacher, knowing he is in bad faith, but unable to do anything about it, so he feels bound to go through the motions of being Margaret's partner, even though he has no desire, and hardly any affection, for her. When he finally brings himself to tell her this, candidly, in Chapter 16, she throws a fit of hystericis, then apologises: 'you were absolutely right, saying what you did. Much better to clear the air like that. I just behaved like a perfect idiot.' This would seem to release Jim honourably from any further responsibility for Margaret, freeing him to pursue the promising intimacy he established with Christine on the night of the Ball. Yet he remains perversely in Margaret's thrall. Shortly afterwards Bertrand angrily accuses him of trying to entice Christine away from himself. Jim stands up to this bullying; but when Christine and Margaret come into the room this passage of highly significant introspection occurs:

He looked at Margaret and an intolerable weight fell upon him.

He knew now what he'd been trying to conceal from himself ever since the previous morning [Margaret's hystericis], what the row with Bertrand had made him temporarily disbelieve: he and Christine would not, after all, be able to eat tea together the following after-
noon. If he was going to eat that meal with any female apart from Miss Cutler [his landlady], it would be not Christine, but Margaret. He remembered a character in a modern novel. Besley had lent him who was always feeling pity moving in him like sickness, or some such jargon. The parallel was apt: he felt very ill.

It is part of Jim's loathing for all high-cultural affectation that he will never admit, even to himself, to remembering the names of the books and authors he has read. But there is little doubt that he is recalling here Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). The closest parallel to the simile cited by Jim actually occurs in Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938), where 'a prick of desire disturbed him [Pinkie Brown] like a sickness.' But it is in *The Heart of the Matter* that the hero is dominated and finally destroyed by the emotion of pity. The word 'pity' occurs scores of times in the text, often in similes like the one half-remembered by Jim Dixon (e.g., 'pity smouldered like decay at his heart'). When he was a B.Litt. student at Oxford, between 1947 and 1949, Amis was commissioned, rather improbably, by an Argentinian university to write a book on Graham Greene. The project came to nothing, and one may infer Amis's opinion of his potential publisher by the fact that the academic charlatan, 'L. S. Caton', who plagiarizes Jim's article, disappears to a chair in Argentina. But it is certain that Amis would have been reading extensively in Greene, and would have read *The Heart of the Matter* on its publication with particular attention, when his own first novel was in gestation.

It is hard to think of two modern novelists who have less in common than Kingsley Amis and 'Grim Grin' (as Greene's name is travestied in Amis's *I Like It Here*). But that of course is the point. In the late 1940s Greene was probably the most highly esteemed living British novelist, and the success of *The Heart of the Matter* put a seal on his reputation. He was precisely the kind of figure that a young aspiring writer might measure himself against and try to displace, or at least differ from. *Lucky Jim* is a comic inversion of the tragic *The Heart of the Matter*. Amis's hero acquires happiness and good fortune by throwing off the pity and guilt that destroys Greene's Scobie. (It is worth noting perhaps that though, like most critics, I refer to Amis's hero affectionately and familiarly as

'Jim', he is actually referred to throughout the text by his surname, as is Greene's.) Many phrases describing Scobie's feelings towards his shrewish wife would apply equally well to Jim's feelings towards Margaret: 'pity and responsibility reached the intensity of a passion'; 'the terrible impotent feeling of responsibility and pity'; 'he was bound by the pathos of her unattractiveness'. Even that quintessentially Greenean sentence, 'He felt the loyalty we all feel to unhappiness, the sense that that is where we really belong', seems applicable to Jim, as he resumes his joyless association with Margaret. Margaret herself is surprisingly honest, even generous, in this scene, heightening the perversity of Jim's renunciation of Christine:

'You'd have much more fun with her than you ever had with me.'
'That's as may be. The point is that I've got to stick to you ...'
'I don't hold with these renunciations. You're throwing her away for a scruple. That's the action of a fool.'

This time, a minute or two went by before either spoke. Dixon felt that his role in this conversation, as indeed in the whole of his relations with Margaret, had been directed by something outside himself and yet not directly present in her. He felt more than ever before that what he said and did arose not out of any willing on his part, nor even out of boredom, but out of a kind of sense of situation. And where did that sense come from if, as it seemed, he took no share in willing it?

It comes, of course, from Jim's conscience, from a kind of pale, secularized version of the self-sacrificing Christian ethic that is overdeveloped in Greene's Scobie, and a fear of transgressing its imperatives. As Jim says later to Christine, 'I'm sticking to Margaret because I haven't got the guts to turn her loose and let her look after herself, so I do that instead of doing what I really want to do, because I'm afraid to.'

What happens subsequently is that Jim is freed from his self-imposed loyalty to unhappiness by two developments in the plot. First, he is liberated from an unsatisfying career in education by Gore-Urquhart's offer of a job as his private secretary - a post doubly desirable because it entails living in London, where Jim longs to be, and because it is coveted by Bertrand. It is, however, worth no more in salary than Jim's
university lectureship, and will be less secure than school-teaching, so Jim’s ready acceptance is a sign of a new willingness to accept risk in his life. Secondly, he is redeemed from his emotional thralldom to Margaret by discovering, via Catchpole, that she faked the suicide attempt that originally bound him to her in a relationship of guilt and pity. Whereas Scobie’s inability to reconcile the responsibilities he feels towards his wife, his mistress and God, lead to his suicide, the discovery that Margaret had no intention of committing suicide releases Jim from his paralysis. What he has always believed—that nice things are nicer than nasty ones—he now at last acts upon. ‘For the first time in his life he felt that it was no use trying to save those who fundamentally would rather not be saved.’ He determines to back his luck—and Christine’s:

Christine’s more normal, i.e. less unworkable, character no doubt resulted, in part at any rate, from having been lucky with her face and figure. But that was simply that. To write things down as luck wasn’t the same as writing them off as non-existent or in some way beneath consideration. Christine was still nicer and prettier than Margaret, and all the deductions that could be drawn from the fact should be drawn: there was no end to the ways in which nice things are nicer than nasty ones.

Is this contrast drawn between the two women sexist? Of course it is! So was most fiction written by men in the 1950s, or indeed at any other time, judged by 1990s standards of what is Politically Correct. The real objection to the characterization of Margaret is that she is portrayed as hysterical, deceitful and sexually frigid, for it would be absurd to pretend that such women have never existed, but that the behaviour in which she manifests these traits is in one important respect rather implausible. I refer to her double deception of Jim and Catchpole over her faked suicide attempt, entailing the forging of a doctor’s prescription. Like the sudden intervention of Gore-Urquhart with his job-offer, this discovery works in narrative terms only because it occurs in a comic novel, because we want to believe in it, because we want the hero to be released from his enchantment and find happiness. Margaret’s story is potentially tragic, but it is not told here (it was to be told many times, and powerfully, by women novelists).

Perhaps the ethical pragmatism finally embraced by Jim Dixon can only be sustained if the subject enjoys good luck. ‘Nice things are nicer than nasty ones’, is not much of a consolation for or defence against disease, madness, addiction, depression and death. As Kingsley Amis allowed these nasty things to impinge more and more on the world of his later novels they became progressively darker, to the disappointment of many readers of Lucky Jim, but also deeper.

DAVID LODGE 1992
‘They made a silly mistake, though,’ the Professor of History said, and his smile, as Dixon watched, gradually sank beneath the surface of his features at the memory. ‘After the interval we did a little piece by Dowland,’ he went on; ‘for recorder and keyboard, you know. I played the recorder, of course, and young Johns . . .’ He paused, and his trunk grew rigid as he walked; it was as if some entirely different man, some impostor who couldn’t copy his voice, had momentarily taken his place; then he went on again: ‘. . . young Johns played the piano. Versatile lad, that; the oboe’s his instrument, really. Well anyway, the reporter chap must have got the story wrong, or not been listening, or something. Anyway, there it was in the Post as large as life: Dowland, yes, they’d got him right; Messrs Welch and Johns, yes; but what do you think they said then?’

Dixon shook his head. ‘I don’t know, Professor,’ he said in sober veracity. No other professor in Great Britain, he thought, set such store by being called Professor.

‘Flute and piano.’

‘Oh?’

‘Flute and piano; not recorder and piano,’ Welch laughed briefly. ‘Now a recorder, you know, isn’t like a flute, though it’s the flute’s immediate ancestor, of course. To begin with, it’s played, that’s the recorder, what they call à bec, that’s to say you blow into a shaped mouthpiece like that of an oboe or a clarinet, you see. A present-day flute’s played what’s known as traverso, in other words you blow across a hole instead of . . .’

As Welch again seemed becalmed, even slowing further in his walk, Dixon relaxed at his side. He’d found his professor standing, surprisingly enough, in front of the Recent Additions shelf in the College Library, and they were now moving diagonally across a small lawn towards the front of the main
building of the College. To look at, but not only to look at, they resembled some kind of variety act: Welch tall and weedy, with limp whitening hair, Dixon on the short side, fair and round-faced, with an unusual breadth of shoulder that had never been accompanied by any special physical strength or skill. Despite this over-evident contrast between them, Dixon realized that their progress, deliberate and to all appearances thoughtful, must seem rather donnish to passing students. He and Welch might well be talking about history, and in the way history might be talked about in Oxford and Cambridge quadrangles. At moments like this Dixon came near to wishing that they really were. He held on to this thought until animation abruptly gathered again and burst in the older man, so that he began speaking almost in a shout, with a tremolo imparted by unshared laughter:

‘There was the most marvellous mix-up in the piece they did just before the interval. The young fellow playing the viola had the misfortune to turn over two pages at once, and the resulting confusion ... my word ...’

Quickly deciding on his own word, Dixon said it to himself and then tried to flail his features into some sort of response to humour. Mentally, however, he was making a different face and promising himself he’d make it actually when next alone. He’d draw his lower lip in under his top teeth and by degrees retract his chin as far as possible, all this while dilating his eyes and nostrils. By these means he would, he was confident, cause a deep dangerous flush to suffuse his face.

Welch was talking yet again about his concert. How had he become Professor of History, even at a place like this? By published work? No. By extra good teaching? No in italics. Then how? As usual, Dixon shelved this question, telling himself what mattered was that this man had decisive power over his future, at any rate until the next four or five weeks were up. Until then he must try to make Welch like him, and one way of doing that was, he supposed, to be present and conscious while Welch talked about concerts. But did Welch notice who else was there while he talked, and if he noticed did he remember, and if he remembered would it affect such thoughts as he had already? Then, abruptly, with no warning, the second of Dixon’s two predicaments flapped up into consciousness. Shuddering in his efforts to repress a yawn of nervousness, he asked in his flat northern voice: ‘How’s Margaret these days?’

The other’s clay-like features changed indefinably as his attention, like a squadron of slow old battleships, began wheeling to face this new phenomenon, and in a moment or two he was able to say: ‘Margaret.’

‘Yes; I’ve not seen her for a week or two.’ Or three, Dixon added uneasily to himself.

‘Oh. She’s recovering very quickly, I think, all things considered. She took a very nasty knock, of course, over that Catchpole fellow, and all the unfortunate business afterwards. It looks to me ... It’s her mind that’s suffering now, you see, not her body; physically she’s absolutely fit again, I should say. In fact, the sooner she can get back to some sort of work the better, though it’s really too late, of course, for her to start lecturing again this term. I know she’d like to get down to things again, and I must say I agree. It would help to take her mind off ... off ...’

Dixon knew all this, and very much better than Welch could hope to, but he felt constrained to say: ‘Yes, I see. I think living with you, Professor, and Mrs Welch, must have helped her a lot to get out of the wood.’

‘Yes, I think there must be something about the atmosphere of the place, you know, that has some sort of healing effect. We had a friend of Peter Warlock’s down once, one Christmas it was, years ago it must be now. He said very much the same thing. I can remember myself last summer, coming back from that examiners’ conference in Durham. It was a real scorcher of a day, and the train was ... well, it ...’

After no more than a minor swerve the misfiring vehicle of his conversation had been hauled back on to its usual course. Dixon gave up, stiffening his legs as they reached, at last, the steps of the main building. He pretended to himself that he’d pick up his professor round the waist, squeeze the furry grey-blue waistcoat against him to expel the breath, run heavily with him up the steps, along the corridor to the Staff Cloakroom, and plunge the too-small feet in their capless shoes into
a lavatory basin, pulling the plug once, twice, and again, stuffing the mouth with toilet-paper.

Thinking of this, he only smiled dreamily when, after a pensive halt in the stone-paved vestibule, Welch said he had to go up and collect his ‘bag’ from his room, which was on the second floor. While he waited, Dixon considered how, without provoking Welch to a long-lived, wondering frown, he could remind him of his invitation to come and eat tea at the Welches’ house outside the city. They’d arranged to leave at four o’clock in Welch’s car, and it was now ten past. Dixon felt apprehension lunging at his stomach as he thought of seeing Margaret, whom he was to take out that evening for the first time since she’d cracked up. He forced his attention away on to Welch’s habits as a car-driver, and began trying to nourish outrage as a screen for the apprehension, tapping his long brown shoe loudly on the floor and whistling. It worked for five seconds or less.

How would she behave when they were alone together? Would she be gay, pretending she’d forgotten, or had never noticed, the length of time since he last saw her, gaining altitude before she dipped to the attack? Or would she be silent and listless, apparently quite inattentive, forcing him to drag painfully from small-talk through solicitude to craven promises and excuses? However it began, it would go on in the same way: with one of those questions which could be neither answered nor dodged, with some horrifying confession, some statement about herself which, whether ‘said for effect’ or not, got its effect just the same. He’d been drawn into the Margaret business by a combination of virtues he hadn’t known he possessed: politeness, friendly interest, ordinary concern, a good-natured willingness to be imposed upon, a desire for unequivocal friendship. It had seemed only natural for a female lecturer to ask a junior, though older, male colleague up to her place for coffee, and no more than civil to accept. Then suddenly he’d become the man who was ‘going round’ with Margaret, and somehow competing with this Catchpole, a background figure of fluctuating importance. He’d thought a couple of months earlier that Catchpole was coming along nicely, taking the strain off him, reducing him to

the sustainable role of consulting tactician; he’d even rather enjoyed the assumption that he knew something of how these campaigns were conducted. And then Catchpole had thrown her over, right over on to his lap. In that posture his destiny as the only current recipient of these unnerving questions and confessions could hardly be eluded.

Those questions ... Although he wasn’t allowed to smoke another cigarette until five o’clock, Dixon lit one now as he remembered the first series, propounded six months or more ago; about the beginning of last December it had been, seven or eight weeks after he took up his appointment. ‘Do you like coming to see me?’ was the first he could recall, and it had been easy as well as truthful to answer ‘Yes’. Then there’d been ones like ‘Do you think we get on well together?’ and ‘Am I the only girl you know in this place?’ and once, when he asked her out for the third consecutive evening, ‘Are we going to go on seeing so much of each other?’ His first qualms had dated from then, but before that and for some time after he’d thought how much simpler this kind of honesty and straightforwardness made the awful business of getting on with women. And the same had seemed true of the confessions: ‘I do enjoy being with you’, ‘I don’t get on with men as a rule’, ‘Don’t laugh at me if I say I think the Board did a better job than they knew when they appointed you’. He hadn’t wanted to laugh then, nor did he want to now. What would she be wearing this evening? He could just about bring himself to praise anything but the green Paisley frock in combination with the low-heeled, quasi-velvet shoes.

Where was Welch? The old man was well known for an incurable evader. Dixon flung himself up the staircase, past the memorial plaques, and along the deserted corridors, but the familiar low-ceiled room was empty. He clattered down the back stairs, an escape-route he often used himself, and into the Staff Cloakroom. Welch was in there, stooped secretively over a wash-basin. ‘Ah, just caught you,’ Dixon said convivially. ‘ thought you’d gone without me. Professor,’ he added, nearly too late.

The other raised his narrow face, distorted with wonder. ‘Gone?’ he asked. ‘You’re ...’
‘You’re taking me home for tea,’ Dixon enunciated. ‘We arranged it on Monday, at coffee-time, in the Common Room.’ He caught sight of his own face in the wall-mirror and was surprised to see that it wore an expression of eager friendliness.

Welch had been flicking water from his hands, a movement he now arrested. He looked like an African savage being shown a simple conjuring trick. He said: ‘Coffee-time?’

‘Yes, on Monday,’ Dixon answered him, putting his hands into his pockets and bunching the fists.

‘Oh,’ Welch said, and looked at Dixon for the first time. ‘Oh. Did we say this afternoon?’ He turned aside to a streaked roller-towel and began a slow drying of his hands, watching Dixon alertly.

‘That’s right, Professor. Hope it’s still convenient.’

‘Oh, it’s convenient enough,’ Welch said in an unnaturally quiet voice.

‘Good,’ Dixon said, ‘I’m looking forward to it,’ and took his dirty old raincoat from a hook in the wall.

Welch’s manner was still a little veiled, but he was obviously recovering quickly, and managed quite soon to pick up his ‘bag’ and put his fawn fishing-hat on his head. ‘We’ll go down in my car,’ he offered.

‘That’ll be nice.’

Outside the building they turned along a gravel drive and went up to the car where it was parked with a few others. Dixon stared about him while Welch looked thoroughly for his keys. An ill-kept lawn ran down in front of them to a row of amputated railings, beyond which was College Road and the town cemetery, a conjunction responsible for some popular local jokes. Lecturers were fond of lauding to their students the comparative receptivity to facts of ‘the Honours class over the road’, while the parallel between the occupations of graveyard attendant and custodian of learning was one which often suggested itself to others besides the students.

As Dixon watched, a bus passed slowly up the hill in the mild May sunshine, bound for the small town where the Welches lived. Dixon betted himself it would be there before them. A roaring voice began to sing behind one of the win-

dows above his head; it sounded like, and presumably might even be, Barclay, the Professor of Music.

A minute later Dixon was sitting listening to a sound like the ringing of a cracked door-bell as Welch pulled at the starter. This died away into a treble humming that seemed to involve every component of the car. Welch tried again; this time the effect was of beer-bottles jerkily belaboured. Before Dixon could do more than close his eyes he was pressed firmly back against the seat, and his cigarette, still burning, was coughed out of his hand into some interstice of the floor. With a tearing of gravel under the wheels the car burst from a standstill towards the grass verge, which Welch ran over briefly before turning down the drive. They moved towards the road at walking pace, the engine maintaining a loud lowing sound which caused a late group of students, most of them wearing the yellow and green College scarf, to stare after them from the small covered-in space beside the lodge where sports notices were posted.

They climbed College Road, holding to the middle of the highway. The unavailing hoots of a lorry behind them made Dixon look furtively at Welch, whose face, he saw with passion, held an expression of calm assurance, like an old quartermaster’s in rough weather. Dixon shut his eyes again. He was hoping that when Welch had made the second of the two maladroit gear-changes which lay ahead of him, the conversation would turn in some other direction than the academic. He even thought he’d rather hear some more about music or the doings of Welch’s sons, the effeminate writing Michel and the bearded pacifist painting Bertrand whom Margaret had described to him. But whatever the subject for discussion might be, Dixon knew that before the journey ended he’d find his face becoming creased and flabby, like an old bag, with the strain of making it smile and show interest and speak its few permitted words, of steering it between a collapse into helpless fatigue and a tautening with anarchic fury. ‘Oh... uh... Dixon.’

Dixon opened his eyes, doing everything possible with the side of his face away from Welch, everything which might help to relieve his feelings in advance. ‘Yes, Professor?’
'I was wondering about that article of yours.'
'Oh yes, I don't...'
'Have you heard from Partington yet?'
'Well yes, actually I sent it to him first of all, if you remember, and he said the pressure of other stuff was...'
'What?'

Dixon had lowered his voice below the medium shout required by the noise of the car, in an attempt to half-conceal from Welch Welch's own lapse of memory, and so protect himself. Now he had to bawl out: 'I told you he said he couldn't find room for it.'

'Oh, couldn't he? Couldn't he? Well, of course they do get a lot of the most... a most terrific volume of stuff sent to them, you know. Still, I suppose if anything really took their eye, then they... they... Have you sent it off to anyone else?'

'Yes, that Caton chap who advertised in the T.L.S. a couple of months ago. Starting up a new historical review with an international bias, or something. I thought I'd get in straight away. After all, a new journal can't very well be bunged up as far ahead as all the ones I've...'

'Ah yes, a new journal might be worth trying. There was one advertised in the Times Literary Supplement a little while ago. Paton or some such name the editor fellow was called. You might have a go at him, now that it doesn't seem as if any of the more established reviews have got room for your... effort. Let's see now; what's the exact title you've given it?'

Dixon looked out of the window at the fields wheeling past, bright green after a wet April. It wasn't the double-exposure effect of the last half-minute's talk that had dumbfounded him, for such incidents formed the staple material of Welch colloquies; it was the prospect of reciting the title of the article he'd written. It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems. Dixon had read, or begun to read, dozens like it, but his own seemed worse than most in its air of being convinced of its own usefulness and significance. 'In considering this strangely neglected topic,' it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what? His thinking all this without having defiled and set fire to the typescript only made him appear to himself as more of a hypocrite and fool. 'Let's see,' he echoed Welch in a pretended effort of memory: 'oh yes; The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485. After all, that's what it's...'

Unable to finish his sentence, he looked to his left again to find a man's face staring into his own from about nine inches away. The face, which filled with alarm as he gazed, belonged to the driver of a van which Welch had elected to pass on a sharp bend between two stone walls. A huge bus now swung into view from further round the bend. Welch slowed slightly, thus ensuring that they would still be next to the van when the bus reached them, and said with decision: 'Well, that ought to do it nicely, I should say.'

Before Dixon could roll himself into a ball or even take off his glasses, the van had braked and disappeared, the bus-driver, his mouth opening and shutting vigorously, had somehow squirmed his vehicle against the far wall, and, with an echoing rattle, the car darted forward on to the straight.

Dixon, though on the whole glad at this escape, felt at the same time that the conversation would have been appropriately rounded off by Welch's death. He felt this more keenly when Welch went on: 'If I were you, Dixon, I should take all the steps I possibly could to get this article accepted in the next month or so. I mean, I haven't the specialized knowledge to judge...' His voice quickened: 'I can't tell, can I? what it's worth. It's no use anybody coming to me and asking "What's young Dixon's stuff like?" unless I can give them an expert opinion of what it's worth, is it now? But an acceptance by a learned journal would... would... You, well you don't know what it's worth yourself, how can you?'

Dixon felt that, on the contrary, he had a good idea of what his article was worth from several points of view. From one of these, the thing's worth could be expressed in one short hyphenated indecency; from another, it was worth the amount of frenzied fact-grubbing and fanatical boredom that had gone into it; from yet another, it was worthy of its aim, the removal
of the ‘bad impression’ he’d so far made in the College and in his Department. But he said: ‘No, of course not, Professor.’

‘And you see, Faulkner, it’s rather important to you that it should turn out to be worth something, if you see what I mean.’

Despite being wrongfully addressed (Faulkner had preceded him in his post), Dixon knew what Welch meant, and said so. How had he made his bad impression? The most likely thing, he always thought, was his having inflicted a superficial wound on the Professor of English in his first week. This man, a youngish ex-Fellow of a Cambridge college, had been standing on the front steps when Dixon, coming round the corner from the library, had kick kneecap at a distance of fifteen yards or more. Averting his head, Dixon had watched in terrified amazement; it had been useless to run, as the nearest cover was far beyond reach. At the moment of impact he’d turned and begun to walk down the drive, but knew well enough that he was the only visible entity capable of stone-propulsion. He looked back once and saw the Professor of English huddled up on one leg and looking at him. As always on such occasions, he’d wanted to apologize but had found, when it came to it, that he was too frightened to. He’d found the same when, two days later, he’d been passing behind the Registrar’s chair at the first Faculty meeting, had stumbled and had knocked the chair aside just as the other man was sitting down. A warning shout from the Registrar’s Clerk had averted complete disaster, but he could still remember the look on the face of that figure, stiffened in the shape of a letter S. Then there’d been that essay written for Welch by one of the Honours people, containing, in fact consisting of, abuse of a book on enclosures by, it transpired, one of Welch’s own ex-pupils. ‘I asked him who could possibly have filled his head with stuff like that, you see, and he said it was all out of one of your lectures, Dixon. Well, I told him as tactfully as I could …’ Much later Dixon had found out that the book in question had been written at Welch’s suggestion and, in part, under his advice. These facts had been there for all to read in the Acknowledgements, but Dixon, whose policy it was to read as little as possible of any given book, never bothered with these, and it had been Margaret who’d told him. That had been, as near as he could remember, on the morning before the evening when Margaret had tried to kill herself with sleeping-pills.

When Welch said in a far-away half-shout ‘Oh, by the way, Dixon,’ Dixon turned to him with real avidity. ‘Yes, Professor?’

How much better to have more of what Welch could provide than thoughts of what Margaret would provide – commodities which he would in any case soon be sampling in their real form.

‘I’ve been wondering if you’d care to come over next weekend for the … week-end. I think it should be quite good fun. We’re having a few people from London, you know, friends of ours and of my son Bertrand’s. Bertrand’s going to try and come himself, of course, but he doesn’t know yet if he can get away. I expect we shall put on one or two little shows, little bits of music and that. We’ll probably call on you to lend a hand with something.’

The car buzzed on along a clear road. ‘Thank you very much, I should love to come,’ Dixon said, thinking he must get Margaret to do some intelligence work on the something he’d probably be called upon to lend a hand with.

Welch seemed quite cheered by this ready acceptance. ‘That’s fine,’ he said with apparent feeling. ‘Now there’s something on the academic side I’d like to discuss with you. I’ve been talking to the Principal about the College Open Week at the end of term. He wants the History Department to throw something into the pool, you see, and I’ve been wondering about you.’

‘Oh, really?’ Surely there were others better qualified to be thrown into the pool?

‘Yes, I thought you might care to tackle the evening lecture the Department’s going to provide, if you could.’

‘Well, I would rather like to have a crack at a public lecture, if you think I’m capable of it,’ Dixon managed to say.

‘I thought something like “Merrie England” might do as a subject. Not too academic, and not too … not too … Do you think you could get something together along those sort of lines?’
And then, just before I went under, I suddenly stopped caring. I'd been clutching the empty bottle like grim death, I remember, as if I were holding on to life, in a way. But quite soon I didn't in the least mind going; I felt too tired, somehow. And yet if someone had shaken me and said, "Come on, you're not going, you're coming back," I really believe I should have started trying to make the effort, trying to get back. But nobody did and so I just thought Oh well, here we go, it doesn't matter all that much. Curious sensation. Margaret Peel, small, thin, and bespectacled, with bright make-up, glanced at Dixon with a half-smile. Around them was the grumble of half a dozen conversations.

'It's a good sign that you're able to talk about it like this,' he said. Since she made no reply, he went on: 'What happened afterwards, or can't you remember? Don't tell me if you'd rather not, of course.'

'No, I don't mind telling you if it won't bore you.' Her smile broadened a little. 'But didn't Wilson tell you about how he found me?'

'Wilson? Oh, the chap in the room underneath. Yes, he said about hearing your wireless booming away and coming up to complain. What made you leave it on like that?' The feelings aroused in him by the first part of Margaret's story had almost subsided now, and he was able to think more clearly.

She looked away across the half-empty bar. 'I don't really know, James,' she said. 'I think I had some idea about wanting to have some sort of noise going on while I was... going off. It seemed so horribly quiet in that room.' She gave a little shiver and said quickly: 'Bit chilly in here, isn't it?'

'We'll move if you like.'

'No, it's all right; just a bit of a draught with that chap coming in... Oh yes, afterwards. I think I grasped quite soon what was going on and where I was and all that. And what they were doing to me. I thought, Oh God, hours and hours of feeling ill and wretched, can I bear it? But of course I was passing out all the time, on and off; good thing, really, in the end. By the time I was fully, er, *compos mentis* again the worst was over, as far as feeling awful was concerned. I was terribly weak, naturally; well, you remember... But everybody was awfully sweet to me. I should have thought they'd got enough to deal with with people who were ill through no fault of their own. I remember being terrified they'd tell the police and get me carted off to a police hospital – are there such things, James? – but they were just angelic; they couldn't have been nicer. And then you came to see me and the horrible part all began to seem unreal. But you looked so terrible...'

She leaned sideways on her bar-stool in laughter, her hands clasped round one knee, the quasi-velvet shoe falling away from her heel. 'You looked as if you'd been watching some frightful gruesome operation, white as a sheet and all... hollow-eyed...' She shook her head, still laughing quietly, and pulled her cardigan up over the shoulders of the green Paisley frock.

'Did I really?' Dixon asked her. He was relieved at this piece of news, to find that he'd looked as bad as he'd felt that morning; then he felt bad again now as he nerved himself to ask the last compulsory question. He half-listened for a minute or so while Margaret described how good Mrs Welch had been to her in fetching her from the hospital and installing her at the Welches' home to convalesce. She had undoubtedly been very kind to Margaret, even though at other times, when publicly disagreeing with her husband for example, she was the only living being capable of making Dixon sympathize with him. It was rather annoying to hear how kind she'd been; it entailed putting tiresome qualifications on his dislike for her. Finally, Dixon said in a low voice, having first drunk freely from his glass: 'You needn't say anything if you don't want to, but... you are over this business now, aren't you? You wouldn't think of having another shot at it, I mean?'

She glanced up quickly as if she'd been expecting to be asked this, but he couldn't tell whether she was glad or sorry when it came. Then she turned her head away and he could see
how thin the flesh was over her jawbone. 'No, I wouldn't have another shot at it,' she said. 'I don't care about him any more; I don't feel anything at all about him, one way or the other. So much so I feel now it was rather silly to have tried at all.'

This made Dixon decide that his apprehensions about the evening had been absurdly out of place. 'Good,' he said heartily. 'Has he tried to get in touch with you or anything?'

'Not a thing, not even so much as a phone message. Vanished without a trace. He might never have existed - as far as we're concerned. I suppose he's too busy with his popsy these days, like he said he'd be. '

'Oh, he said that, did he?'

'Oh yes, our Mr Catchpole was never one to beat about the bush. How did it go? 'I'm taking her off to North Wales with me for a couple of weeks. I thought I ought to tell you before I went off.' Oh, he was charmingly frank about it, James; quite charming in every way. '

Again she turned away from him, and this time the tendons of her neck were prominent, together with the bones at the base. He felt a pang of alarm, which sharpened when he found he could think of nothing to say. As if searching for a text he examined her face, noting the tufts of brown hair that overhung the ear-pieces of her glasses, the crease running up the near cheek and approaching closer than before to the eyeocket (or was he imagining that?), and the faint but at this angle unmistakable downward curve of the mouth. There was nothing there of conversational aliment; he felt for his cigarettes, but before he could use the offer of these as a means of breaking into her pose, she switched back to him with a little smile which he recognized, with self-dislike, as consciously brave.

She drained her glass with a quick gay movement. 'Beer,' she said. 'Buy me beer. The night is young.'

While he was securing the barmaid's attention and getting the drinks, Dixon wondered first how many more rounds of blue-label he might be expected to pay for, and then why Margaret, with her full lecturer's salary uninterrupted by her absence from work, so rarely volunteered to stand him a drink. Finally, though this was no more welcome, he thought of the morning before Margaret had taken her overdose of sleeping-pills. He'd had nothing to do at College that day before a two-hour seminar in the afternoon, and she'd been free after a tutorial hour at ten. After coffee at sevenpence a cup in a recently-opened, and now flourishing, restaurant, they'd gone to a chemist's where she'd wanted to buy a few things. One of the things had been a new bottle of the sleeping-pills. He could remember exactly how she'd looked dropping the bottle, in its sealed white wrapper, into her handbag and glancing up to say: 'If you've got nothing better to do tonight I'll be brewing up about ten. What about dropping in for an hour?' He'd said he would, meaning to turn up, but in the event he hadn't been able to get his next day's lecture written up in time, nor, he realized, had the prospect of another conference about Catchpole seemed inviting when ten o'clock came. In the early evening Catchpole had called on Margaret to tell her he was finished with her, and at about ten she'd eaten the whole bottleful of pills. If he'd been there himself, Dixon thought now for the thousandth time, he'd have been able to prevent her, or, if too late for that, to get her to the hospital a good hour and a half earlier than that fellow Wilson had. He shied away from the image of what would have happened if Wilson hadn't bothered to go up to Margaret's room. What had actually happened was much more unpleasant than anything he could have predicted that morning. The next time he'd seen her was in the hospital a week later.

Pocketing the eightpence change from his two florins, Dixon shoved one of the stemmed glasses along to Margaret. They were sitting at the bar of the Oak Lounge in a large roadside hotel not far from Welch's house. From this seat Dixon felt he could recoup himself a little for the expensive-ness of the drinks by eating steadily through the potato crisps, gherkins, and red, green, and amber cocktail onions provided by an ambitious management. He began eating the largest surviving gherkin and thought how lucky he was that so much of the emotional business of the evening had been transacted without involving him directly. She'd said nothing about his recent non-appearance at the Welch's, nor had any dis-inintegrating question or avowal been let fall.
‘By the way, James,’ Margaret said, holding the stem of her glass, ‘I want to say how awfully grateful I am to you for your tact these last couple of weeks. It has been good of you.’

Dixon alerted all his faculties. Conundrums that sounded innocuous or even pleasant were the most reliable sign of impending attack, the mysterious horseman sighted riding towards the bullion-coach. ‘I didn’t know I’d been all that tactful,’ he said in an uncoloured tone.

‘Oh, just the way you’ve been keeping in the background. You were the only one who took the trouble to work it out, that I might prefer not to be bombarded with kind inquiries, “and how are you feeling, my dear, after your unpleasant experience” et cetera. Do you know, old Mother Welch had people from the village who’d never even heard of me before, dropping in to ask how I was. It was really incredible. You know, James, they couldn’t have been kinder, but I’ll be awfully glad to get out of that place.’

It seemed genuine. She had been known to interpret some of his laziest or most hurtful actions or inactions in this light, though not, of course, as often as she’d interpreted some gesture of support as lazy or hurtful. Perhaps he could now begin to lead the talk somewhere else. ‘Neddy said something about you feeling ready to start work again soon,’ he said. ‘Of course, the exams’ll be on us before very long. Are you going to do anything at College before they start?’

‘Well, I shall see each of my classes once to answer any questions they may think worth putting. If the effort of thinking up questions won’t turn their poor little brains, that is. But I shan’t do any more than that this year, apart from marking the scripts. What’ll really bring me back to normality’ll be getting away from the Neddies, ungrateful as it may sound.’ She crossed her legs spasmodically.

‘How much longer are you thinking of staying there?’

‘Oh, not more than a fortnight, I hope. I want to get out before the summer vac anyway. It all depends how soon I can find somewhere to live.’

‘That’s good,’ Dixon said, his spirits rising as opportunity for greater honesty seemed to be approaching. ‘You’ll be there next week-end, then.’

‘What, for Neddy’s arty get-together? Yes, of course. Why, you don’t mean you’re coming, do you?’

‘Yes, that’s just what I do mean. The question was popped on the way down in the car. Why, what’s so funny?’

Margaret was laughing in the way Dixon had provisionally named to himself ‘the tinkle of tiny silver bells’. He sometimes thought that the whole corpus of her behaviour derived from translating such phrases into action, but before he could feel much irritation with himself or her, she said: ‘You know what you’re in for, do you?’

‘Well, fine talk mostly, I hoped. I can waffle with the best of them. What’s been laid on, then?’

She ticked the items off on her fingers. ‘Part-songs. A play-reading. Demonstration of some sword-dance steps. Recitations. A chamber concert. There’s something else, too, but I’ve forgotten it. I’ll remember in a minute.’ She went on laughing.

‘Don’t bother, that’s enough to be going on with. My God, this is really serious; Neddy must be going off his head at last. It’s absolutely fantastic. Nobody’ll come.’

‘You’re wrong there, I’m afraid: a chap from the Third Programme’s promised to turn up. And a camera team from Picture Post. Several of the more prominent local musicians will appear, including your pal Johns with . . .’

Dixon gave a throttled howl. ‘This can’t be right,’ he said, draining his glass chokingly. ‘No more fantasy, please. They can’t fit a gang like that into the house. Or are they going to sleep on the lawn? And what . . .’

‘Most of them are just coming down on the Sunday for the day, according to Mrs Neddy. There will be boarders, though, apart from you. Johns is arriving on the Friday evening, probably driven down with you . . .’

‘I’ll strangle that little sod before I get into the same . . .’

‘Yes yes of course; don’t shout. One of the sons is coming too, with his girl. The girl might be rather interesting; a ballet student, I gather.’

‘A ballet student? I didn’t know there were such things.’

‘There are, apparently. This one’s called Sonia Loosmore.’

‘No, really? How do you know all this?’
"I've heard nothing else from either of the Neddies for the last week."

"I can imagine that," Dixon began looking towards the barmaid. "Then perhaps you can tell me why I've been asked."

"They weren't very clear about that. Just to join in, I suppose. There'll be plenty of things for you to do, I've no doubt at all."

"Look, Margaret, you know as well as I do that I can't sing, I can't act, I can hardly read, and thank God I can't read music. No, I know what it is. Good sign in a way. He wants to test my reactions to culture, see whether I'm a fit person to teach in a university, see? Nobody who can't tell a flute from a recorder can be worth hearing on the price of bloody cows under Edward the Third." He put seven or eight onions into his mouth and began crunching them.

"But he's exposed you to culture before now, surely."

"Not such a heavy concentration as this looks like being. My God, what the hell does he think he's playing at? What's it all in aid of? I mean it can hardly be all just for my benefit."

"He's got some idea of an article or a wireless talk on the provincial culture-group. You know, that stuff he came back from Manchester full of at Easter."

"But he can't really think anyone'll take him up, can he?"

"Who knows what he really thinks? No, it's probably just an excuse for doing it. You know how he loves that sort of thing."

"None better," Dixon said, again trying to catch the barmaid's eye. "You'll have to start finding out what he's got lined up for me. So I can start thinking up reasons for not being able to do it."

She laid her hand on his. "You can rely on me," she said in a soft voice.

Dixon said quickly: "But how's he got hold of the B.B.C. type and the Picture Post people? He must have got someone interested."

"I gather both lots are contacts of Bertrand's, or perhaps his girl's. But don't let's talk about it any more. Can't we talk about ourselves? We've got so much to say to each other, haven't we?"

"Yes, of course," he said, trying to stuff comradeliness into his tone. He brought out his cigarettes and, while lighting two of these and getting more drinks, he meditated on Margaret's capacity of talking like this at no notice. He wanted to give an inarticulate shout and run out of the bar, not stopping until he was on board a city bus. Though silenced, he was grateful to notice, by the barmaid's nearness, Margaret was yet managing to keep up the pressure by intimate glances, even touching his knee with hers. He converted his start at this into a glance upwards, to the clock above the counter. The thin red second hand swung smoothly round the dial, giving the illusion of time rapidly passing. The other hands pointed to five past nine.

While he was being given his change, Dixon studied the barmaid, who was large and very dark with a narrow upper lip and rather close-set eyes. He thought how much he liked her and had in common with her, and how much she'd like and have in common with him if she only knew him. With the maximum of deliberation he trousered his change, then picked up and shook a cigarette packet someone had left on the counter. It proved empty. At his side, Margaret heaved the sigh which invariably preluded the worst avowals. She waited until he had to look at her and said: "How close we seem to be tonight, James." A fat-faced man on the other side of her turned and stared at her. "All the barriers are down at last, aren't they?" she asked.

Finding this unanswerable, Dixon gazed at her, slowly nodding his head, half expecting a round of applause from some invisible auditorium. What wouldn't he give for a fierce purging draught of fury or contempt, a really efficient warming from the sense of responsibility?

At last she lowered her eyes and might have fallen to scanning her beer for foreign matter. "It seemed almost too much to hope for." After another silence, she went on in a brisker tone: "But can't we sit somewhere more... out of the public eye?"

Dixon thought this was a good idea, and they moved across the room, which was starting to fill up, to a vacant corner. Before sitting down, he excused himself and went out to the lavatory.
Out there, he thought how nice it would be if he could give up his dual role of conciliator and go right away from here. Five minutes would be ample for a vituperative phone-call to Welch and a short statement of the facts of the case to Margaret. Then he’d go and pack a few clothes and get on the ten-for for London. As he stood in the badly-lit jakes, he was visited again, and unbearably, by the visual image that had haunted him ever since he took on this job. He seemed to be looking from a darkened room across a deserted back street to where, against a dimly-glowing evening sky, a line of chimney-pots stood out as if carved from tin. A small double cloud moved slowly from right to left. The image wasn’t purely visual, because he had a feeling that some soft unidentifiable noise was in his ears, and he felt with a dreamer’s baseless conviction that somebody was going to come into the room where he seemed to be, somebody he knew in the image but not in reality. He was certain it was an image of London, and just as certain that it wasn’t of any part of London he’d ever visited. He hadn’t spent more than a dozen evenings there in his life. Then why, he pondered, was his ordinary desire to leave the provinces for London sharpened and particularized by this half-glimpsed scene?

He walked thoughtfully out of the lavatory without bothering to close its door, which was fitted with a compressed-air delaying device. The cylinder of this having been unscrewed by some rioter, the door swung to at once behind him, just missing his rear heel. The effect, in that short and narrow passage, was like the discharge of a piece of ordnance. He seemed to catch a hoarse cry of alarm from inside the bar. More than ever it was the moment to dart into the street and fail to return. But economic necessity and the call of pity were a strong combination; topped up by fear, as both were, they were invincible. He went back through the polished door into the Oak Lounge.

‘Excuse me, Mr Dixon; have you got a minute to spare?’

First making his shot-in-the-back face, Dixon stopped and turned. He was leaving College after a lecture, and so had been hurrying. ‘Yes, Mr Michie?’

Michie was a moustached ex-service student who’d commanded a tank troop at Anzio while Dixon was an R.A.F. corporal in western Scotland. He now confronted Dixon near the porter’s lodge. As always, his manner seemed to be concealing something, though Dixon could never be sure what. He waited for a moment and said: ‘Have you got that syllabus together yet, sir?’ He was the only student Dixon had ever heard calling a member of the staff ‘sir’, and apparently reserved the title exclusively for Dixon.

‘Oh yes, that syllabus,’ Dixon said, playing for time. He hadn’t got it together yet.

Michie pretended to think his question needed amplifying. ‘You know, sir, the list of stuff for your special subject next year. You said you were going to distribute copies to the Honours people, if you remember.’

‘Yes, oddly enough I can remember having said that,’ Dixon said, then pulled himself together; he mustn’t antagonize Michie. ‘I’ve got the stuff ready in my digs, but I’ve not given it to the typist yet. I’ll try to have it ready for you early next week, if that’s all right.’

‘That’ll do beautifully, sir,’ Michie said fulsomely, his moustache writhing a little as he smiled. He began moving away down the drive, keeping his eyes on Dixon, trying, it seemed, to engineer a joint departure from College. A briefcase, swollen with the week-end’s reading, swayed in his loose grip. ‘If I could come along to your room some time and pick them up?’

Dixon stopped trying to stand his ground, and allowed
Michie to draw him away towards the road. ‘If you would,’ he said. Fury flared up in his mind like forgotten toast under a grill. The getting together of the syllabus had been, of course, Welch’s idea; on receipt of it, the candidates for Honours in History were to ‘see whether they were interested’ in studying this new special subject, in preference to the old special subjects taught by the other members of the Department and examined in one of the eight papers required for B.A. Clearly, the more students, within reason, Dixon could get ‘interested’ in his subject, the better for him; equally clearly, too large a number of ‘interested’ students would mean that the number studying Welch’s own special subject would fall to a degree that Welch might be expected to resent. With an Honours class of nineteen and a Department of six, three students seemed a safe number to try for. So far, Dixon’s efforts on behalf of his special subject, apart from thinking how much he hated it, had been confined to aiming to secure for it the three prettiest girls in the class, one of whom was Michie’s girl, while excluding from it Michie himself. Added to Dixon’s dislike of thinking about work at all, the necessity of keeping Michie at arm’s length went far to explain his present discomfort.

‘What are your main ideas so far, sir, if you don’t mind my asking?’ Michie asked as they turned downhill into College Road.

Dixon did mind, but said only: ‘Well, I think the main emphasis of the thing will be social, you know.’ He was trying to stop himself from thinking directly about the official title of his subject, which was ‘Medieval Life and Culture’. ‘I thought I might start with a discussion of the university, for instance, in its social role.’ He comforted himself for having said this by the thought that at least he knew it didn’t mean anything.

‘You don’t propose to offer an analysis of scholasticism, then, I take it?’

This question illustrated exactly why Dixon felt he had to keep Michie out of his subject. Michie knew a lot, or seemed to, which was as bad. One of the things he knew, or seemed to, was what scholasticism was. Dixon read, heard, and even used the word a dozen times a day without knowing, though he seemed to. But he saw clearly that he wouldn’t be able to go on seeming to know the meaning of this and a hundred such words while Michie was there questioning, discussing, and arguing about them. Michie was, or seemed, able to make a fool of him again and again without warning. Though it would have been easy enough to pick some technical quarrel with him, over an undelivered essay for example, Dixon was reluctant to do so because he felt superstitiously that Michie was capable of insisting on studying Medieval Life and Culture out of sheer spite and desire to do him down. Michie, then, must be kept out, but with smiles and regrets instead of the blows and kicks which were his due. This was why Dixon now said: ‘Oh no, I’m afraid there won’t be much meat in it from that point of view. I’m not qualified to pronounce on the learned Scotus or Aquinas, I’m afraid.’ Or should it have been Augustine?

‘It might be rather fascinating to study the effect on men’s lives of the various popular debasements and vulgarizations of the schoolmen’s doctrines.’

‘Oh, agreed, agreed,’ Dixon said, his lips beginning to shake, ‘but that’s a subject for a D.Phil thesis, wouldn’t you say, rather than a fairly elementary course of lectures?’

Michie gave at some length, but luckily without asking any questions, his views of the case for and against such an opinion. After Dixon had voiced his regret that so interesting a discussion must be broken off, they parted at the foot of College Road, Michie to his Hall of Residence, Dixon to his digs.

Hurrying through the sidestreets, deserted at this hour before works and offices closed, Dixon thought of Welch. Would Welch have asked him to get up a special subject if he wasn’t going to keep him on as a lecturer? Substitute any human name for Welch’s and the answer must be No. But retain the original reading and no certainty was possible. As recently as last week, a month after the special subject had been first mentioned, he’d heard Welch talking to the Professor of Education about ‘the sort of new man’ he was after. Dixon had felt very ill for five minutes; then Welch had come up to him and begun discussing, in tones of complete honesty,
what he wanted Dixon to do with the Pass people next year. At the memory, Dixon rolled his eyes together like marbles and sucked in his cheeks to give a consumptive or wasted appearance to his face, moaning loudly as he crossed the sunlight street to his front door.

On the florid black hallstand were a couple of periodicals and some letters that had come by the second post. There was something in a typed envelope for Alfred Beesley, who was a member of the College's English Department; a buff envelope containing football pool coupons and addressed to W. Atkinson, an insurance salesman some years older than Dixon; and another typed envelope addressed to 'J. Dickinson' with a London postmark. He hesitated, then opened it. Inside was a sheet hastily torn from a pad bearing a few ill-written lines in green ink. Without formality the writer announced that he'd liked the shipbuilding article and proposed to publish it 'in due course'. He'd be writing again 'before very long' and signed himself 'L. S. Caton'.

Dixon took a felt hat of Atkinson's from the hallstand, put it on his head, and did a little dance in the narrow hall. Welch would find it harder to sack him now. It was good news apart from that; it was generally encouraging; perhaps the article had had some merit after all. No, that was going too far; but it did mean it was the right sort of stuff, and a man who'd written one lot of the right sort of stuff could presumably write more. He'd enjoy telling Margaret about it. He replaced the hat, glancing idly at the periodicals, which were destined for Evan Johns, office worker at the College and amateur oboist. The front page of one of them bore a large and well-produced photograph of a contemporary composer Johns might reasonably be supposed to admire. An idea came into Dixon's mind, which was the more ready to receive it in this mood of exultation. He stood still and listened for a moment, then crept into the dining-room where the table was laid for high tea. Working quickly but carefully, he began altering the composer's face with a soft black pencil. The lower lip he turned into a set of discoloured snaggle-teeth, adding another lower lip, thicker and looser than the original, underneath. Duelling-scars appeared on the cheeks, hairs as thick as tooth-picks sprang from the widened nostrils, the eyes, enlarged and converging, spilled out on to the nose. After crenellating the jaw-line and hiding the forehead in luxuriant fringe, he added a Chinese moustache and pirate's earrings, and had just replaced the papers on the hallstand when somebody began to come in by the front door. He sprang into the dining-room and listened again. After a few seconds he smiled as a voice called out 'Miss Cutler' in an accent northern like his own, but eastern where his own was western. He came out and said: 'Hallo, Alfred.'

'Uh, hallo, Jim.' Beesley was tearing his letter open with some haste. The kitchen door opened behind Dixon and the head of Miss Cutler, their landlady, emerged to see who and how many they were. Satisfied on these points, she smiled and withdrew. Dixon turned back to Beesley, who was now reading his letter, scowling as he did so.

'Coming in to tea?'

Beesley nodded and handed Dixon the cyclostyled sheet. 'Spot of good news to take home with me for the weekend.'

Dixon read that Beesley was thanked for his application, but that Mr P. Oldham had been appointed to the post. 'Oh, bad luck, Alfred. Still, there'll be others to go for, won't there?'

'Doubt it, for October. Time's running pretty short now.' They took their seats at the tea-table. 'Were you very set on it?' Dixon asked.

'Only in so far as it would have been a way of getting away from Fred Karno.' This was how Beesley was accustomed to refer to his professor.

'I suppose you were quite set on it, then.'

'That's right. Anything new from Neddy about your chances?'

'No, nothing direct, but I've just had a bit of good news. That chap Caton's taken my article, the thing about shipbuilding.'

'That's a comfort, eh? When's it coming out?'

'He didn't say.'

'Oh? Got the letter there?' Dixon passed it to him. 'Mm, not too fussy about stationery and so on, is he? I see ... Well,
you'll be wanting more definite information than that, won't you?

Dixon's nose twitched his glasses up into position, a habit of his. 'Will I?'

'Well, Christ, Jim, of course you will, old man. A vague acceptance of that kind isn't much use to anyone. Might be a couple of years before it comes out, if then. No, you pin him down to a date, then you'll have got some real evidence to give Neddy. Take my advice.'

Uncertain whether the advice was sound, or whether it arose out of Beesley's disappointment, Dixon was about to temporize when Miss Cutler came into the room with a tray of tea and food. One of the oldest of her many black dresses shone softly at several points of her stout frame. The emphatic quietness of her tread, the quick, trained movements of her large purple hands, the little grimace and puff of breath with which she enjoined silence upon each article she laid on the table, her modestly lowered glance, combined to make it impossible to talk in her presence, except to her. It was many years now since her retirement from domestic service and entry into the lodging-house trade, but although she sometimes showed an impressive set of landlady-characteristics, her deportment when serving meals would still have satisfied the most exacting lady-housekeeper. Dixon and Beesley said something to her, receiving, as usual, no reply beyond a nod until the tray was unloaded; then a conversation followed, only to be abruptly broken off at the entry of the insurance salesman and ex-Army major, Bill Atkinson.

This man, who was tall and very dark, sat weightily down at his place at the foot of the table while Miss Cutler, whom he terrified by his demands for what he called the correct thing, ran out of the room. He studied Dixon closely when the latter said: 'You're early today, Bill,' as if the remark might have carried some challenge to his physical strength or endurance; then, seemingly reassured, nodded twenty or thirty times. His centre-parted black hair and rectangular moustache gave him an air of archaic ferocity.

The meal continued and Atkinson soon partook in it, though remaining aloof from the conversation, which ran for
most?" Dixon asked, but Beesley, puffing away at his pipe, had already got up. Dixon's views on the Middle Ages themselves would have to wait until another time.

"Oh well, I'm off now," Beesley said. "Have a good time with the artists, Jim. Don't get drunk and start telling Neddy what you've just been telling me, will you? Cheero, Bill," he added unanswerably to Atkinson, and went out leaving the door open.

Dixon said good-bye, then waited a moment before saying: "Oh, Bill, I wonder if you could do me a favour."

The reply was unexpectedly prompt. "Depends what it is," Atkinson said scornfully.

"Could you ring me at this number about eleven on Sunday morning? I'll be there all right and we'll just have a little chat about the weather, but if by any chance I can't get hold of you or I've turned up here out of the blue, you'll know who I am, and you'll call me down."

He paused at a small, unidentifiable sound from outside the room, but heard nothing further and continued: "If you can't get hold of me, tell whoever answers that my parents have turned up here out of the blue and will I please get back as soon as I can. There, I've written everything down."

Atkinson raised his dense eyebrows and studied the envelope-back as if it bore the wrong answer to a chess problem. He gave a barbaric laugh and stared into Dixon's face. "Afraid you won't be able to last out, or what?"

"It's one of my professor's arty week-ends. I've got to turn up, but I can't face the whole of Sunday there."

There was a long pause while Atkinson looked censoriously round the room, a familiar exercise. Dixon liked and revered him for his air of detecting everything that presented itself to his senses, and of not meaning to let this detestation become staled by custom. He said finally: "I see. I'll enjoy doing that."

As he said this, yet another man came into the room. It was Johns, carrying his periodicals, and at the sight of him Dixon felt a twinge of disquiet: Johns was a silent mover, a potential eavesdropper, and a friend of the Welch's, especially Mrs Welch. Asking himself whether Johns had in fact overheard enough of the task just assigned to Atkinson, Dixon nodded anxiously at Johns, whose tallow-textured features made no movement. This immobility was prolonged when Atkinson spoke his greeting: "Hallo, sonny boy."

Dixon had resolved to travel to the Welch's by bus to avoid Johns's company, so he now got up, thinking he ought to impart some specific warning to Atkinson. Unable to fix on anything, however, he left the room. Behind him he heard Atkinson speaking to Johns again: "Sit down and tell me about your oboe."

A few minutes later Dixon, carrying a small suitcase, was hurrying through the streets to his bus stop. At the corner of the main road he had a view downhill to where the last few terraced houses and small provision shops began to give place to office blocks, the more fashionable dress-shops and tailors, the public library, the telephone exchange, and a modern cinema. Beyond these again were the taller buildings of the city centre with its tapering cathedral spire. Trolley-buses and buses hummed or ground their way towards it and away from it, with columns of cars winding, straightening, contracting, and thinning out. The pavements were crowded. As Dixon crossed the road, the sight of all this energy made his spirits lift, and somewhere behind his thoughts an inexplicable excitement stirred. There was no reason to suppose that the week-end would contain anything better than the familiar mixture of predicted boredom with unpredicted boredom, but for the moment he was unable to believe this. The acceptance of John's article might be the prelude to a run of badly-needed luck. He was going to meet some people who might well prove interesting and amusing. If not, then he and Margaret could relish talking about them. He must see that she enjoyed herself as far as possible, and doing this would be easier in the presence of others. In his case was a small book of verse, by a contemporary poet he privately thought very nasty, which he'd brought that morning as a completely unprovoked gift to Margaret. The surprise would combine nicely with the evidence of affection and the flattery implied in the choice. A routine qualm gave him trouble at the thought of what he'd written on the fly-leaf, but his mood enabled him to suppress it.
Of course, this sort of music's not intended for an audience, you see," Welch said as he handed the copies round. "The fun's all in the singing. Everybody's got a real tune to sing - a real tune," he repeated violently. "You could say, really, that polyphony got to its highest point, its peak, at that period, and has been on the decline ever since. You've only got to look at the part-writing in things like, well, *Onward, Christian Soldiers*, the hymn, which is a typical ... a typical ..."

"We're all waiting, Ned," Mrs Welch said from the piano. She played a slow arpeggio, sustaining it with the pedal. "All right, everybody?"

A soporific droning filled the air round Dixon as the singers hummed their notes to one another. Mrs Welch rejoined them on the low platform that had been built at one end of the music-room, taking up her stand by Margaret, the other soprano. A small bullied-looking woman with unabundant brown hair was the only contralto. Next to Dixon was Cecil Goldsmith, a colleague of his in the College History Department, whose tenor voice held enough savage power, especially above middle C, to obliterate whatever noises Dixon might feel himself impelled to make. Behind him and to one side were three basses, one a local composer, another an amateur violinist occasionally summoned at need by the city orchestra, the third Evan Johns.

Dixon ran his eye along the lines of black dots, which seemed to go up and down a good deal, and was able to assure himself that everyone was going to have to sing all the time. He'd had a bad setback twenty minutes ago in some Brahms rubbish which began with ten seconds or so of unsupported tenor - more accurately, of unsupported Goldsmith, who'd twice dried up in face of a tricky interval and left him opening and shutting his mouth in silence. He now cautiously reproduced the note Goldsmith was humming and found the effect pleasing rather than the reverse. Why hadn't they had the decency to ask him if he'd like to join in, instead of driving him up on to this platform arrangement and forcing sheets of paper into his hand?

The madrigal began at the bidding of Welch's arthritic forefinger. Dixon kept his head down, moved his mouth as little as possible consistent with being unmistakably seen to move it, and looked through the words the others were singing. "When from my love I looked for love, and kind affections due," he read, "too well I found her vows to prove most faithless and untrue. But when I did ask her why ..." He looked over at Margaret, who was singing away happily enough - she turned out regularly during the winter with the choir of the local Conservative Association - and wondered what changes in their circumstances and temperaments would be necessary to make the words of the madrigal apply, however remotely, to himself and her. She'd made vows to him, or avowals anyway, which was perhaps all the writer had meant. But if he'd meant what he seemed to mean by 'kind affections due', then Dixon had never 'looked for' any of these from Margaret. Perhaps he should: after all, people were doing it all the time. It was a pity she wasn't a bit better-looking. One of these days, though, he would try, and see what happened.

"Yet by, and by, they'll all, deny, and say 'twas hurt in jest," Goldsmith sang tremulously and very loudly. It was the last phrase; Dixon kept his mouth open while Welch's finger remained aloft, then shut it with a little flick of the head he'd seen singers use as the finger swept sideways. All seemed pleased with the performance and anxious for another of the same sort. "Yes, well, this next one's what they called a ballet. Of course, they didn't mean what we mean by the similar ... Rather a well-known one, this. It's called *Now is the Month of Maying*. Now if you'll all just ...

A bursting snuffle of laughter came from Dixon's left rear. He glanced round to see Johns's pallor rent by a grin. The large short-lashed eyes were fixed on him. "What's the joke?" he asked. If Johns were laughing at Welch, Dixon was prepared to come in on Welch's side.
‘You’ll see,’ Johns said. He went on looking at Dixon. ‘You’ll see,’ he added, grinning.

In less than a minute Dixon did see, and clearly. Instead of the customary four parts, this piece employed five. The third and fourth lines of music from the top had Tenor I and Tenor II written against them; moreover, there was some infantile fa-la-la stuff on the second page with numerous gaps in the individual parts. Even Welch’s ear might be expected to record the complete absence of one of the parts in such circumstances. It was much too late now for Dixon to explain that he hadn’t really meant it when he’d said, half an hour before, that he could read music ‘after a fashion’; much too late to transfer allegiance to the basses. Nothing short of an epileptic fit could get him out of this.

‘You’d better take first tenor, Jim,’ Goldsmith said; ‘the second’s a bit tricky.’

Dixon nodded bemusedly, hardly hearing further laughter from Johns. Before he could cry out, they were past the piano-ritual and the droning and into the piece. He flapped his lips to: ‘Each with his bonny lass, a-a-seated on the grass: fa-la-la, fa-la-la-la-la-la la la la…’ but Welch had stopped waving his finger, was holding it stationary in the air. The singing died. ‘Oh, tenors,’ Welch began; ‘I didn’t seem to hear…’

An irregular knocking on the door at the far end of the room was at once followed by the bursting-open of this door and the entry of a tall man wearing a lemon-yellow sportscoat, all three buttons of which were fastened, and displaying a large beard which came down further on one side than on the other, half-hiding a vine-patterned tie. Dixon guessed with surging exultation that this must be the pacifist painting Bertrand whose arrival with his girl had been heralded, with typical clangour, by Welch every few minutes since tea-time. It was an arrival which must surely prove an irritant sooner or later, but for the moment it served as the best possible counter-irritant to the disastrous madrigals. Even as Dixon thought this, the senior Welches left their posts and went to greet their son, followed more slowly by the others who, perhaps finding the chance of a break not completely unwelcome, broke into conversation as they moved. Dixon delightedly lit a cigarette, finding himself alone: the amateur violinist had got hold of Margaret; Goldsmith and the local composer were talking to Carol, Goldsmith’s wife, who’d refused, with enviable firmness, to do more than sit and listen to the singing from an armchair near the fireplace; Johns was doing something technical at the piano. Dixon moved down the room through the company and leaned against the wall at the end by the door where the bookshelves were. Placed here, savouring his cigarette, he was in a good position to observe Bertrand’s girl when she came in, slowly and hesitantly, a few seconds later, and stood unnoticed, except by him, just inside the room.

In a few more seconds Dixon had noticed all he needed to notice about this girl: the combination of fair hair, straight and cut short, with brown eyes and no lipstick, the strict set of the mouth and the square shoulders, the large breasts and the narrow waist, the premeditated simplicity of the wine-coloured corduroy skirt and the unornamented white linen blouse. The sight of her seemed an irresistible attack on his own habits, standards, and ambitions: something designed to put him in his place for good. The notion that women like this were never on view except as the property of men like Bertrand was so familiar to him that it had long since ceased to appear an injustice. The huge class that contained Margaret was destined to provide his own womenfolk: those in whom the intention of being attractive could sometimes be made to get itself confused with performance; those with whom a too-tight skirt, a wrong-coloured, or no, lipstick, even an ill-executed smile could instantly discredit that illusion beyond apparent hope of renewal. But renewal always came: a new sweater would somehow scale down the large feet, generosly revivify the brittle hair, a couple of pints site positive charm in talk of the London stage or French food.

The girl turned her head and found Dixon staring at her. His diaphragm contracted with fright; she drew herself up with a jerk like a soldier standing easy called to the stand-at-ease position. They looked at each other for a moment, until, just as Dixon’s scalp was beginning to tingle, a high, baying voice called ‘Ah, there you are, darling; step this way, if you please, and be introduced to the throng’ and Bertrand strode
up the room to meet her, throwing Dixon a brief hostile glance. Dixon didn’t like him doing that; the only action he required from Bertrand was an apology, humbly offered, for his personal appearance.

Dixon had been too distressed at the sight of Bertrand’s girl to want to be introduced to her, and kept out of the way for a time; then he moved down and started talking to Margaret and the amateur violinist. Bertrand dominated the central group, doing a lot of laughing as he told some lengthy story; his girl watched him intently, as if he might ask her later to summarize its drift. Coffee and cakes, intended to replace an evening meal, were brought in, and getting enough of these for himself and Margaret kept Dixon fully occupied. Then Welch came up to him and said, inexplicably enough: ‘Ah, Dixon, come along now. I want you to meet my son Bertrand and his ... his ... Come along.’

With Margaret at his side, Dixon was soon confronted by the two people Welch wanted him to meet and by Evan Johns. ‘This is Mr Dixon and Miss Peel,’ Welch said, and drew the Goldsmiths away.

Before a silence could fall, Margaret said ‘Are you down here for long, Mr Welch?’ and Dixon felt grateful to her for being there and for always having something to say.

Bertrand’s jaws snatched successfully at a piece of food which had been within an ace of eluding them. He went on chewing for a moment, pondering. ‘I doubt it,’ he said at last. ‘Upon consideration I feel it incumbent upon me to doubt it. I have miscellaneous concerns in London that need my guiding hand.’ He smiled among his beard, from which he now began brushing crumbs. ‘But it’s very pleasant to come down here and to know that the torch of culture is still in a state of combustion in the provinces. Profoundly reassuring, too.’

‘And how’s your work going?’ Margaret asked.

Bertrand laughed at this, turning towards his girl, who also laughed, a clear, musical sound not unlike Margaret’s tiny silver bells. ‘My work?’ Bertrand echoed. ‘You make it sound like missionary activity. Not that some of our friends would dissent from that description of their labours. Fred, for instance,’ he said to his girl.

‘Yes, or Otto possibly,’ she replied.

‘Most assuredly Otto. He certainly looks like a missionary, even if he doesn’t behave like one.’ He laughed again. So did his girl.

‘What work do you do?’ Dixon asked flatly.

‘I am a painter. Not, alas, a painter of houses, or I should have been able to make my pile and retire by now. No no; I paint pictures. Not, alas again, pictures of trade unionists or town halls or naked women, or I should now be squatting on an even larger pile. No no; just pictures, mere pictures, pictures tout court, or, as our American cousins would say, pictures period. And what work do you do? always provided, of course, that I have permission to ask.’

Dixon hesitated; Bertrand’s speech, which, except for its peroration, had clearly been delivered before, had annoyed him in more ways than he’d have believed possible. Bertrand’s girl was looking at him interrogatively; her eyebrows, which were darker than her hair, were raised, and she now said, in her rather deep voice: ‘Do gratify our curiosity.’ Bertrand’s eyes, which seemed to lack the convexity of the normal eyeball, were also fixed on him.

‘I’m one of your father’s underlings,’ Dixon said to Bertrand, deciding he mustn’t be offensive; ‘I cover the medieval angle for the History Department here.’

‘Charming, charming,’ Bertrand said, and his girl said: ‘You enjoy doing that, do you?’

Welch, Dixon noticed, had rejoined the group and was looking from face to face, obviously in quest of a point of entry into the conversation. Dixon resolved to deny him this at all costs. He said, quietly but quickly: ‘Well, of course, it has its own appeal. I can quite see that it hasn’t the sort of glamour of’, he turned to the girl, ‘your line of country.’ He must show Bertrand that he wasn’t below including her in the conversation.

She looked perplexedly up at Bertrand. ‘But I haven’t noticed much glamour knocking about in...’

‘But surely,’ Dixon said, ‘I know there must be a lot of hard work and exercise attached to it, but the ballet, well,’ he disregarded a nudge from Margaret, ‘there must be plenty of
glamour there. So I’ve always understood, anyway.’ As he spoke, he gave Bertrand a smile of polite, comradely envy, and stirred his coffee with civilized fingers, splaying them a good deal on the handle of the spoon.

Bertrand was going red in the face and was leaning towards him, struggling to swallow half a bridge roll and speak. The girl repeated with genuine bewilderment: ‘The ballet? But I work in a bookshop. Whatever made you think I . . .?’ Johns was grinning. Even Welch had obviously taken in what he’d said. What had he done? He was attacked simultaneously by a pang of fear and the speculation that ‘ballet’ might be a private Welch synonym for ‘sexual intercourse’.

‘Look here, Dickinson or whatever your name is,’ Bertrand began, ‘perhaps you think you’re being funny, but I’d as soon you cut it out, if you don’t mind. Don’t want to make a thing of it, do we?’

The baying quality of his voice, especially in the final query, together with a blurring of certain consonants, made Dixon want to call attention to its defects, also, perhaps, to the peculiarity of his eyes. This might make Bertrand assail him physically—splendid; he was confident of winning any such encounter with an artist—or would Bertrand’s pacifism stop him? But in the ensuing silence Dixon swiftly decided to back down. He’d made some mistake about the girl; he mustn’t make things any worse. ‘I’m terribly sorry if I’ve made a mistake, but I was under the impression that Miss Loosmore here had something to do with . . .’

He turned to Margaret for aid, but before she could speak Welch, of all people, had come in loudly with: ‘Poor old Dixon, ma-ha-ha, must have been confusing this . . . this young lady with Sonia Loosmore, a friend of Bertrand’s who let us all down rather badly some time ago. I think Bertrand must have thought you were . . . twitting him or something, Dixon; ba-ha-ha.’

“Well, if he’d taken the trouble to be introduced, this wouldn’t have happened,’ Bertrand said, still flushed. ‘Instead of which, he . . .’

‘Don’t worry about it, Mr Dixon,’ the girl cut in. ‘It was only a silly little misunderstanding. I can quite see how it happened. My name’s Christine Callaghan. Altogether different, you see.’

‘Well, I’m . . . thanks very much for taking it like that. I’m very sorry about it, really I am.’

‘No no, don’t let it get you down, Dixon,’ Bertrand said, with a glance at his girl. ‘If you’ll excuse us, I think we might circulate round the company.’

They moved off, followed at a distance by Johns, towards the Goldsmith group, and Dixon was left alone with Margaret.

‘Here, have a cigarette,’ she said. ‘You must be needing one. God, what a swine Bertrand is. He might have realized . . .’

‘It was my fault, really,’ Dixon said, grateful for nicotine and support. ‘I should have been there to be introduced.’

‘Yes, why weren’t you? But he needn’t have made it worse. But that’s typical of him, as far as I can gather.’

‘I sort of couldn’t face meeting him. How often have you met him?’

‘He came down once before, with the Loosmore girl. I say, it is rather queer, isn’t it? He was going to marry the Loosmore then, and now here he is with a new piece. Yes, of course; Nedly gave me a long harangue about when the Loosmore wedding was coming off, and so on, only a couple of days ago. So as far as he knew . . .’

‘Look, Margaret, can’t we go out for a drink? I need one, and we shan’t get one here. It’s only just eight; we could be back . . .’

Margaret laughed, so that he could see a large number of her teeth, one canine flecked with lipstick. She always made up just a little too heavily. ‘Oh, James, you’re incorrigible,’ she said. ‘Whatever next? Of course we can’t go out; what do you suppose the Neddies would think? Just as their brilliant son’s arrived? You’d get a week’s notice like a shot.’

‘Yes, you’re right, I admit. But I’d give anything for three quick pints. I’ve had nothing since the one I had down the road yesterday evening, before I showed up here.’

‘Much better for your pocket not to have them.’ She began to laugh again. ‘You were wonderful in the madrigals. Your best performance yet.’
'Don't remind me, please.'

'Even better than your rendering of the Anouilh tough. Your accent made it sound so frightfully sinister. What was it? ‘La rigolade, c'est autre chose’? Very powerful, I thought.'

Dixon screamed softly from a tightened throat. 'Stop it. I can't bear it. Why couldn’t they have chosen an English play? All right, I know. Don’t explain to me. Look, what’s going to happen now?'

'Recorders, I think.'

'Well, that lets me out, anyway. No disgrace in not playing them. I'm only a lay brother, after all. Oh, but isn't it horrible, Margaret? Isn't it horrible? How many of the bloody things do you have going at once?'

She laughed again, glancing quickly round the room. This was a reliable sign that she was enjoying herself. 'Oh, any number can play, as far as I know.'

Dixon laughed too, trying to forget about beer. It was true that he had only three pounds left in his tin box to last until pay-day, which was nine days off. In the bank he had twenty-eight pounds, but this was a fund he’d started against the chance of being sacked.

'Pretty girl, that Christine Whatshername,' Margaret said. 'Yes, isn't she?'

'Wonderful figure she's got, hasn't she?'

'Yes.'

'Not often you get a figure as good as that with a good-looking face.'

'No,' Dixon tensed himself for the inevitable qualification. 'Pity she's so refined, though.' Margaret hesitated, then decided to gloss this epithet. 'I don't like women of that age who try to act the gracious lady. Bit of a prig, too.'

Dixon, who'd arrived at similar conclusions already, found he didn't much want to have them confirmed in this way. 'Oh, I don't know,' he said. 'Can't really tell at this stage.'

This was greeted with the tinkle of tiny bells. 'Ah, you always were one for a pretty face, weren't you? Covers a multitude is what I always say.'

He thought this profoundly true and, debarred from saying so, was at a loss what to reply. They looked anxiously at each other, as if whatever either might say next must be an insult. Finally Dixon said: 'She does seem rather as if she's tarred with the same brush as Bertrand.'

She gave him a curious sardonic smile. 'I should say they've got a lot in common.'

'I imagine so.'

A maid servant was now collecting the used crockery, and the company was moving about. The next stage of the evening was clearly imminent. Bertrand and his girl had disappeared, possibly to unpack. At Welch's summons, Dixon left Margaret to help arrange some chairs. 'What's the next item on the programme, Professor?' he asked.

Welch's heavy features had settled into their depressive look after the manic phase of the last hour and a half. He gave Dixon a mutinous glare. 'Just one or two instrumental items.'

'Oh, that'll be nice. Who's first on the list?'

The other brooded, his slab-like hands on the back of a ludicrously low chair that resembled an inefficiently converted hassock. In a moment he disclosed that the local composer and the amateur violinist were going to 'tackle' a violin sonata by some Teutonic bore, that an unstated number of recorders would then perform some suitable item, and that at some later time Johns might be expected to produce music from his oboe. Dixon nodded as if pleased.

He returned to Margaret to find her in conversation with Carol Goldsmith. This woman, aged about forty, thin, with long straight brown hair, Dixon regarded as one of his allies, though sometimes she overawed him a little with her mature air.

'Hallo, Jim, how's it going?' she asked in her abnormally clear voice.

'Badly. There's at least an hour of scraping and blowing in front of us.'

'Yes, that's badly all right, isn't it? Why do we come to this sort of thing? Well, I know why you come, Jim, and poor Margaret's living here. I suppose what I mean is why the hell do I come.'

'Oh, wifely support for your spouse, I take it,' Margaret said.
‘Something in that, I suppose. But why does he come? There aren’t even any drinks.’

‘James has already noticed that.’

‘It would hardly be worth coming just to meet the great painter, would it?’ Dixon said, meaning to start a conversation that might diminish his retrospective embarrassment over the recent Loosmore–Callaghan imbroglio.

For a reason he didn’t then understand, the reception of this remark was perceptibly unfavourable. Margaret looked at him with lifted chin as if ready to reprove some indiscretion, but to her any sort of adverse remark about anybody was, unless they were alone, indiscreet enough. Carol half-closed her eyes and smoothed her straight hair. ‘What makes you say that?’ she said.

‘Well, nothing really,’ Dixon said in alarm. ‘I had a little brush with him just now, that’s all. I got into some mix-up over his girl’s name, and he was a bit offensive, I thought. Nothing drastic.’

‘Oh, that’s quite typical,’ Carol said. ‘He always thinks he’s being got at. He often is, too.’

‘Oh, you know him, do you?’ Dixon said. ‘I’m sorry, Carol; is he a great pal of yours?’

‘Hardly that. We saw a bit of him last summer, you know, Cecil and I, before you got your job. He can be quite entertaining at times, actually, though you’re quite right about the great-painter stuff; it does get you down occasionally. You’ve met him once or twice, haven’t you, Margaret? What did you think of him?’

‘Yes, I met him when he came down before. I thought he was all right when you got him on his own. I think he feels that when he’s got an audience he’s got to play up to it and impress everyone.’

A great baying laugh made all three turn round. Bertrand, leading Goldsmith by the arm, was approaching. With the remnants of his laughter still trickling from his face, he said to Carol: ‘Ah, there you are, dear girl. And how are things with you?’

‘Well enough, thank you, dear man. I can see how things are with you. A bit out of your usual run, isn’t she?’

‘Christine? Ah, now there’s a grand girl for you, a grand girl. One of the best, she is.’

‘Any plans for her?’ Carol pursued, smiling slightly.

‘Plans? Plans? No no, no plans at all. Unquestionably none.’

‘Not like you, old boy,’ said Goldsmith’s furry monotone, so different from his bawling tenor in song.

‘At the moment, quite frankly, she’s made me more than a little piqued,’ Bertrand said, making a circle of thumb and forefinger to emphasize the last word.

‘How’s that, Bertrand?’ Goldsmith asked solicitously.

‘Well, as you may imagine, despite my passionate interest in this kind of sport,’ he nodded towards the piano, where the amateur violinist was tuning his violin with the cooperation of the local composer, ‘it’s not quite enough to draw me down here unaided, glad as I am to see you all. No no; I had been promised a meeting with one Julius Gore-Urquhart, of whom you may have heard.’

Dixon had indeed heard of Gore-Urquhart, a rich devotee of the arts who made occasional contributions to the arts sections of the weekly reviews, who had a house in the neighbourhood where persons of distinction sometimes came to stay, and who was a fish that Welch had more than once vainly tried to land. Dixon looked again at Bertrand’s eyes. They really were extraordinary: it seemed as if a sheet of some patterned material were tacked to the inside of his face, showing only at two arbitrary loopholes. What could a man with such eyes, such a beard, and (he noticed them for the first time) such dissimilar ears have to do with a man like Gore-Urquhart?

He learned what they had to do with each other in the next minute or two. As yet, the connexion was tenuous: the Callaghan girl, who knew Gore-Urquhart’s family, or was even perhaps his niece, had arranged to introduce Bertrand to him during the current week-end. At some late stage it had been found that Gore-Urquhart was at present in Paris, so that a further visit to this part of the world would have to be undertaken to meet him. There was some reason, which Dixon at once forgot, why a meeting in London would be less
satisfactory. And what was Gore-Urquhart going to do for Bertrand when they did meet?

When Margaret had asked for this information in her circumlocutory way, Bertrand raised his great head and looked down his cheeks from face to face before replying. ‘I have it on more than ordinarily good authority,’ he said in measured tones, ‘that our influential friend will shortly be declaring his private secretaryship vacant. I doubt whether the post will be publicly competed for, and so I am at the moment busily engaged in grooming myself for the part. Patronage, you see, patronage: that’s what it’ll be. I’ll answer his letters with one hand and paint with the other.’ He gave a laugh in which Goldsmith and Margaret joined. ‘So I’m naturally anxious to strike while the iron’s hot, if you’ll pardon the expression.’

Why shouldn’t they pardon the expression? Dixon thought. Why?

‘When do you think you’ll be down again then, old boy?’ Goldsmith asked. ‘We’ll have to fix something up. Haven’t had a chance this time.’

‘Oh, in a fortnight or so, I expect,’ Bertrand said, then added significantly: ‘Miss Callaghan and I have another engagement for next week-end. You’ll understand I don’t want to miss that.’

‘The week-end after’s the Summer Ball at the College,’ Margaret cut in quickly, in an attempt, Dixon supposed, to smother the overtones of this last declaration. How could Bertrand possibly bring himself to say things like that in front of one woman he hardly knew and one man he must guess hadn’t liked him all that much at a first meeting?

‘Oh, is it really?’ Bertrand asked with apparent interest.

‘Yes, will you be coming again this year, Mr Welch?’

‘I might manage it, I suppose. I remember being not unentertained last time. Ah, I see cigarettes are being produced. I like cigarettes. May I detach one from your store, Cecil? Good. Well, what about this Ball, then? They won’t be able to keep you away, I suppose?’

‘Afraid they will this time,’ Goldsmith said. ‘There’s a conference of teachers of history then at Leeds. Your father wants me to go to it.’

‘Dear, dear,’ Bertrand said. ‘That’s most unfortunate, most unfortunate. Isn’t there anyone else he could send?’ He looked over at Dixon.

‘Afraid not. We went into all that,’ Goldsmith said.

‘Pity, pity. Ah well. Will any other members of the company be attending, I wonder?’

Margaret glanced at Dixon, and Carol said: ‘What about you, Jim?’

Dixon shook his head firmly. ‘No, I’ve never been much of a dancing man, I’m afraid. As far as I’m concerned it would be just money thrown away.’ It would be terrible if Margaret blackmailed him into taking her.

‘Oh well, we don’t want that, do we?’ Bertrand said. ‘That wouldn’t do at all. I wonder where young Callaghan has got to. Her nose must be fairly thickly encrusted with powder by now, I should hazard. And why the delay among the musicians?’

Dixon looked over and saw that the two performers, tuning evidently completed, music set up, and bow resined, were hanging about smoking and chatting. Welch was nowhere to be seen; he must be displaying his rather terrifying expertise as an evader. At the other end of the long, low, softly-lit room the door opened and the Callaghan woman came in. For so well-built a girl Dixon thought she moved awkwardly.

‘Ah, my dear,’ Bertrand said with a gallant bow, ‘we were wondering what had become of you.’

She seemed disconcerted. ‘Oh, I’ve only been...’

‘We’ve been discussing Mr Gore-Urquhart, and wondering whether he’ll be available the week-end after next, there being a species of dancing festivity at the College during that time. Can you enlighten us, I wonder?’

‘Well, his secretary said he’d probably be in Paris till the middle of next month, which would be too late for that, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes, I think it would. Yes, it would. Oh well, it’ll have to be another time, won’t it?’ He didn’t appear at all put out by this news.

‘I’ve written to Uncle asking him to let me know when he’s coming back.’
Dixon wanted to laugh at this. It always amused him to hear girls (men never did it) refer to ‘Uncle’, ‘Daddy’, and so on, as if there were only one uncle or daddy in the world, or as if this particular uncle or daddy were the uncle or daddy of all those present.

‘What’s the joke, Jim?’ Carol asked. Bertrand stared at him.

‘Oh, nothing.’ He returned Bertrand’s stare. He wished there were some issue on which he could defeat Bertrand, even at the risk of alienating his father. Any measure short of, or not necessitating too much, violence would be justified. But there seemed to be no field of endeavour where he could employ a measure of that sort. For a moment he felt like devoting the next ten years to working his way to a position as art critic on purpose to review Bertrand’s work unfavourably. He thought of a sentence in a book he’d once read: ‘And with that he picked up the bloody old towner by the scruff of the neck, and, by Jesus, he near throttled him.’ This too made him smile, and Bertrand’s beard twitched, but he said nothing to break the pause.

As ever, Margaret had thought of something to say: ‘I was reading about your uncle only recently, Miss Callaghan. There was a piece about him in the local paper. He was presenting some water-colours to our Gallery here. I don’t know what we should do without someone like him to keep things going.’

This remark, in itself virtually unanswerable, had the effect, familiar to Margaret’s acquaintances, of dumbfounding its audience by the obviousness of its intention — namely, the intention of forcing them to talk. Some feet away the amateur violinist could be heard laughing huskily at something the local composer was telling him. Where was Welch?

‘Yes, he is very generous,’ the Callaghan girl said.

‘It’s a good job there are some people still about who can afford to be, in that way,’ Margaret said. Dixon looked up to catch Carol’s eye, but she was exchanging a glance with her husband.

‘Well, there won’t be much longer, I fear, if the lads at Transport House go on running our lives for us,’ Bertrand said.

‘Oh, I don’t think this crowd have done too badly,’ Goldsmith put in. ‘After all, you can’t . . .’

‘Their foreign policy might, I agree, have been a good deal worse, with the exception of their spectacular inability to pour water on troubled oil.’ Bertrand looked quickly round the group, then went on: ‘But their home policy . . . soak the rich . . . I mean . . .’ He seemed to be hesitating. ‘Well, it is that, pure and simple, isn’t it? I’m just asking for information, that’s all. I mean that’s what it seems to be, don’t we all agree? I take it that it is just that and no more, isn’t it? or am I wrong?’

Pretending not to notice Margaret’s warning frown and Carol’s expectant grin, Dixon said quietly: ‘Well, what’s wrong with it, even if it is that and no more? If one man’s got ten buns and another’s got two, and a bun has got to be given up by one of them, then surely you take it from the man with ten buns.’

Bertrand and his girl were looking at each other with identical expressions, shaking their heads, smiling, raising their eyebrows, sighing. It was as if Dixon had just said that he didn’t know anything about art, but he did know what he liked. ‘But we don’t think anybody need give up a bun, Mr Dixon,’ the girl said. ‘That’s the whole point.’

‘Hardly the whole point, I should have thought,’ Dixon said at the moment when Margaret said ‘Don’t let’s get involved in a set-to about . . .’ and Bertrand said ‘The whole point of this is that the rich . . .’

It was Bertrand who won the little contest. ‘The point is that the rich play an essential role in modern society,’ he said, his voice haying a little more noticeably. ‘More than ever in days like these. That’s all; I’m not going to bore you with the stock platitudes about their having kept the arts going, and so on. The very fact that they are stock platitudes proves my case. And I happen to like the arts, you see.’

The last word, a version of ‘see’, was Bertrand’s own coinage. It arose as follows: the vowel sound became distorted into a short ‘a’, as if he were going to say ‘sat’. This brought his lips some way apart, and the effect of their rapid closure was to end the syllable with a light but audible ‘m’. After working this out, Dixon could think of little to say, and contented
himself with 'You do', which he tried to make knowing and sceptical.

It seemed to encourage Bertrand. 'Yes, I do,' he said even more loudly, so that all his listeners looked quickly at him. 'And shall I tell you what else I happen to like? Rich people. I take pride in the contemporary unpopularity of that statement. And why do I like them? Because they're charming, because they're generous, because they've learnt to appreciate the things I happen to like myself, because their houses are full of beautiful things. That's why I like them and that's why I don't want them soaked. All right?'

'Come along, dear,' Mrs Welch called from behind them. 'If we wait for Father we'll be here all night. Shall we make a start? If you'll come over here we can all sit down.'

'All right, Mother,' Bertrand said over his shoulder, and the group began to dissolve, but before he moved himself he said, his eyes on Dixon: 'That's quite clear, is it?'

Margaret pulled at Dixon's sleeve and he, not wanting to go on fighting after the end of the round, said amicably: 'Oh yes. You seem to have been luckier in the rich people you've come into contact with than I have, that's all.'

'That wouldn't surprise me in the least,' Bertrand said with some contempt, standing aside so that Margaret could pass him.

Dixon said angrily: 'Well, you'd better make the most of them while you've got them, then, because you won't have them much longer, you know.'

He began to push past after Margaret, but the Callaghan girl halted him by saying: 'I'd rather you didn't talk in that strain, if you don't mind.'

Dixon looked about him; the rest of the company were seated, and the amateur violinist was snuggling his instrument in under his chin. Dropping into the nearest chair, Dixon said in a lowered voice: 'You say you'd rather I didn't talk in that strain?'

'Yes, if you don't mind.' She and Bertrand also sat down. 'I always get a bit irritated by that sort of thing. I'm sorry, I can't do anything about it; it's just a thing about me, I'm afraid.'

If Dixon hadn't learnt to dislike this argument when offered by Margaret, he probably wouldn't have answered as he did. 'Seen anybody about it yet?'

The amateur violinist nodded the top half of his body and, supported by the local composer, burst into some scurrying tunelessness or other. Bertrand leaned over towards Dixon. 'What the hell do you mean?' he asked in a loud undertone. 'Who's your alienist?' Dixon said, broadening his field of fire.

'Look here, Dixon, you're talking as if you want a bloody good punch on the nose, aren't you?'

Dixon, when moved, was bad at ordering his thoughts. 'If I did, you don't think you're the one to give me one, do you?'

Bertrand screwed up his face at this enigma. 'What?'

'Do you know what you look like in that beard?' Dixon's heart began to race as he switched to simplicity.

'All right; coming outside for a bit?'

The latest of this string of questions was drowned by a long rumbling shake in the bass of the piano. 'What?' Dixon asked.

Mrs Welch, Margaret, Johns, the Goldsmiths, and the contralto woman all seemed to turn round simultaneously. 'Sshh,' they all said. It was like a railway engine blowing out steam under a glass roof. Dixon got up and tip-toed to the door. Bertrand half rose to follow, but his girl stopped him.

Before Dixon could reach the door, it opened and Welch entered. 'Oh, you've started, have you?' he asked without dropping his voice at all.

'Yes,' Dixon whispered. 'I think I'll just . . .'

'Pity you couldn't have waited a little longer. I've been on the phone, you see. It was that chap from the . . . from the . . .'

'See you later.' Dixon began edging past to the doorway.

'Aren't you going to stay for the P. Racine Fricker?'

'Shan't be long, Professor. I just think I'll . . .' Dixon made some gestures meant to be indecipherable. 'I'll be back.'

He shut the door on Welch's long-lived, wondering frown.
He was going down-grade making ninety miles an hour, when his whistle began to scream,' Dixon sang. 'He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle . . . ' He broke off, panting; it was hard work walking up the dry sandy track to the Welch's house, especially with so much beer distributed about his frame. A dreamy smile stretched his face in the darkness as he savoured again in retrospect that wonderful moment at ten o'clock. It had been like a first authentic experience of art or human goodness, a stern, rapt, almost devotional exaltation. Gulping down what he'd assumed must be his last pint of the evening, he'd noticed that drinks were still being ordered and served, that people were still coming in and that their expressions were confident, not anxious, that a new sixpence had tinkled into the works of the bar-billiard table. Illumination had come when the white-coated barman struggled in with two fresh crates of Guinness. The little town and the city were in different counties; the local pubs, unlike the city pubs and the hotel he went to with Margaret, stayed open till ten-thirty during the summer, and the summer had now officially begun. His gratitude had been inexpressible in words; only further calls at the bar could pay that happy debt. As a result he'd spent more than he could afford and drunk more than he ought, and yet he felt nothing but satisfaction and peace. Rebounding painfully from the gatepost, he began creeping round the cobbled environs of the house.

The large, long room at the back, where the music had been going on, was in darkness. That was good. Further round, however, where the drawing-room was, there were lights and, he soon found, voices in conversation. Peering through a chink in the curtains, he saw Welch, in his crimson-striped blue raincoat and fishing-hat, just going out of the door, followed by the local composer and Cecil Goldsmith, both of them also dressed in raincoats. People were evidently about to be driven home; Dixon grinned as he imagined the sort of drive Welch would give them. Carol, in a light tweed coat, stayed for a moment to exchange a last remark with Bertrand. Nobody else was in the room.

A nearby window was open, but Dixon couldn't catch the words now spoken by Bertrand. He could tell from their intonation, however, that they formed a question, to which Carol said: 'Yes, all right.' At this, Bertrand stepped forward and put his arms round her. Dixon couldn't see what followed, because Bertrand had his back to the window, but if there was a kiss it lasted only a moment; Carol freed herself and hurried out. Bertrand went too.

Dixon went back to the music-room and got in through the French window. What he'd seen had disturbed him in some way he couldn't tie down. Though theoretically inured to that kind of activity, he found its close proximity disagreeable rather than anything else. To have seen and talked to Cecil Goldsmith several times a week for some months didn't make the fellow any less a nonentity, but it gave him a claim on one, a claim which was somehow invoked by the sight of his wife being handled by a third party, especially that third party. Dixon wished he hadn't found that gap in the curtains, then thrust the matter from his mind. All his attention would be needed for the operation of getting up to his bedroom undetected.

Deciding that the small risk of someone coming into the music-room had got to be faced anyway, Dixon groped through the darkness to an armchair, lay back in it, closed his eyes, and heard with satisfaction the sound of Welch's car being started up and driven away. After a moment, he felt as if he were heeling over backwards, and the pit of his stomach seemed to swell so as to start enclosing his head within it. He opened his eyes again, making his tragic-mask face; yes, it had after all been a bad idea to take that last pint. He got up and began a skipping-with-arms-raising exercise he'd learnt all about in the R.A.F. Five hundred skips and raising of the arms had helped to clear his head before. After a hundred and eighty an unclear head seemed much preferable to more skips. It was time to move.
was his due, wasn’t it? After all he’d put up with. But was it fair
to her to implicate her in this sort of situation after all
she’d had to put up with? As soon as Dixon recognized
the mental envelope containing this question he thrust it away
from him unopened, and went into the bathroom tying his
pyjama-cord.

It wasn’t as nice in the bathroom as it had been in the bed-
room. Though it was a cool night for early summer, he found
he felt hot and was sweating. He stood for some time in front
of the wash-basin, trying to discover more about how he felt.
His body seemed swollen below the chest and uneven in
density. The stuff coming from the light seemed less like light
than a very thin but cloudy phosphorescent gas; it gave a
creamy hum. He turned on the cold tap and bent over the
basin. When he did this, he had to correct an impulse to go on
leaning forward until his head lay between the taps. He
wetted his face, took a bakelite mug from the glass shelf above
the basin, and drank a very great deal of water, which moment-
arily refreshed him, though it had some other effect as well
which he couldn’t at once identify. He cleaned his teeth with
a lot of toothpaste, wetted his face again, refilled the mug, and
ate some more toothpaste.

He stood brooding by his bed. His face was heavy, as if
little bags of sand had been painlessly sewn into various parts
of it, dragging the features away from the bones, if he still had
bones in his face. Suddenly feeling worse, he heaved a shudder-
ing sigh. Someone seemed to have leapt nimbly up behind him
and encased him in a kind of diving-suit made of invisible
cotton-wool. He gave a quiet groan; he didn’t want to feel any
worse than this.

He began getting into bed. His four surviving cigarettes—
had he really smoked twelve that evening?—lay in their packet
on a polished table at the bed-head, accompanied by matches,
the bakelite mug of water, and an ashtray from the mantelpiece.
A temporary inability to raise his second foot on to the
bed let him know what had been the secondary effect of
drinking all that water: it had made him drunk. This became
a primary effect when he lay in bed. On the fluttering mantel-
piece was a small china effigy, the representation, in a squatting

position, of a well-known Oriental religious figure. Had
Welch put it there as a silent sermon to him on the merits of
the contemplative life? If so, the message had come too late.
He reached up and turned off the light by the hanging switch
above his head. The room began to rise upwards from the
right-hand bottom corner of the bed, and yet seemed to keep
in the same position. He threw back the covers and sat on
the edge of the bed, his legs hanging. The room composed
itself to rest. After a few moments he swung his legs back and
lay down. The room lifted. He put his feet to the floor. The
room stayed still. He put his legs on the bed but didn’t lie
down. The room moved. He sat on the edge of the bed.
Nothing. He put one leg up on the bed. Something. In fact
a great deal. He was evidently in a highly critical condition.
Swearing hoarsely, he heaped up the pillows, half-lay, half-sat
against them, and dangled his legs half-over the edge of the
bed. In this position he was able to lower himself gingerly into

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DIXON was alive again. Consciousness was upon him before
he could get out of the way; not for him the slow, gracious
wandering from the hails of sleep, but a summary, forcible
ejection. He lay sprawled, too wicked to move, spewed up
like a broken spider-crab on the tarry shingle of the morning.
The light did him harm, but not as much as looking at things
did; he resolved, having done it once, never to move his eye-
balls again. A dusty thudding in his head made the scene
before him beat like a pulse. His mouth had been used as
a latrine by some small creature of the night, and then as its
mausoleum. During the night, too, he’d somehow been on a
cross-country run and then been expertly beaten up by secret
police. He felt bad.

He reached out for and put on his glasses. At once he saw
that something was wrong with the bedclothes immediately
before his face. Endangering his chance of survival, he sat up
a little, and what met his bursting eyes roused to a frenzy the
timpanist in his head. A large, irregular area of the turned-back
part of the sheet was missing; a smaller but still con-
siderable area of the turned-back part of the blanket was
missing; an area about the size of the palm of his hand in the
main part of the top blanket was missing. Through the three
holes, which, appropriately enough, had black borders, he
could see a dark brown mark on the second blanket. He ran a
finger round a bit of the hole in the sheet, and when he looked
at his finger it bore a dark-grey stain. That meant ash; ash
meant burning; burning must mean cigarettes. Had this ciga-
ette burnt itself out on the blanket? If not, where was it now?
Nowhere on the bed; nor in it. He leaned over the side, grit-
ting his teeth; a sunken brown channel, ending in a fragment
of discoloured paper, lay across a light patch in the pattern of a
valuable-looking rug. This made him feel very unhappy, a
feeling sensibly increased when he looked at the bedside table.
This was marked by two black, charred grooves, greyish and
shiny in parts, lying at right angles and stopping well short of
the ashtray, which held a single used match. On the table
were two unused matches; the remainder lay with the empty
cigarette packet on the floor. The bakelite mug was nowhere
to be seen.

Had he done all this himself? Or had a wayfarer, a burglar,
camped out in his room? Or was he the victim of some Hora
fond of tobacco? He thought that on the whole he must have
done it himself, and wished he hadn’t. Surely this would mean
the loss of his job, especially if he failed to go to Mrs Welch
and confess what he’d done, and he knew already that he
wouldn’t be able to do that. There was no excuse which
didn’t consist of the inexcusable: an incendiary was no more
pardonable when revealed as a drunkard as well – so much of
a drunkard, moreover, that obligations to hosts and fellow-
guests and the counter-attraction of a chamber-concert were
as nothing compared with the lure of the drink. The only hope
was that Welch wouldn’t notice what his wife would presum-
ably tell him about the burning of the bedclothes. But Welch
had been known to notice things, the attack on his pupil’s
book in that essay, for example. But that had really been an
attack on Welch himself; he couldn’t much care what hap-
pened to sheets and blankets which he wasn’t actually using
at the time. Dixon remembered thinking on an earlier occa-
sion that to yaw drunkenly round the Common Room in
Welch’s presence screeching obscenities, punching out the
window-panes, fouling the periodicals, would escape Welch’s
notice altogether, provided his own person remained inviolate.
The memory in turn reminded him of a sentence in a book of
Alfred Beesley’s he’d once glanced at: ‘A stimulus cannot be
received by the mind unless it serves some need of the organ-
ism.’ He began laughing, an action he soon modified to a
wince.

He got out of bed and went into the bathroom. After a
minute or two he returned, eating toothpaste and carrying a
safety-razor blade. He started carefully cutting round the
edges of the burnt areas of the bedclothes with the blade. He
didn’t know why he did this, but the operation did seem to
improve the look of things: the cause of the disaster wasn’t so
immediately apparent. When all the edges were smooth and
regular, he knelt down slowly, as if he’d all at once become
a very old man, and shaved the appropriate part of the rug.
The debris from these modifications he stuffed into his jacket
pocket, thinking that he’d have a bath and then go downstairs
and phone Bill Atkinson and ask him to come through with
his message about the senior Dixons a good deal earlier than
had been arranged. He sat on the bed for a moment to recover
from his vertiginous exertions with the rug, then, before he
could rise, somebody, soon identifiable as male, came into
the bathroom next door. He heard the clinking of a plug-
chain, then the swishing of tap-water. Welch, or his son, or
Johns was about to take a bath. Which one it was was soon
settled by the upsurge of a deep, untrained voice into song.
The piece was recognizable to Dixon as some skien of untiring
facetiousness by filthy Mozart. Bertrand was surely unlikely
to sing anything at all, and Johns made no secret of his
indifference to anything earlier than Richard Strauss. Very
slowly, like a forest giant under the axe, Dixon heeled over
sideways and came to rest with his hot face on the pillow.
This, of course, would give him time to collect his thoughts,
and that, of course, was just what he didn't want to do with his thoughts; the longer he could keep them apart from one another, especially the ones about Margaret, the better. For the first time he couldn't avoid imagining what she'd say to him, if indeed she'd say anything, when he next saw her. He pushed his tongue down in front of his lower teeth, screwed up his nose as tightly as he could, and made gibbering motions with his mouth. How long would it be before he could persuade her first to open, then to empty, her locker of reproaches, as preliminary to the huge struggle of getting her to listen to his apologies? Desperately he tried to listen to Welch's song, to marvel at its matchless predictability, its austere, unwavering devotion to tedium; but it didn't work. Then he tried to feel pleased about the acceptance of his article, but all he could remember was Welch's seeming indifference on hearing the news and his injunction, so exasperatingly like Beesley's, to 'get a definite date from him, Dixon, otherwise it's not much . . . not much . . .' He sat up and by degrees worked his feet to the floor.

There was an alternative to the Atkinson plan; the simpler, nicer one of clearing out at once without a word to anybody. That wouldn't really do, though, unless he cleared out as far as London. What was going on in London now? He began to take off his pyjamas, deciding to omit his bath. Those wide streets and squares would be deserted at this time, except for a few lonely, hurrying figures; he could visualize it all from remembering a week-end leave during the war. He sighed; he might as well be thinking of Monte Carlo or Chinese Turkestan; then, rigging on the rug with one foot out of, the other still in, his pyjamas, thought of nothing but the pain that slacked through his head like water into a sand-castle. He clung to the mantelpiece, nearly displacing squashing Oriental, crumbling like a shot film-gunman. Had Chinese Turkestan its Margarets and Welches?

Some minutes later he was in the bathroom. Welch had left grime round the bath and steam on the mirror. After a little thought, Dixon stretched out a finger and wrote 'Ned Welch is a gappy Fool with a Fase like A Pigs gum' in the steam; then he rubbed the glass with a towel and looked at himself.

He didn't look too bad, really; anyway, better than he felt. His hair, however, despite energetic brushing helped out by the use of a water-soaked nail-brush, was already springing away from his scalp. He considered using soap as a pomatum, but decided against it, having in the past several times converted the short hairs at the sides and back of his head into the semblance of duck-plumage by this expedient. His glasses seemed more goggle-like than usual. As always, though, he looked healthy and, he hoped, honest and kindly. He'd have to be content with that.

He was all ready to slink down to the phone when, returning to the bedroom, he again surveyed the mutilated bedclothes. They looked in some way unsatisfactory; he couldn't have said how. He went and locked the outer bathroom door, picked up the razor-blade, and began again on the circumferences of the holes. This time he made jagged cuts into the material, little inlets from the great missing areas. Some pieces he almost severed. Finally he held the blade at right angles and ran it quickly round the holes, roughening them up. He stood back from his work and decided the effect was perceptibly better.

The disaster now seemed much less obviously the work of man and might, for a few seconds, be put down to some fulminant dry-rot or the ravages of a colony of moths. He turned the rug round so that the shaven burn, without being actually hidden by a nearby chair, was none the less not far from it. He was considering taking the bedside table downstairs and later throwing it out of the bus on his journey back when a familiar voice came into aural range singing in a way that suggested head-wagging jollity. It grew in volume, like the apprehension of something harmful or awful, until the locked bathroom door began to be shaken and its handle to be rattled. The singing stopped, but the rattling went on, was joined by kicking, even momentarily replaced by the thudding of what must be a shoulder. Welch hadn't thought in advance that the bathroom might bear signs of occupation by another when he wanted to get back into it himself (why, in any case, did he want to get back into it?), nor did he soon realize it now. After trying several manœuvres to replace his first vain rattling of the handle, he returned his attention to a vain rattling of the
handle. There was a final orgasm of shakings, knockings, thud-
dings, and rattlings; then footsteps retreated and a door closed.

With tears of rage in his eyes, Dixon left the bedroom, first
unintentionally treading on and shattering the bakelite mug,
which must have rolled out from under something into his
path. Downstairs, he looked at the hall clock—twenty past
eight—and went into the drawing-room, where the phone was.
It was a good job that Atkinson got up early on Sundays to
go out for the papers. He'd be able to catch him easily before
he went. He picked up the phone.

What gave him most trouble during the next twenty-five
minutes was giving vent to his feelings without hurting his
head too much. Nothing whatever came out of the receiver
during that time except the faint sea-shell whispering. As he
sat on the arm of a leather-covered armchair, putting his face
through all its permutations of loathing, the whole household
seemed to spring into activity around him. Footsteps walked
the floor above his head; others descended the stairs and
entered the breakfast-room; still others came from the back
of the house and also entered the breakfast-room; far off a
vacuum-cleaner whined; a cistern flushed; a door banged;
a voice called. When it sounded as if a posse was being
assembled immediately outside the drawing-room door, he
hung up and left, his bottom aching from its narrow seat, his
arm aching from rattling the receiver-rest.

Breakfast technics at the Welch's, like many of their ways of
thought, recalled an earlier epoch. The food was kept hot on
the sideboard in what Dixon conjectured were chafing-dishes.
The quantity and variety of this food recalled in turn the fact
that Mrs. Welch supplemented Welch's professorial salary
with a good-sized income of her own. Dixon had often won-
dered how Welch had contrived to marry money; it could
hardly have been due to any personal merit, real or supposed,
and the vagaries of Welch's mind could leave no room there
for avarice. Perhaps the old fellow had had when younger
what he now so demonstrably lacked: a way with him. In
spite of the ravages wrought by his headache and his fury,
Dixon felt happier as he wondered what foods would this
morning afford visible proof of the Welch's prosperity. He
went into the breakfast-room with the bedclothes and Mar-
garet a long way from the foreground of his mind.

The only person in the room was the Callaghan girl, sitting
behind a well-filled plate. Dixon said good morning to her.
'Oh, good morning.' Her tone was neutral, not hostile.

He quickly decided on a bluff, speak-my-mind approach as
the best cloak for rudeness, past or to come. One of his father's
friends, a jeweller, had got away with conversing almost
entirely in insults for the fifteen years Dixon had known him,
merely by using this simple device. Deliberately intensifying
his northern accent, Dixon said: 'Afraid I got off on the wrong
foot with you last night.'

She looked up quickly, and he saw with bitterness how
pretty her neck was. 'Oh... that. I shouldn't worry too much
about it if I were you. I didn't show up too well myself.'

'Nice of you to take it like that,' he said, remembering that
he'd already had one occasion to use this phrase to her. 'Very
bad manners it was on my part, anyway.'

'Well, let's forget it, shall we?'

'Glad to; thanks very much.'

There was a pause, while he noted with mild surprise how
much and how quickly she was eating. The remains of a large
pool of sauce were to be seen on her plate beside a dimin-
ishing mound of fried egg, bacon, and tomatoes. Even as he
watched she replenished her stock of sauce with a fat scarlet
gout from the bottle. She glanced up and caught his look of
interest, raised her eyebrows, and said, 'I'm sorry, I like sauce;
I hope you don't mind,' but not convincingly, and he fancied
she blushed.

'That's all right,' he said heartily; 'I'm fond of the stuff
myself.' He pushed aside his bowl of cornflakes. They were of
a kind he didn't like: malt had been used in their preparation.
A study of the egg and bacon and tomatoes opposite him made
him decide to postpone eating any himself. His gullet and
stomach felt as if they were being deftly sewn up as he sat. He
poured and drank a cup of black coffee, then refilled his
cup.

'Aren't you going to have any of this stuff?' the girl asked.

'Well, not yet, I don't think.'
'I've no doubt they were. Tell me: how did Mr Welch react?'

'What, to finding out you'd probably gone to the pub?'

'Yes. Did he seem irritated at all?'

'I really have no idea.' Conscious, possibly, that this must sound rather bald, she added: 'I don't know him at all, you see, and so I couldn't really tell. He didn't seem to notice much, if you see what I mean.'

Dixon saw. He felt too that he could tackle the eggs and bacon and tomatoes now, so went to get some and said: 'Well, that's a relief, I must say. I shall have to apologize to him, I suppose.'

'It might be a good idea.'

She said this in a tone that made him turn his back for a moment at the sideboard and make his Chinese mandarin's face, hunching his shoulders a little. He disliked this girl and her boy-friend so much that he couldn't understand why they didn't dislike each other. Suddenly he remembered the bed-clothes; how could he have been such a fool? He couldn't possibly leave them like that. He must do something else to them. He must get up to his room quickly and look at them and see what ideas their physical presence suggested. 'God,' he said absently; 'oh my God,' then, pulling himself together: 'I'm afraid I shall have to dash off now.'

'Have you got to get back?'

'No, I'm not actually going until ... No, I mean there's... I've got to go upstairs.' Realizing that this was a poor exit-line, he said wildly, still holding a dish-cover: 'There's something wrong with my room, something I must alter.' He looked at her and saw her eyes were dilated. 'I had a fire last night.'

'You lit a fire in your bedroom?'

'No, I didn't light it purposely. I lit it with a cigarette. It caught fire on its own.'

Her expression changed again. 'Your bedroom caught fire?'

'No, only the bed. I lit it with a cigarette.'

'You mean you set fire to your bed?'

'That's right.'
'With a cigarette? Not meaning to? Why didn’t you put it out?'
'I was asleep. I didn’t know about it till I woke up.'
'But you must have... Didn’t it burn you?'
He put the dish-cover down. 'It doesn’t seem to have done.'
'Oh, that’s something, anyway.' She looked at him with her lips pressed firmly together, then laughed in a way quite different from the way she’d laughed the previous evening; in fact, Dixon thought, rather unmusically. A blonde lock came away from the devotedly-brushed hair and she smoothed it back. 'Well, what are you going to do about it?'
'I don’t know yet. I must do something, though.
'Yes, I quite agree. You’d better start on it quickly, hadn’t you, before the maid goes round?'
'I know. But what can I do?'
'How bad is it?'
'Bad enough. There are great pieces gone altogether, you see.'
'Oh. Well, I don’t really know what to suggest without seeing it. Unless you... no; that wouldn’t help.'
'Look, I suppose you wouldn’t come up and... ?'
'Have a look at it?'
'Yes. Do you think you could?'
She sat up again and thought. 'Yes, all right. I don’t guarantee anything, of course.'
'No, of course not.' He remembered with joy that he still had some cigarettes left after last night’s holocaust. 'Thanks very much.'
They were moving to the door when she said: 'What about your breakfast?'
'Oh, I shall have to miss that. There’s not time.'
'I shouldn’t if I were you. They don’t give you much for lunch here, you know.'
'But I’m not going to wait till... I mean there isn’t much time to... Wait a minute.' He darted back to the sideboard, picked up a slippery fried egg and slid it into his mouth whole. She watched him with folded arms and a blank expression. Chewing violently, he doubled up a piece of bacon and crammed it between his teeth, then signalled he was ready to move. Intimations of nausea circled round his digestive system.
'They went in file through the hall and up the stairs. The ocarina-like notes of a recorder playing a meagre air were distantly audible; perhaps Welch had breakfasted in his room. Dixon found, with a pang of relief, that he could open the bathroom door.'
The girl looked sternly at him. 'What are we going in here for?'
'My bedroom’s on the far side of this.'
'Oh, I see. What a curious arrangement.'
'I imagine old Welch had this part of the house built on. It’s better like this than having the bathroom on the far side of a bedroom.'
'I suppose so. My goodness, you certainly have gone to town, haven’t you?' She went forward and fingered the sheet and blankets like one shown material in a shop. 'But this doesn’t look like a burn; it looks as if it’s been cut with something.'
'Yes, I... cut the burnt bits off with a razor-blade. I thought it would look better than just leaving it burnt.'
'Why on earth did you do that?'
'I can’t really explain. I just thought it would look better.'
'Mm. And did all this come from one cigarette?'
'That I don’t know. Probably.'
'Well, you must have been pretty far gone not to... And the table too. And the rug. You know, I don’t know that I ought to be a party to all this.' She grinned, which made her look almost ludicrously healthy, and revealed at the same time that her front teeth were slightly irregular. For some reason this was more disturbing to his equanimity than regularity could possibly have been. He began to think he’d noticed quite enough things about her now, thank you. Then she drew herself up and pressed her lips together, seeming to consider. 'I think the best thing would be to remake the bed with all this mess at the bottom, out of sight. We can put the blanket that’s only scorched - this one - on top; it’ll probably be almost all right on the side that’s underneath now. What about that? It’s a pity there isn’t an eiderdown.'
‘Yes. Sounds all right to me, that. They’re bound to find it when they strip the bed, though, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, but they probably won’t connect it with smoking, especially after what you did with your razor-blade. And after all, you wouldn’t have put your head right down the bottom of the bed to smoke, would you?’

‘That’s a point, of course. We’d better get on with it, then.’

He heaved the bed away from the wall, while she watched with arms folded, then they both set about the unmaking and remaking. The vacuum-cleaner could now be heard quite close at hand, drowning Welch’s recorder. As they worked, Dixon studied the Callaghan girl, despite his determination to notice nothing more about her, and saw with fury that she was prettier than he’d thought. He found himself wanting to make the kind of face or noise he was accustomed to make when entrusted with a fresh ability-testing task by Welch, or seeing Michie in the distance, or thinking about Mrs Welch, or being told by Beesley something Johns had said. He wanted to imbode his features, to crush air from his mouth, in a way and to a degree that might be set against the mess of feelings she aroused in him: indignation, grief, resentment, peevish-ness, spite, and sterile anger, all the alletropes of pain. The girl was doubly guilty, first of looking like that, secondly of appearing in front of him looking like that. Run-of-the-mill queens of love – Italian film-actresses, millionaires’ wives, girls on calendars – he could put up with; more than that, he positively liked looking at them. But this sort of thing he’d as soon not look at all. He remembered seeing in a book once that some man who claimed to have love well weighed up – someone like Plato or Rilke – had said that it was an emotion quite different in kind, not just degree, from ordinary sexual feelings. Was it love, then, that he felt for girls like this one? No emotion he’d experienced or could imagine came anything like so close, to his way of thinking; but apart from the dubious support of Plato or Rilke he had all the research on the subject against him there. Well, what was it if it wasn’t love? It didn’t seem like desire; when the last corner was tucked in and he joined her on her side of the bed, he was strongly tempted to put his hand out and lay it on one of those full breasts, but this action, if performed, would have appeared as natural to him, as unimportant and unobjectionable, as reaching out to take a large ripe peach from a fruit-dish. No, all this, whatever it was or was called, was something nothing could be done about.

‘There, I think that looks very nice,’ the girl said. ‘You couldn’t guess what was underneath it all if you didn’t know, could you?’

‘No, and thanks very much for the idea and the help.’

‘Oh, that’s all right. What are you going to do with the table?’

‘I’ve been thinking about that. There’s a little junk-room at the end of the passage, full of broken furniture and rotting books and things; they sent me up there yesterday to fetch a music-stand or whatever they call the things. That room’s the place for this table, behind an old screen with French courtiers painted on it – you know, floppy hats and banjos. If you’ll go and see whether the coast’s clear, I’ll rush along there with it now.’

‘Agreed. I must say that’s an inspiration. With the table out of the way nobody’ll connect the sheets with smoking. They’ll think you tore them with your feet, in a nightmare or something.’

‘Some nightmare, to get through two blankets as well.’

She looked at him open-mouthed, then began to laugh. She sat down on the bed but immediately jumped up again as if it were once more on fire. Dixon began laughing too, not because he was much amused but because he felt grateful to her for her laughter. They were still laughing a minute later when she beckoned to him from outside the bathroom door, when he ran out on to the landing with the table, and when Margaret suddenly flung open the door of her bedroom and saw them.

‘What do you imagine you’re up to, James?’ she asked.
they formed the sort of story she liked. He said as much at the end of his account.

Without changing her expression, she dissented. ‘I could see you and that girl were finding it all pretty funny, though.’

‘Well, why shouldn’t we have found it funny?’

‘No reason at all; it’s nothing to do with me. The whole thing just strikes me as rather silly and childish, that’s all.’

He said effortfully: ‘Now look, Margaret: I can quite see why it looked like that to you. But don’t you see the whole point is that naturally I didn’t mean to burn that bloody sheet and so on. Once I’d done it, though, I’d obviously got to do something about it, hadn’t I?’

‘You couldn’t have gone to Mrs Welch and explained, of course.’

‘No, “of course” is right, I couldn’t have. I’d have been out of my job in five minutes.’ He produced and lit cigarettes for the two of them, trying to remember whether Bertrand’s girl had said anything about owning up to Mrs Welch. He didn’t think she had, which was odd in a way.

‘You’ll be out in less time than that if she ever finds that table.’

‘She won’t find it,’ he said irritably, beginning to pace up and down the room.

‘What about that sheet? You say it was Christine Callaghan’s idea to remake the bed?’

‘Well, what about it? And what about the sheet?’

‘You seem to have got on a good deal better with her than you did last night.’

‘Yes, that’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Incidentally I thought she was abominably rude just now.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Barging in and sending you off with that table like that.’

Stung with this reflection on his dignity, Dixon said:

‘You’ve got this “rude” business on the winkle, Margaret. She was absolutely right: one of the Welches might have turned up at any moment. And if anyone barged in, it was you, not her.’ He began regretting this speech well before it was over.

She stared at him with her mouth a little open, then whipped
abruptly round away from him. ‘I’m sorry, I won’t barge in again.’

‘Now, Margaret, you know I didn’t mean it like that; don’t be ridiculous. I was only...’

In a high voice, kept steady only by obvious effort, she said:

‘Please go.’

Dixon fought hard to drive away the opinion that, both as actress and as script-writer, she was doing rather well, and hated himself for failing. Trying to haul urgency into his tone, he began: ‘You mustn’t take it like that. It was a bloody stupid thing to say, on my part, I admit. I didn’t mean you actually barged in, in that way, of course I didn’t. You must see...’

‘Oh, I see all right, James. I see perfectly.’ This time her voice was flat. She wore a sort of arty get-up of multi-coloured shirt, skirt with fringed hem and pocket, low-heeled shoes, and wooden beads. The smoke from her cigarette curled up, blue and ash in a sunbeam, round her bare forearm. Dixon moved closer and saw that her hair had been recently washed; it lay in dry lustless wisps on the back of her neck. In that condition it struck him as quintessentially feminine, much more feminine than the Callaghan girl’s shining fair crop. Poor old Margaret, he thought, and rested his hand, in a gesture he hoped was solicitous, on her nearer shoulder.

Before he could speak she’d shaken his hand off, moved over to the window, and begun to talk in a strain that marked the opening, he soon realized, of a totally new phase of the scene they were evidently having. ‘Get away. How dare you. Stop pushing and pulling me about. Who do you think you are? You haven’t even had the grace to apologize for last night. You behaved disgracefully. I hope you realize you absolutely stank of beer. I’ve never given you the least impression... Whatever made you think you could get away with that sort of thing? What the hell do you take me for? It isn’t as if you didn’t know what I’ve had to put up with, all these last weeks. It’s intolerable, absolutely intolerable. I won’t stand for it. You must have known how I’ve been feeling.’

She went on like this while Dixon looked her in the eyes. His panic mounted in sincerity and volume. Her body moved jerkily about; her head bobbed from side to side on its rather long neck, shaking the wooden beads about on the multi-coloured shirt. He found himself thinking that the whole arty get-up seemed oddly at variance with the way she was acting. People who wore clothes of that sort oughtn’t to mind things of this sort, certainly not as much as Margaret clearly minded this thing. It was surely wrong to dress, and to behave most of the time, in a way that was so un-prim when you were really so proper all of the time. But then, with Catchpole at any rate, she hadn’t been proper all of the time, had she? But of course it was all wrong to think like this, very bad, in fact, to allow his irritation with some of the things about her to do what it always did, to obscure what was most important: she was a neurotic who’d recently taken a bad beating. Yes, she was right really, though not in the way she meant. He had behaved badly, he had been inconsiderate. He’d better devote all his energy to apologizing. He booted out of his mind the reflection, derived apparently from nowhere, that in spite of her emotion she seemed well able to keep her voice down.

‘I was thinking only yesterday afternoon about the relationship we’d been building up, how valuable it was, something really good. But that was silly, wasn’t it? I was dead wrong, I...’

‘No, you’re dead wrong now, you were right then,’ he broke in. ‘These things don’t stop just like that, you know; human beings aren’t as simple as that, they’re not like machines.’

He went on like this while she looked him in the eyes. The rotten triteness of his words seemed, if anything, to help him to meet her gaze. She stood with one leg partly crossed over the other in her favourite attitude, no doubt designed to show off her legs, for they were good, her best feature. At one point she moved slightly so that her spectacles caught the light and prevented him seeing where she was looking. The eeriness of this disconcerted him a good deal, but he soldiered pluckily on to his objective, the promise or avowal, not yet in sight, which would end this encounter, bring some respite from the trek away from honesty. Boots, boots, boots, boots, marching up and down again.
thought. After a moment he leaned forward and said: 'Miss Callaghan? Good. It's Dixon here. Now listen carefully.'

'I've no idea. What makes you say that?'

'Have you ever noticed anything?'

'I don't think so; why?'

'Oh, I don't know. It's really rather odd that he should ever have been taking her to the Ball, and then her looking so furious...'

'Ah, but Bertrand's always been pretty thick with both of them - I remember you were there when she told us - and it's only natural she should feel she was being pushed around a bit. Sorry,' he added to a girl whose bottom had come into collision with his hip. He wished this set of dances would end; he was hot, his socks seemed to have been sprayed with fine adhesive sand, and his arms ached like those of a boxer keeping his guard up after fourteen rounds. He wondered why he didn't tell Margaret about the embrace he'd seen during the arty week-end; she always kept her mouth shut when told to. Perhaps it was that the news, as well as shocking her, would make her mildly exultant, and he didn't want that. Why didn't he want that?

Margaret was talking again, animatedly; her face was a little flushed and her lipstick had been more carefully applied than usual. She looked as if she was enjoying herself; her sort of minimal prettiness was in evidence. 'Well, anyway, I think she's done a good deal better for herself with Mr Gore-Urquhart. I must say he seems most charming, something quite exceptional these days. He's got the most beautiful manners, hasn't he? quite the real thing. Bit of a change after the bearded monster.'

Dixon gargled inaudibly in his throat at this mixture of styles, but before he had time to reply the dance wheeled to an end. In a moment an uneasy thudding, followed by a clashing thump, signalled the end of the set. Dixon heaved a sigh and wiped his palms on his handkerchief. 'What about a drink?' he said.

Margaret was darting her eyes this way and that. 'Wait a minute; I just want to see if I can see the others.'

The dancers were trickling away on to the touchlines of the long dance-floor. The walls were decorated with scenes from the remotest past, portrayed in what was no doubt an advanced
style, so that in the one nearest Dixon, for example, some lack of perspective or similar commodity made a phalanx of dwarf infantrymen (Spartan? Macedonian? Roman?) seem to be falling from the skies upon their much larger barbarian adversaries (Persian? Iranian? Carthaginian?) who, unaware of this danger overhead, gazed threateningly into the empty middle distance. At intervals stood large pillars of some palpit material. Dixon gave a sad, nostalgic smile; it all reminded him so clearly of those large eating-establishments at Marble Arch, Charing Cross, Coventry Street, where he’d enjoyed himself so much. Lowering his eyes from these memorials, he caught sight of Michie in the crowd, talking and laughing vigorously with Miss O’Shaughnessy, the prettiest of the three pretty girls and, in fact, Michie’s girl. She had the kind of water-gipsy face, dusky but rosy, that affected him uncomfortably. The same was true of the low-cut dress she wore. Though he was fifteen yards away from him, Dixon knew all about the perfection of Michie’s evening clothes, the efficiency of his chatter, and the attentiveness of his audience. Michie now caught his eye, at once became grave, and made him a shallow but courteous bow. Miss O’Shaughnessy managed a quick smile before turning away, beyond all question so as to laugh. ‘What about a drink?’ Dixon asked Margaret again.

‘Ah, here they are,’ she said by way of reply.

Bertrand and Christine were approaching. Bertrand, Dixon had to admit, was quite presentable in evening clothes, and to say of him now that he looked like an artist of some sort would have been true without being too offensive. It was on him that Dixon fixed his eye, less from interest than to avoid fixing it on Christine. Her manner to him so far that evening had been not even cold; it had been simply non-existent, had made him feel that, contrary to the evidence of his senses, he wasn’t really there at all. But, worse than this, she was looking her best this evening. She wore a yellow dress that left her shoulders bare. It was perfectly plain, managing, as if it had been intended just for that, to reveal as decidedly ill-judged Margaret’s royal-blue taffeta, with its bow and what he supposed were gatherings or something, and with the quadruple row of pearls above it. Christine’s aim, he imagined, had been to show off the emphasis of her natural colouring and skin-texture. The result was painfully successful, making everybody else look like an assemblage of granulated halftones. For a moment, as she and Bertrand came up, Dixon caught her eye, and although he held nothing for him he wanted to cast himself down behind the protective wall of skirts and trousers, or, better, pull the collar of his dinner-jacket over his head and run out into the street. He’d read somewhere, or been told, that somebody like Aristotle or I. A. Richards had said that the sight of beauty makes us want to move towards it. Aristotle or I. A. Richards had been wrong about that, hadn’t he?

‘Well, what goes forward, people?’ Bertrand asked. He was holding Christine’s wrist between finger and thumb, perhaps taking her pulse. He glanced at Dixon, to whom he’d so far been fairly amiable.

‘Well, I thought we might go and have a drink,’ Dixon said. ‘Oh, do be quiet, James; anybody’d think you’d die if you went an hour without one.’

‘He probably would,’ Bertrand said. ‘Anyway, it’s sensible of him not to want to take the risk. What about it, darling? I’m afraid there’s only beer and cider, unless you want to fare forth to an adjacent hostelram.’

‘Yes, all right, but where’s Uncle Julius and Mrs Goldsmith? We can’t go off and leave them.’

While it was being agreed that these two were probably already in the bar, Dixon grinned to himself at ‘Uncle Julius’. How marvellous it was that there should be somebody called that and somebody else to call him that, and that he himself should be present to hear one calling the other that. As he drifted off at Margaret’s side between the talking groups on one side and the mutes lining the walls on the other, he caught sight of Alfred Beesley standing rather miserably among the last-named. Beesley, notorious for his inability to get to know women, always came to functions of this sort, but since every woman here tonight had come with a partner (except for women like the sexagenarian Professor of Philosophy or the fifteen-stone Senior Lecturer in Economics) he must know he was wasting his time. Dixon exchanged greetings with him,
and fancied he caught a gleam of envy in Beesley’s eye. Dixon reflected firstly how inefficient a bar to wasting one’s time was the knowledge that one was wasting it (and especially in what Welch called ‘matters of the heart’); secondly how narrow a gap there really was between Beesley’s status and his own in such matters; and thirdly how little there was to envy in what established him as on the far side of the gap from Beesley – the privileges of being able to speak to one woman and of being in the same party as another. But, fourthly, the possession of the signs of sexual privilege is the important thing, not the quality nor the enjoyment of them. Dixon felt he ought to feel calmed and liberated at reaching this conclusion, but he didn’t, any more than unease in the stomach is alleviated by discovery of its technical name.

They reached the bar, a small room not designed for the purpose. The still recent tradition of a ‘wet’ Summer Ball had been instituted, though few could of course bring themselves to believe it, by the College authorities, on the argument that the amount of drunkenness among student patrons, alarming at one time, could be reduced by providing cheap non-spirituous liquors on the premises, and by thus rendering less acutely attractive the costly and injurious gulping of horses’ necks or of inferior gin and synthetic lime-juice in the city’s pubs. More oddly still, perhaps, this argument had shown itself to be sound, so that in the room now visited by Dixon and the rest three minor College employees were toiling at barrels of beer and cider under panels representing, similarly to the larger ones in the Ballroom, swarthy potentates about to be danced upon by troupes of midget Circassians, or caravans of Chinese merchants being sucked up into the air by whirlwinds. The pallid pillars were here replaced by potted and tubbed palms of an almost macabre luxuriance. Among these last lurked Maconochie, the titular supervisor of the three barmen, adding to the effect in some indefinable way by wearing a starched white coat over his olive-green trousers.

Gore-Urquhart and Carol were sitting in one of the further palm-groves, talking fairly hard. When he saw the others coming towards them, Gore-Urquhart rose to his feet. This formality was so unfamiliar in the circles Dixon normally moved in that for a moment he wondered whether the other meant to oppose their approach by physical force. He was younger than Dixon had expected any distinguished man, and an uncle of Christine’s, to be: somewhere in the middle forties. His evening suit, too, was not nearly as spectacularly ‘faultless’ as might have been predicted. His large smooth face, surmounting a short thin body, was the least symmetrical, short of actual deformity, that Dixon had ever seen, giving him the look of a drunken sage trying to collect his wits, a look intensified by slightly protruding lips and a single black eyebrow running from temple to temple. Before the party was finally seated Maconochie, no doubt well tipped already, loped forward to see what drinks were wanted. Dixon watched his servility with enjoyment.

‘I’ve managed to keep out of your Principal’s way so far,’ Gore-Urquhart said with his strong Lowland-Scottish accent. ‘That’s no mean achievement, Mr Gore-Urquhart,’ Margaret said with a laugh. ‘I’m sure he’s got all his spies out for you.’

‘Do you think so, now? Will I be able to get away again if he catches me?’

‘Most unlikely, sir,’ Bertrand said. ‘You know what they’re like in this part of the world. Throw them a celebrity and they’ll fight over him like dogs over a bone. Why, even in my small way I’ve had a good deal of that sort of thing to endure, especially from academic so-called society. Just because my father happens to be a professor, they think I must want to talk to the Vice-Chancellor’s wife about the difficulties her wretched grandson’s having at his school. But, of course, it must be a thousand times worse for you, sir, am I right?’

Gore-Urquhart, who’d been listening to this with attention, said briskly ‘In some ways’, and drank from his glass.

‘Anyway, Mr Gore-Urquhart,’ Margaret said, ‘you’re quite safe for the moment. The Principal holds court on these occasions in a room at the other end of the dance-floor – he doesn’t mix with the rabble in here.’

‘So while I’m with the rabble I’m fairly safe, you mean, Miss Peel? Good, I’ll stay with the rabble.’

Dixon had been expecting a silver-bells laugh from Margaret
to follow this remark, but it was still hard to bear when it came. At that moment Maconochie arrived with the drinks Gore-Urquhart had ordered. To Dixon's surprise and delight, the beer was in pint glasses and, after waiting for Gore-Urquhart's 'Find me some cigarettes, laddie,' to Maconochie, he leaned forward and said: 'How on earth did you manage to get pints? I haven't seen anything but halves in here the whole evening. I thought it must be a rule of the place. They wouldn't give me pints when I asked for them. How on earth did you get round it?' While he said this he saw irritably that Margaret was looking from him to Gore-Urquhart and back again and smiling depreciatingly, as if to assure Gore-Urquhart that, despite all evidence to the contrary, this speech betokened no real mental derangement. Bertrand, too, was watching and grinning.

Gore-Urquhart, who didn't seem to have noticed Margaret's smiles, jerked a short, nicotined thumb towards the departing Maconochie. 'A fellow Scottish Nationalist,' he said.

All the people facing Dixon and to his left - Gore-Urquhart himself, Bertrand, and Margaret - laughed at this, and so did Dixon, who looked to his right and saw Christine, seated next to him with her elbows on the table, smiling in a controlled fashion, and beyond her Carol, at Gore-Urquhart's left, staring rather grimly at Bertrand. Before the laughter cleared, Dixon noticed Bertrand becoming aware of this scrutiny and looking away. Perturbed by the small tension in the company, and finding now that Gore-Urquhart's eyes were fixed on him from under the black eyebrow, Dixon twitched his glasses on to the right part of his nose and said at a venture: 'Well, it's an unexpected pleasure to be drinking pints at a do like this.'

'You're in luck, Dixon,' Gore-Urquhart said sharply, handing round cigarettes.

Dixon felt himself blushing slightly, and resolved to say no more for a time. None the less he was pleased that Gore-Urquhart had caught his name. With a braying flourish of trumpets, the music started up in the Ballroom, and people began to move out of the bar. Bertrand, who'd settled himself next to Gore-Urquhart, began talking to him in a low voice, and almost at once Christine addressed some remark to Carol.

Margaret said to Dixon: 'It is sweet of you to have brought me here, James.'

'Glad you're enjoying yourself.'

'You don't sound as if you are very much.'

'Oh, I am, really.'

'I'm sure you're enjoying this part of it, anyway, better than the actual dancing part.'

'Oh, I'm enjoying both parts, honestly. Drink that up and we'll go back on the floor. I can do quick-steps.'

She looked earnestly at him and rested a hand on his arm.

'Dear James, do you think it's wise for us to go round together like this?' she asked him.

'Why ever not?' he said in alarm.

'Because you're so sweet to me and I'm getting much too fond of you.' She said this in a tone that combined the vibrant with the flat, like a great actress demonstrating the economical conveyance of strong emotion. This was her habit when making her avowals.

In the midst of his panic, Dixon managed to find the thought that this, if true, would indeed be grounds for their seeing less of each other; then he hit on a remark both honest and acceptable: 'You mustn't say things like that.'

She laughed lightly. 'Poor James,' she said. 'Keep my seat for me, will you, darling? I shan't be long.' She went out.

Poor James? Poor James? It was, in fact, a very just characterization, but hardly one for her to make, surely, her of all people. Then a sense of guilt sent him diving for his glass; guilt not only for this latest reflection, but for the unintentional irony of 'you're so sweet to me.' It was doubtful, he considered, whether he was capable of being at all sweet, much less 'so' sweet, to anybody at all. Whatever passably decent treatment Margaret had had from him was the result of a temporary victory of fear over irritation and/or pity over boredom. That behaviour of such origin could seem 'so sweet' to her might be taken as a reflection on her sensitivity, but it was also a terrible commentary on her frustration and loneliness. Poor old Margaret, he thought with a shudder. He must try harder. But what would be the consequences to her of treatment more consistently sweet, or of a higher level of sweetness? What
II

As he left the bar with Christine at his side, Dixon felt like a special agent, a picaroon, a Chicago war-lord, a hidalgo, an oil baron, a mahock. He kept careful control over his features to stop them doing what they wanted to do and breaking out into an imbecile smirk of excitement and pride. When she turned and faced him at the edge of the floor, he found it hard to believe that she was really going to let him touch her, or that the men near them wouldn’t spontaneously intervene to prevent him. But in a moment there they were in the conventional pseudo-embrace, actually dancing together, not
very skilfully, but without doubt dancing. Dixon looked past her face in silence, afraid of any distraction from the task of not leading her into a collision, for the floor was a good deal more thickly populated than a quarter of an hour earlier. Among the dancers he recognized Barclay, the Professor of Music, dancing with his wife. She permanently resembled a horse, he only when he laughed, which he did suddenly and seldom, but was momentarily to be seen doing now.

'What was the matter with Mrs Goldsmith, do you know?' Christine asked.

This inquisitiveness surprised him. 'She did look rather fed-up, didn't she?' he fenced.

'Was it because she was expecting Bertrand to bring her here tonight instead of me?'

Did that mean she knew about the switch of partners? It needn't, but it might. 'I don't know,' he said in a muffled voice.

'I think you do know.' She sounded quite angry. 'I wish you'd tell me.'

'I know nothing at all about it, I'm afraid. And in any case it's nothing to do with me.'

'If that's your attitude, then there's nothing more to be said.'

Dixon felt himself flushing for the second time in the last few minutes. Obviously she'd been at her most typical when helping Bertrand to bait him at their first encounter, when reproving him for drinking too much, when treating him this evening as non-existent. Her formal, not her relaxed, pose was the true one. Her cooperation over the sheet had been given in return for anecdote-material likely to amuse her London friends, her amiability over the phone had been to get something out of him. No doubt she was disturbed by the Bertrand-Carol business, but the feminine manoeuvre of using an innocent bystander as whipping-boy was one he'd learnt to recognize and dislike.

They danced on in silence for some time. She'd not been modest in declaring herself an indifferent dancer, but Dixon's enforced avoidance of anything ambitious kept them fairly well together. The other couples moved round them, wheeling when a space momentarily presented itself, huddling and marking time in the crushes. Everybody else seemed to be talking, and eventually a female voice of Christine's pitch, heard close at hand, deceived Dixon. 'What did you say?' he asked.

'Nothing.'

Something would have to be said by him now, so he said what he'd been waiting to say all the evening: 'I never got a chance to thank you for playing up so well over that phone business.'

'What phone business?'

'You know, me pretending to Bertrand that I was a reporter.'

'Oh, that. I'd sooner not discuss that, if you don't mind.'

She couldn't be allowed to get away with that. 'Supposing I do mind?'

'How do you mean?'

'You seem to forget that, but for me, and but for my little impersonation, you probably wouldn't be here at all tonight.'

'Well, that wouldn't have mattered very much, would it?'

The dance came to an end, but neither of them thought of leaving the floor. Through the applause he said: 'No, perhaps it wouldn't, but you seemed to want to come at the time, didn't you?'

'Look, can't you shut up about it?'

'All right, but don't you try to queen it over me. You've no call to do that.'

She shrugged clumsily, then dropped her eyes. 'I'm sorry; that was silly of me. I didn't mean to be like that.'

As she spoke, an inaudible piano introduction led into the last of the set. 'O.K., then,' Dixon said. 'Dance?'

'Yes, of course.'

They moved off again. 'I think we're getting the hang of this quite well,' he said in a moment.

'I wish I hadn't said what I did say. I was a fool. I acted like a perfect fool.'

He saw that when, as now, she abandoned her set expression, her lips were full, and protruded like her uncle's. 'It's all right, really; it was nothing,' he said.

'No it wasn't nothing; it was ridiculous. I thought the whole of the Evening Post business was brilliantly funny.'

'Oh come, there's no need to go to the opposite extreme.'
But you see I didn't feel like discussing it with you because that would have been like laughing at Bertrand behind his back, and that would have been wrong. I'm afraid I must have sounded a bit unfriendly over the phone the second time, but that was only because I couldn't have let myself go like I wanted to without seeming as if I was getting mixed up in a conspiracy to get the better of Bertrand. That's all it was.'

The whole thing sounded rather childish, but better than peevish. All the same, what messes these women got themselves into over nothing. Men got themselves into messes too, and ones that weren't so easily got out of, but their messes arose from attempts to satisfy real and simple needs. He was saved from having to reply by the intervention of an enormous, half-incoherent voice, like that of an ogre at the onset of aphasia, which now began to sing through loudspeakers with an intonation rather resembling Cecil Goldsmith's:

'Ah'll be parp tar gat you in a taxi, honny,
Ya'd battern be raddy 'bout a parp-parp eight;
Ahr, baby, dawn't be late,
Ah'm gonna parp parp parp when the band starts playin'ceng . . .'

In trying to pull Christine out of the path of a short red-faced man dancing with a tall pale-faced woman, Dixon got badly out of time. 'Start again,' he mumbled, but they seemed unable to move together as before.

'Here, you'll never do any good while you stand right over there,' Christine said. 'I'm not close enough to you to feel what you're doing. Get hold of me properly.'

Gingerly, Dixon moved forward until they were standing up against each other. He again took her warm right hand, and steered her off. This time things were much better, though Dixon was a little shorter of breath than he thought he should be. Her body felt rounded, and rather bulky, against his. They moved down the floor away from the band, through the sound of which Dixon faintly caught a baying laugh. Bertrand, his big head flung back, was just disappearing into a gap some yards away. Though Dixon couldn't see Carol's face, this seemed to indicate that she'd been at least partly mollified.

What the hell was Bertrand up to? This was a problem deserving as urgent attention as the problem of why he wore a beard. Was he trying to have two mistresses at once, or was he trying to discard one in favour of the other? If the latter, which one was he trying to acquire and which one was he trying to reconcile to being discarded? Would he bother, though, about reconciling people to what he wanted to do with them? Probably not, in which case it was presumably Carol who was in the ascendant, because that was the only way of explaining her presence here tonight. Christine must be functioning merely as Gore-Urquhart's niece, but would have to be somehow retained on Bertrand's establishment until the Gore-Urquhart deal was safely concluded. Dixon found his head beginning to sing slightly as he realized that the third round in his campaign against Bertrand was about to begin, though he didn't yet see how battle was going to be joined.

'How are you getting on with Professor Welch these days?' Christine asked suddenly.

Dixon stiffened. 'Oh, not too badly,' he said mechanically. 'He hasn't been on to you about that phone call?'

He couldn't stifle a howl, but hoped the music would drown it. 'You mean Bertrand did find out it was me after all?'

'Find out it was you? How do you mean?'

'That I was pretending to be the reporter that time.'

'No, I wasn't talking about that business. I meant the phone call from that man in your digs, that Sunday.'

As the body of a decapitated hen is said to go running about the farmyard, Dixon's legs continued to perform the requisite dance-steps. 'He knows that I arranged for Atkinson to tell me my parents had come down?'

'Oh, is that who Atkinson is? He seems to have done a lot of phoning since we met. Yes, Mr Welch knows you asked him to ring you up about your parents.'

'Who told him? Who told him?'

'Please don't dig your nails into my back . . . It was that little man who played the oboe - you did tell me his name . . .'

'Yes. I did. Johns is his name. Johns.'

'That's right. It was the only thing I remember him saying
the whole time I was there. Except for when he said you must have gone to the pub the previous evening, that is. He seems to have got it in for you rather.

'Yes, he does, doesn't he? Tell me: was Mrs Welch there when he blew the gaff about the phone call?'

'No, I'm sure she wasn't. Just the three of us were chatting together after lunch.'

'That's good.' There was a fair chance that Welch hadn't noticed what Johns had told him, since he'd presumably only told him once; Mrs Welch, on the other hand, would have been likely to go on telling Welch until he did notice. But perhaps Johns had told her separately, out of Christine's hearing. Then a fresh aspect of the situation struck him: 'How did Johns say he got to know about this? I didn't tell him, as you can imagine.'

'He said he was there when you were arranging it.'

'That's pretty rich, isn't it?' he said, scowling. 'As if I'd have said a word in front of that little ponce ... Sorry. No, he was listening outside the door. Must have been. I remember thinking I heard something.'

'What a filthy trick,' she said with unexpected venom. 'What had you done to him?'

'Only mucked about with a photograph of a chap on the front of a paper of his with a pencil.'

This utterance, enigmatic enough in itself, was half blotted out by the disturbance which now arose to mark the end of the set. After Dixon had explained, Christine, who was just starting to move off at his side, turned and looked at him, laughing with her mouth closed. When he smiled sourly, she began laughing with her tongue between those slightly irregular teeth. Dixon felt desire abruptly flooding his entire frame with an immense fatigue, as if he'd been struck by a bullet in some vital spot. All his facial muscles relaxed involuntarily. She caught his eye and stopped laughing.

'Thank you for the dance,' he said in a normal tone.

'I enjoyed it very much,' she replied, compressing her lips after she spoke.

Dixon realized with wonderment that he didn't really care about Johns's latest piece of gaff-blowing, for the moment anyway. It must be because he was having such a good time at the dance.

In the bar again, they found Gore-Urquhart in his former seat, already being talked to by Bertrand, as if their conversation had never been interrupted. Margaret was in even closer attendance, if possible; she broke off from laughing at a retort of Gore-Urquhart's to look up casually at Dixon with an air that suggested she was wondering idly who he might happen to be. More drinks arrived, proving inexplicably to be double gins. They were brought, of course, by Maconochie, one of whose jobs at these functions was to prevent the importation of spirits. Dixon, who was beginning to do what he'd have described as 'feeling his age', sat down in a chair and began drinking his drink and smoking a cigarette. How hot it was; and how his legs ached; and how much longer was all this going to go on? After a moment he roused himself to talk to Christine, but she was sitting next to Bertrand and, though unheedful, evidently listening to what he was saying to her uncle, who was keeping his eyes on the floor in the way that Dixon had noticed earlier. Margaret was laughing again, swaying towards Gore-Urquhart so that their shoulders kept touching. Oh well, Dixon thought, each must enjoy himself as and when he can. But where was Carol?

Just then she reappeared, walking up to them with a kind of deliberate carelessness that made Dixon suspect her of having a bottle of something, now no doubt much depleted, hidden in the ladies' cloakroom. The expression on her face boded ill for somebody, or perhaps everybody. When she reached the group, Dixon saw Gore-Urquhart look up at her and try to flash some facial signal; 'You see how I'm placed' was possibly its nearest equivalent. Then, alone among the men present, he stood up.

Carol turned to Dixon. 'Come on, Jim,' she said rather loudly, 'I want you to dance with me. I take it that nobody here will object.'

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He tried to get her to walk off with him, but she stayed where she was in the doorway, the lights from the corridor throwing her face into shadow. 'I meant a taxi.'

'A taxi? a taxi? just for three or four hundred yards?' He gave a shuddering laugh. 'I'll have you back with Mum in less time than it'd take to phone. Good-night, Professor; good-night, Mrs Barclay. Well, it's a good thing we haven't far to go; rather chilly. Did you say good-bye to the others for me?' They were far enough away by now for him to be able to add: 'Good. That's fine. Well done.' Nearby a car started up. Behind him he heard Mrs Barclay say something to her husband.

'What's going on?' Christine asked with undismayed curiosity. 'What's all this about?'

'We've pinched their taxi, that's one of the things that's going on. It's parked just round this corner.'

As if answering its name, the taxi, tired of waiting, emerged from the side-street and turned up towards the main road. He ran furiously off in pursuit, calling loudly: 'Taxi. Taxi.'

It drew to a stop and he went up to the driver's window. After a brief conversation, the taxi moved off again and disappeared into the main road. Dixon ran back to Christine, whom the Barcays had now rejoined. 'Sorry I couldn't get him for you,' he said to them. 'He'd got someone to pick up at the station in five minutes. What a nuisance.'

'Well, thank you very much, Dixon, for trying,' Barclay said.

'Yes, thank you all the same,' his wife said.

He took Christine's arm and walked her round into the side-street, calling good-night. They started to cross over.

'Does that mean we've lost the taxi? It was ours, was it?'

'Ours after it was theirs. No, I told the driver to drive round the corner and wait for us a hundred yards along the road. We can cut up through this alley, be there in a couple of minutes.'

'What would you have done if he hadn't driven out just then? We couldn't have driven off under the noses of those people.'

'I'd already worked out we'd have to do something like that.

We'd got to establish that we and the taxi were leaving separately. That's why I was quick off the mark.'

'You were, very.'

With no more said they reached the taxi, parked outside the lighted windows of a dress-shop. Dixon opened a rear door for Christine, then said to the driver: 'Our friend isn't coming. We'll make a start, if you're ready.'

'Right, sir. Just by the Corn Exchange, isn't it?'

'No, it's further than the Corn Exchange.' He named the small town where the Welches lived.

'Oh, can't make it there, I'm sorry, sir.'

'It's all right, I know the way.'

'So do I, but they told me at the garage the Corn Exchange.'

'Did they really? Well, they told you wrong, then. We're not going to the Corn Exchange.'

'Not enough petrol.'

'Bateson's at the foot of College Road doesn't shut till twelve.' He peered at the dashboard. 'Ten to. We'll do it on our heads.'

'Not allowed to draw petrol except at our own garage.'

'We are tonight. I'll write to the company explaining. It's their fault for telling you you were only going to the Corn Exchange. Now let's go, or you'll find yourself eight miles out without any petrol to get you back.'

He got in beside Christine and the car started.

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'That was all very efficient,' Christine said. 'You're getting good at this sort of thing, aren't you? First the table, then the Evening Post thing, and now this.'

'I didn't use to be. By the way, I hope you don't object too much to the way I got hold of this taxi.'

'I've got into it, haven't I?'

'Yes, I know, but I should have thought the method would strike you as unethical.'
‘It does, at least it would in the ordinary way, but it was more important for us to get a taxi than for them, wasn’t it?’

‘I’m glad you look at it like that.’ He brooded on her use of the word ‘important’ for a moment, then realized that he didn’t much care for her easy acquiescence in his piratical treatment of the Barclays’ taxi. Even he now felt it had been a bit thick, and she presumably hadn’t his excuse for wanting a taxi very badly. Like both the pretty women he’d known, and many that he’d only read about, she thought it was no more than fair that one man should cheat and another be cheated to serve her convenience. She ought to have objected, refused to go with him, insisted on returning and handing the taxi over to the Barclays, walked back, revolted by his unscrupulousness, into the dance. Yes, he’d have liked that, wouldn’t he? Ay, proper champion that would have been, lad. His hand flew to his mouth in the darkness to stifle his laughter; to sidetrack it, he began distilling alarm from the thought that he’d have to find something to talk to this girl about all the way back to the Welches’. The only thing he felt at all clear about was the fact that this abduction of her was a blow struck against Bertrand, but it seemed less than prudent to begin there. Why had she consented to ditch her boy-friend in this emphatic way? There were several possible answers. Perhaps he could start with that. ‘Did you manage to get away all right?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes; nobody seemed to object very much.’

‘What did you say to them?’

‘I just explained things to Uncle Julius—he never minds what I do—and then I just told Bertrand I was going.’

‘How did he react to that?’

‘He said, “Oh, don’t do that, I’ll be with you in a minute.”’

Then he went on talking to Mrs Goldsmith and Uncle. So I came away then.’

‘I see. It all sounds very easy and quick.’

‘Oh, it was.’

‘Well, I’m very glad you decided to come with me after all.’

‘Good. I couldn’t help feeling guilty rather, at first, about walking out on them all, but that’s worn off now.’

‘Good. What finally made you make up your mind?’

After a silence, she said: ‘I wasn’t enjoying it much in there, as you know, and I started feeling awfully tired, and it didn’t look as if Bertrand could leave for some time, so I thought I’d come along with you.’

She said this in her best schoolmistrressy way, elocution-mistressy in fact, so Dixon repeated as stiffly: ‘I see.’ In the light of a street-lamp he could see her sitting, as he’d expected, on the very edge of the seat. That was that, then.

She suddenly broke in again in her other manner, the one he associated with their phone conversation: ‘No, I’m not going to try and get away with that. That’s only a part of it. I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you a bit more. I left because I was feeling absolutely fed-up with everything.’

‘That’s a bit sweeping. What had fed you up in particular?’

‘Everything. I was absolutely fed-up. I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you this. I’ve been feeling very depressed recently, and it all seemed to get too much for me tonight.’

‘A girl like you’s got no call to be depressed about anything, Christine,’ Dixon said warmly, then at once fell against the window and banged his elbow smartly on the door as the taxi lurched aside in front of a row of petrol pumps. Behind these was an unlit building with a painted sign, faintly visible, reading Car’s for hire— Batesons—Repair’s. Dixon got out, ran to a large wooden door, and began to pound irregularly upon it, wondering whether, or how soon, to add shouts to his summons. While he waited, he ran over in his mind some handy all-purpose phrases of abusive or menacing tendency against the appearance of a garage-man unwilling to serve him. A minute passed; he went on thumping while the taxi-driver slowly joined him, his very presence a self-righteously pessimistic comment. Dixon laid down for himself the general lines of an appropriate face, involving free and unusual use of the lips and tongue and endorsed by manual gestures. Just then a light sprang up inside and very quickly the door was opened. A man appeared and declared himself able and willing to serve petrol. During the next couple of minutes Dixon was thinking not about this man but about Christine. He was filled with awe at the thought that she seemed, not only not to
became audible. ‘My God, here they are,’ he said, instinctively
whispering again.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’ll wait until they’ve started coming in the front door, and
then nip out by the window. You close it after me.’

‘Right.’

The car began moving along the front of the house. ‘You’ve
got all that about where to meet?’ he asked.

‘Don’t you worry, I’ll be there. Four o’clock.’

They went over to the window and stood there with their
arms round each other while the car’s engine, after a terrible
rattling roar, died away, and footsteps receded.

‘Thanks for a lovely evening, Christine.’

‘Good-night, Jim.’ She pressed herself to him and they
kissed for a moment; then she broke away with ‘Wait a
minute’ and rushed over to where her bag lay on a chair.

‘What’s all this?’

She came back and thrust a pound note at him. ‘For the
taxi.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, I . . .

‘Come on, don’t argue; they’ll be here in a second. It must
have cost the earth.’

‘But . . .’

She pushed the money into his outside breast-pocket, frowning,
pursing her lips, and waggling her left hand to silence him
in a gesture that reminded him of one of his aunts forcing
sweets or an apple on him in his childhood. ‘I’ve probably
got more than you have,’ she said. She propelled him to the
window, which they reached just as Welch’s voice, in its high-
pitched, manic phase, became audible not so far away. ‘Quick.
See you on Tuesday. Good-night.’

He scuttled out and saw her blow a kiss into the darkness
while she fastened the window; then the curtain fell back. The
sky had cleared a little and there was enough light to see his
way by. He moved off down towards the road, feeling more
tired than he could remember ever feeling in his life before.

Dear Mr Johns, Dixon wrote, gripping his pencil like a
breadknife. This is just to let you know that I am not going to work
with young Marleen Richards, young Marleen is a decent girl and has got no
time for your sort, I no your sort. She is a decent girl and I won’t have
you filling her head with a lot of new and music, she is too good for that,
and I am going to marry her which is more than your sort ever do. So
just keep of her, Mr Johns this will be your only warning. This is
just a friendly letter and I am not threatening you, but you just do as I
say else me and some of my pals from the Works will be up your way
and we sha’n’t be coming along just to say How do you can be. So just
you wash out and lay of young Marleen if you no what’s good for you.
yours faithfully, Joe Higgins.

He read it through, thinking how admirably consistent were
the style and orthography. Both derived, in large part, from the
eysays of some of his less proficient pupils. He could hardly
hope, even so, to deceive Johns for long, especially since Johns
had almost certainly got no further with Marlene Richards, a
typist in his office, than staring palely at her across it. But the
letter would at any rate give him a turn and his dig-mates a
few moments’ amusement when it was opened, according
to his habit, at the breakfast-table and read over cornflakes.
Dixon wrote To: Mr Johns and the address of the digs on
a cheap envelope not specially bought for the purpose,
sealed the letter up in it, and then, grinning his finger on the
floor, drew a heavy smudge across the flap. Finally he stuck
a stamp on, slobberyng it on for further verisimilitude. He’d
post the letter on his way down to the pub for a lunch-time
drink, but before that he must write up some of his notes for
the Merrie England lecture. Before that in turn he must
review his financial position, see if he could somehow
restore it from complete impossibility to its usual level of
merely imminent disaster, and before that again he must
meditate, just for a couple of minutes, on the incredible
finale to the Summer Ball the previous evening and on Christine.

He found himself unable to think coherently about, hardly able even to remember, what they’d said to each other at the Welches’, nor could he now evoke what it had been like kissing her more clearly than that he’d enjoyed it. He was already so excited about Tuesday afternoon that he had to get up and walk about his bedroom. The great thing was to convince himself utterly that she wouldn’t turn up, then whatever happened would be something extra. The trouble was that he could imagine exactly how she’d look coming across the hotel lounge towards him. Then he found he could visualize her face quite clearly, and looked inattentively out over the back garden of the lodging-house, which lay in thick, beating sunshine. He realized that when it wasn’t set in that rather chilly life-mask, her face sometimes touched upon other sorts of face by a kind of physiognomical allusion. Some of the other sorts of face were very remote from her own. There was the permanent grin of an acrobat, or partner in an apache-dance routine; the sun-dazzle of some Honourable trollop photographed motorboating on the Riviera; the sulky mindless glare theoretically detectable on the face of a pin-up; the frown of a plethoric and not very nice little girl. At any rate they were all female faces. He coughed loudly on recalling that Margaret had more than once reminded him facially of a man with an unintelligible accent and Service glasses whom he’d known by sight in the R.A.F. and had never seen doing anything except sweeping out the N.A.A.F.I. and wiping his nose on his sleeve.

To drive this thought away he opened the cupboard that contained his smoking engines and accessories - monuments, some of them costly, to economy. As long as he could remember he’d never been able to smoke as much as he wanted to. This armoury of devices had been assembled as each fresh way of seeming to smoke as much as he wanted to had come to his notice: the desiccated packet of cheap cigarette-tobacco, the cherry-wood pipe, the red packet of cigarette-papers, the packet of pipe-cleaners, the leather cigarette-machine, the quadripartite pipe-tool, the crumbling packet of cheap pipe-

- tobacco, the packet of cotton-wool filter-tips (new process), the nickel cigarette-machine, the clay pipe, the briar pipe, the blue packet of cigarette-papers, the packet of herbal smoking-mixture (guaranteed free from nicotine or other harmful substances. Why?), the rusting tin of expensive pipe-tobacco, the packet of chalk pipe-filters. Dixon took a cigarette from the packet in his pocket and lit it.

On the floor of the cupboard were the empty beer-flagons which represented his only sure method of saving money. There were nine of these, but two of them belonged to an impossibly distant pub; he’d bought them to drink in the bus on the way back from the Toynbee Society dinner in February. He’d hoped, by their aid, to efface the memory of a traumatically embarrassing speech Margaret had made at the dinner, but, sitting next to him throughout the journey back, she’d vetoed his project on disciplinary grounds (there’d been a lot of students in the bus, most of them drinking beer from flagons). He shivered at this memory, tried to drive it away by totting up the exchange value of the other seven bottles. Two and eight altogether; much less than he’d counted on. He decided not to review his financial position, and was just getting out his Merrie England notes when there was a knock at his door and Margaret came in. She was wearing the green Paisley frock and the quasi-velvet shoes.

‘Hallo, Margaret,’ he said with a heartiness which originated, he realized, in a guilty conscience. But why had he got a guilty conscience? Leaving her with Gore-Urquhart at the Ball had been ‘tactful’, hadn’t it?

She looked at him with her air of not being quite sure who he was which had more than once entirely, and unaided, discomposed him. ‘Oh, hallo,’ she said.

‘How are you?’ he asked, keeping up the gimcrack friendliness. ‘Have a seat.’ He pushed forward the immense crippled armchair, of Pall Mall smoking-room size and design, that took up almost half the space left unoccupied by the bed. ‘Cigarette?’ He took out his packet to show that this was a sincere offer.

Still looking at him, she shook her head slowly, like a doctor indicating that there is no hope. Her face had a yellowish
tinge, and her nostrils seemed pinched. She remained standing and not saying anything.

'Well, how are things?' Dixon said, tugging a smile on to his mouth.

She shook her head again, a little more slowly, and sat down on the arm of the chair, which creaked sharply. Dixon threw his pyjamas on to his bed and sat down on a cane-bottomed chair with his back to the window. 'Do you hate me, James?' she said.

Dixon wanted to rush at her and tip her backwards in the chair, to make a deafening rude noise in her face, to push a bead up her nose. 'How do you mean?' he asked.

It took her a quarter of an hour to make clear how she meant. She talked fast and fluently, moving about a lot on the chair-arm, her legs kicking straight as if hardened on the knee, her head jerking to restore invisible strands of hair, her thumbs bending and straightening. Why had he deserted her at the Ball like that? or rather, since she and he and everyone else knew why, what did he think he was up to? or rather, again, how could he do this to her? In exchange for such information on these and allied problems as he could give, she offered the news that all three Welches were 'out for his blood' and that Christine had referred slightly to him at breakfast that morning. No mention of Gore-Urquhart was made, beyond a parenthetical attack on Dixon's 'rudeness' in leaving the dance without saying good night to him. Dixon knew from experience that to counter-attack Margaret was invariably mistaken, but he was too angry to bother about that. When he was sure that she was going to say no more about Gore-Urquhart, he said, his heart pounding a little: 'I don't see why you're kicking up all this fuss. You looked as if you were doing all right for yourself when I left.'

'What the hell do you mean by that?'

'You were all over that Gore-itchbag character, hadn't got time to say a single word to me, had you? If you didn't do yourself any good it wasn't for want of trying. I've never seen such an exhibition in my life ...' His voice tailed off; he couldn't synthesize enough of the required righteous indignation.

She stared at him wide-eyed. 'But you can't mean ...?' 'Oh yes I bloody well can; of course I can mean.'

'James ...you don't know ... what you're talking about,' she said, slowly and painfully, like a foreigner reading out of a phrase-book. 'Really, I'm so surprised; I just don't know what to say.' She began to tremble. 'I talk to a man, just for a few minutes, that's all it was ... and now you start accusing me of making up to him. That's what you mean. Isn't that what you mean?' Her voice quavered grotesquely.

'That's what I mean all right,' Dixon said, trying to squeeze anger into his tone. 'It's no use denying it.' He could only manage to sound a little nettled and out of sorts.

'Do you really think I was trying to make up to him?'

'Well, it looked very much like it, you must admit.'

Going so close to Dixon that he flinched, she began looking out of the window. He couldn't see her face without craning his neck, so he took her seat on the arm of the Pall Mall armchair. She stayed there so long without moving that he began to hope she'd forgotten all about him; in a few moments he might be able to slip silently out to the pub. Then she began to speak, sounding quite calm. 'I'm afraid there's an awful lot you don't understand, James. I used to think you understood me, but now ... You see, when you say a thing like that, I don't mind it being, er, offensive and all that, because I know you feel bad about this, at least I hope you do, for my own sake, and so I don't mind you ... trying to lash out at me. What makes me feel so, so unhappy, is the awful gulf it shows that there is between us. It makes me say to myself, Oh, it's no good, he just doesn't know me at all, never has done, either. You see that, don't you?'

Dixon didn't make a face; he was afraid she might see it reflected in the window-pane. 'Yes,' he said.

'I don't want to go into it all, James, it's such a small, petty, trivial thing, but I suppose I'd better a little.' She sighed. 'Can't you distinguish between ...? no, obviously you can't. I'll just tell you this, just this one thing, and see whether that'll satisfy you.' She turned and faced him, then said less calmly than before: 'After you'd gone last night, I didn't
spend a single moment with Gore-Urquhart. He was with Carol Goldsmith. I spent the whole of the rest of the time with Bertrand, thank you very much.' Her voice went up. 'And you can guess what sort of a ...'

'Well, hard luck,' Dixon broke in before he should have time to relent. A grandiose disgust for the whole proceedings had filled him; not merely for this one hand, but for the whole game of poker, of non-strip poker, that he and Margaret were playing. Biting his lips, he vowed to himself that this time he'd take whatever she might have to deal out. He remembered Carol's phrase about not throwing Margaret any lifebelts. Well, he'd thrown his last one. He would not waste any more time trying to conciliate her, more because he knew it was a waste of time than because his powers of conciliation were at an end, though they were pretty well at an end as well. 'Look here, Margaret,' he said. 'I've no desire to hurt your feelings unnecessarily, as you know perfectly well, whatever you may say. But for your own sake, as well as mine, you must get some things straight. I know you've had a very hard time recently, and you know I know that as well. But it won't do you any good to go on thinking what you evidently do think about me and how we stand. It'll only make things worse. What I want to say is, you must stop depending on me emotionally like this. I agree I was probably in the wrong over the dance business, but right or wrong won't make any difference to this. I'll stick up for you and I'll chat to you and I'll sympathize, but I've had enough of being forced into a false position. Get it into your head that I've quite lost whatever interest I may have had in you as a woman, as someone to make love to, or go to bed with — no, you can have your turn in a minute. This time you're going to hear me out. As I said, the sex business is all finished, if it ever got started. I'm not blaming anyone; I just want to tell you you must count me out as far as anything like that's concerned. That's how things are. And I can't say I'm sorry because you can't say you're sorry for what you can't do anything about, and I can't do anything about this and neither can you. That's all.'

'You don't think she'd have you, do you? a shabby little provincial bore like you,' Margaret burst out as soon as he'd stopped speaking. 'Or has she had you already? Perhaps she just wanted a . . .'

'Don't be fantastic, Margaret. Come off the stage for a moment, do.'

There was a pause; then she came waveringly forward, put her hands on his shoulders, and seemed to collapse, or be dragging him, on to the bed. Unregarded, her spectacles fell off. She was making a curious noise, a steady, repeated, low-pitched moan that sounded as if it came from the pit of her stomach, as if she'd been sick over and over again and still wanted to be sick. Dixon half-helped, half-lifted her on to the bed. Now and then she gave a quiet, almost skittish little scream. Her face was pushed hard against his chest. Dixon didn't know whether she was fainting, or having a fit of hysterics, or simply breaking down and crying. Whatever it was he didn't know how to deal with it. When she felt that she was sitting on the bed next to him she threw herself forward so that her face was on his thigh. In a moment he felt moisture creeping through to his skin. He tried to lift her, but she was immovably heavy; her shoulders were shaking more rapidly than seemed to him normal even in a condition of this kind. Then she raised herself, tense but still trembling, and began a series of high-pitched, inward screams which alternated with the deep moans. Both were quite loud. Her hair was in her eyes, her lips were drawn back, and her teeth chattered. Her face was wet, with saliva as well as tears. At last, as he began speaking her name, she threw herself violently backwards and sideways on to the bed. While she lay there with her arms spread out, writhing, she screamed half a dozen times, very loudly, then went on more quietly, moaning with every outward breath. Dixon seized her wrists and shouted: 'Margaret. Margaret.' She looked at him with dilated eyes and began struggling, trying to free herself from him. Two lots of footsteps were now approaching outside, one ascending the stairs, the other descending. The door opened and Bill Atkinson came in, followed by Miss Cutler. Dixon looked up at them.

'Hysterics, eh?' Atkinson said, and slapped Margaret several times on the face, very hard, Dixon thought. He pushed Dixon
out of the way and sat down on the bed, gripping Margaret by the shoulders and shaking her vigorously. ‘There’s some whisky up in my cupboard. Go and get it.’

Dixon ran out and up the stairs. The only thought that presented itself to him at all clearly was one of mild surprise that the fictional or cinematic treatment of hysterics should be based so firmly on what was evidently the right treatment. He found the whisky; his hand was shaking so much that he nearly dropped the bottle. He uncorked it and took a quick swig, trying not to cough. Down in his room again, he found everything much quieter. Miss Cutler, who’d been watching Atkinson and Margaret, gave Dixon a glance, not of suspicion or reproach, but of reassurance; she said nothing. As he felt at the moment, this made him want to cry. Atkinson looked up without taking the bottle. ‘Get a glass or a cup.’ He got a cup from the cupboard, poured some of the whisky into it, and gave it to Atkinson. Miss Cutler, as much in awe of him as ever, stood at Dixon’s side and watched Margaret being given some whisky.

Atkinson heaved her up into a half-sitting position. Her moans had stopped and she was trembling less violently. Her face was red from Atkinson’s blows. When he put the cup to her mouth it rattled once or twice on her teeth and her breathing was audible. With eerie predictability she choked and coughed, swallowed some, coughed again, swallowed some more. Quite soon she stopped trembling altogether and began to look round at them. ‘Sorry about that,’ she said faintly.

‘That’s all right, girlie,’ Atkinson said. ‘Like a fag?’

‘Yes please.’

‘Forward, Jim.’

Miss Cutler smiled at them all, mouthed something, and went quietly out. Dixon lit cigarettes for the three of them and Margaret sat up on the edge of the bed; Atkinson still kept his arm round her. ‘Were you the one that slapped my face?’ she asked him.

‘That’s right, girlie. It did you a power of good. How do you feel now?’

‘A lot better, thanks. A bit hazy, but otherwise all right.’

‘Good. Don’t you try to move around for a bit. Here, put your feet up and have a rest.’

‘There’s really no need . . .’

He pulled her feet up on to the bed and took off her shoes, then stood looking down at her. ‘You stay there for ten minutes at least. I’ll leave you to the care of brother Jim now. Have some more whisky when you’ve finished that, but don’t let Jim get at it. I promised his mother not to let him drink himself to death.’ He turned his Tartar’s face on Dixon. ‘All right, old man?’

‘Yes thanks, Bill. It’s been very good of you.’

‘All right, girlie?’

‘Thank you so much, Mr Atkinson; you’ve been wonderful. I just can’t thank you enough.’

‘That’s all right, girlie.’ He nodded to them and went out.

‘I’m sorry about all that, James,’ she said as soon as the door was shut.

‘It was my fault.’

‘No, you always say that. This time I’m not going to let you. I just couldn’t take what you said, that’s all. I thought to myself, I can’t bear it, I must stop him, and then I simply lost control of myself. Nothing more to it than that. And it was all so silly and childish, because you were absolutely right, saying what you did. Much better to clear the air like that. I just behaved like a perfect idiot.’

‘There’s no point in reproaching yourself. You couldn’t help it.’

‘No, but I ought to have been able to. Do sit down, James; you’re getting on my nerves, prowling around like that.’

Dixon pulled the cane-bottomed chair to beside the bed. When he was settled and looking at Margaret, he was reminded of how he’d sat at her side, just like this, when he visited her in hospital after her suicide attempt. But she’d looked different then, thinner and weaker, with her hair drawn back to the nape of her neck; and, in a way, less distressing than she looked now. The sight of her smudged lipstick, her damp nose, her disordered, stiff hair filled him with a profound and tranquil depression. ‘I’d better come back to the Welches with you,’ he said.
‘My dear, I wouldn’t hear of it. You’d better keep clear of that place as long as you can.’

‘I don’t care about any of that. And in any case I needn’t come in. I’ll just come back on the bus with you.’

‘Don’t be so ridiculous, James. It’s absolutely unnecessary. I’m perfectly all right now. At least I will be when I’ve had another go at nice Mr Atkinson’s whisky. Would you be an angel and pour me some?’

While he complied, Dixon thought with relief that he needn’t go back on the bus with her. By now he could always tell what Margaret wanted, whatever she might say, and it was clear that this refusal of services was genuine. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel concern for her; he felt a lot, so much that the load was intolerable - intolerable, too, was the way in which to feel concern had now come, for him, to confuse itself utterly with the feeling of guilt. He gave her the cup, not looking at her; he said nothing, not for the familiar reason of not being able to say what he wanted to say, but because he could think of nothing to say.

‘I’ll just drink this and finish my cigarette, and then I’ll be off. There’s a bus at twenty to; it’ll get me in nicely. Would you get me an ashtray, James?’

He brought her a copper one which bore the representation, in high-relief, of a small antique warship and the caption ‘H.M. Torpedo-Boat Destroyer Ribble’. She dropped ash on to it, then sat up on the edge of the bed and, taking cosmetics from her handbag, began making up her face. Looking into her compact-mirror, she said conversationally: ‘It’s strange that it should end like this, isn’t it? In such a very undignified fashion.’

When he still said nothing, she went on, moving her mouth about now and then to put lipstick on it: ‘But then it hasn’t been very dignified all the way through, has it? It’s just been me flying off the handle in one way and another, and you rather reluctantly trying to get me to grow up. No, that’s not fair to you.’ She worked lipstick over her mouth, then peered into the mirror again. ‘You did all a man could do, and more than most would, believe me. You’ve got nothing to reproach yourself with. Really, I don’t know how you stuck it. I’m afraid none of it’s been much fun for you. Just as well you decided to call it quits.’ She snapped the compact shut and put it into her handbag.

‘You know I’m fond of you, Margaret,’ Dixon said. ‘It’s just that it wouldn’t work, that’s all.’

‘I know, James. Don’t you worry about anything. I shall be all right.’

‘You must always come to me if anything goes wrong. That I can do anything about.’

She smiled slightly at his reservation. ‘Of course I will,’ she said as if she were soothing him.

He raised his head and looked at her. Under the powder, her cheeks were still slightly mottled where the redness was fading, but with her glasses back on the slight puffiness round her eyes was scarcely noticeable. That she’d only recently finished being hysterical seemed incredible to him, as did the thought that he could ever have said to her anything important enough to make her hysterical. As he watched her, she put out her cigarette on H.M.S. Ribble and stood up, brushing the ash from her dress. ‘That just about takes care of everything, I think,’ she said lightly. ‘Well, good-bye, James.’

Dixon smiled uncertainly. What a pity it was, he thought, that she wasn’t better-looking, that she didn’t read the articles in the three-halfpenny Press that told you which colour lipstick went with which natural colouring. With twenty per cent more of what she lacked in these ways, she’d never have run into any of her appalling difficulties: the vices and morbidities bred of loneliness would have remained safely dormant until old age. ‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ he asked her.

‘Stop worrying about me; I’m perfectly all right. Now I must be off, or I shall miss my bus, and that’ll make me late for lunch, and you know what Mrs Nedly is about meal-times. Well, I dare say we shall run into each other before very long. Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Margaret. See you soon.’

She went out without replying.

Dixon put his own cigarette out, jabbing at Ribble’s bridge in a feeble rage he couldn’t find any source for. He tried to tell himself that when he’d got over his own feelings of shock, he’d begin to be glad at having told Margaret what he’d been
down to the library for it. I know for a fact they've got ninety per cent of the stuff I want. I'd go myself, but as I took the trouble to explain, I'm tied up here. And I must have the information by tonight, because I'm giving the talk tomorrow evening after Professor Fortescue gets . . . goes . . . goes back. Now do you see?

Dixon did: Welch had all the time been talking about the public library in the city, and, since this was clear to him, naturally hadn't thought of the confusion he might cause by talking about 'the library' within five feet of a totally different building known in the area as 'the library'. 'Oh, of course, Professor; I'm sorry,' he said, having been well schooled in giving apologies at the very times when he ought to be demanding them.

'All right, Dixon. Well, I won't hold you up now; I expect you'll want to get started if you're to finish by five. You'd better come up to my room afterwards and show me what you've got. It's very kind of you to offer to help; I appreciate it very much.'

Dixon dropped the papers between the pages of Barclay's book and turned away, only to start violently and look back as a loud thundering noise broke out behind him. Welch, his hair flapping, was straining like a packed-down rugby forward to push the revolving door in the wrong direction. Dixon stood and watched, allowing his mandrill face full play. After a time Welch, somehow divining his error, began pulling instead at the now-jammed door, changing his semblance to that of anchor in a losing tug-o'-war team. With a sudden bursting click the door yielded and Welch overbalanced backwards, hitting his head on the panel behind him. Dixon went away, beginning to whistle his Welch tune in a solemn, almost liturgical tempo. He felt that it was things like this that kept him going.

'Well, that's really splendid, Dixon,' Welch said seven hours later. 'You've filled in all the gaps in a most . . . a most . . . Really quite admirable.' He gloated over his notes for a moment, then suddenly added: 'What are you doing now?' with an effect of suspicion.

In point of fact, Dixon had got his hands behind his back now and was gesturing with them. 'I was just . . . ' he stammered.

'I was wondering if you were doing anything this evening. I thought you might like to come over and have a meal with us.'

After a day of doing Welch's work, there was plenty for Dixon to do that evening in connexion with his lecture, but it was obvious that he couldn't afford to turn down this offer, so he said unhesitatingly: 'Well, thank you very much, Professor. That's very kind of you.'

Welch nodded as if pleased, and gathered up the papers to put them into his 'bag'. 'I think this ought to go down very well tomorrow night,' he said, turning on Dixon his sexual maniac's smile.

'I'm sure it will. Who's the talk being delivered to?'

'The Antiquarian and Historical Society. I'm surprised you haven't seen the posters.' He picked up his 'bag' and put his fawn fishing-hat on his head. 'Come along, then. We'll go down in my car.'

'That'll be nice.'

'I must say they're a marvellously keen lot,' Welch said passionately as they went downstairs. 'A very good audience to talk to. Attentive and . . . keen, and plenty of questions to fire at you afterwards. Of course, you get mainly town people there, but we always get some of the better students along. Young Michie, for instance. A good lad, that. Have you managed to get him interested in your special subject at all?'

Reflecting that Michie was lying ominously low these days,
Dixon said: ‘Yes, he seems quite set on it,’ and hoped that Welch would take due heed of this testimony to his power to ‘interest’ such a good lad.

Welch went on as before: ‘A very good lad, he is. Very keen. Always turns up to the Antiquarians. I’ve had one or two chats with him, as a matter of fact. I think we’ve really got quite a lot in common.’

Dixon doubted whether Welch and Michie had much in common beyond a similar view of his own capacities, but, judging that Welch’s professional ethics would prevent him from instancing that, asked with a show of curiosity: ‘In what way?’

‘Well, we both have this interest in the English tradition, as you might call it. His is more philosophical, I suppose, and mine more what you could sum up as cultural, but we’ve got quite a lot in common. I was thinking the other day, by the way, that it’s remarkable how my own interests have turned more and more towards this English tradition in the last few years. Whereas my wife’s are... I always sum her up as a Western European first and an Englishwoman second. With her, you see, with her sort of Continental way of looking at things, almost Gallic you might say she is in some things, well, the things that are so important to me, the English social and cultural scene, with a kind of backward-looking bias in a sense, popular crafts and so on, traditional pastimes and that, well, to her that’s an aspect in a way, you see, just an aspect - a very interesting aspect, of course, but no more than an aspect, and here he hesitated as if choosing the accurate term, ‘a sort of aspect of the development of Western European culture, you might say. You can see it most clearly, really, in her attitude towards the Welfare State, and it’s a great advantage to be able to view that problem in what you might describe as a wider perspective. She argues, you see, that if people have everything done for them...’

Dixon, having long ago summed up Mrs Welch on his own account, allowed Welch to go on about her political views, her attitude towards ‘so-called freedom in education’, her advocacy of retributive punishment, her fondness for reading what Englishwomen wrote about how Parisians thought and felt. His own thoughts and feelings, all the time they were getting into the car and driving off, were busy on the subject of Margaret. He didn’t know how he was to face meeting her; this reflection, which had been occupying him for most of the day at the Public Library, had become much more urgent now that he’d have to face meeting her very shortly. He’d also presumably have to face meeting Bertrand and Mrs Welch, but these encounters must in comparison be much less appalling. There’d be Christine as well; he didn’t really want to see her either, not because of anything to do with her personally, but because she formed a portion of his worry about Margaret. He’d have to do something to show Margaret she wasn’t entirely alone; he wouldn’t, he mustn’t let himself, get back on the old footing with her, but he must somehow reassure her of his continued support. How was he going to do that?

In search of some distraction, he looked out of the window at his left just as Welch slowed to a walking pace at a road junction. Standing on the pavement was a big fat man whom Dixon recognized as his barber. Dixon felt a deep respect for this man because of his impressive exterior, his rumbling bass voice, and his unsurpassable stock of information about the Royal Family. At that moment two rather pretty girls stopped at a pillar-box a few yards away. The barber, his hands clasped behind his back, turned and stared at them. An unmistakable look of furtive lust came over his face; then, like a courtly shopwalker, he moved slowly towards the two girls. Welch now accelerated again and Dixon, a good deal shaken, hurriedly switched his attention to the other side of the road, where a cricket match was being played and the bowler was just running up to bowl. The batsman, another big fat man, swiped at the ball, missed it, and was violently hit by it in the stomach. Dixon had time to see him double up and the wicket-keeper begin to run forward before a tall hedge hid the scene.

Uncertain whether this pair of vignettes was designed to illustrate the swiftness of divine retribution or its tendency to mistake its target, Dixon was quite sure that he felt in some way overwhelmed, so much so that he listened to what Welch was saying. He was saying ‘Most impressive’, and for a second
Dixon felt like picking up the spanner he could see in the dashboard pocket and hitting him on the back of the neck with it. He knew the sort of thing Welch found impressive.

The rest of the journey passed uneventfully. Welch's driving seemed to have improved slightly; at any rate, the only death Dixon felt himself threatened by was death from exposure to boredom. Even this danger receded for a couple of minutes while Welch disclosed a few facts about the recent history of the effeminate writing Michel, a character always waiting in the wings of Dixon's life but apparently destined never to enter its stage. This Michel, as indefatigably Gallic as his mother, had been cooking for himself in his small London flat, and had in the last few days made himself ill by stuffing himself with filthy foreign food of his own preparation, in particular, Dixon gathered, spaghetti and dishes cooked in olive oil. This seemed fit punishment for one so devoted to coagulated flour-and-water and peasants' butter-substitute, washed down, no doubt, by 'real' black coffee of high viscosity. Anyway, Michel was evidently coming down in a day or two to recuperate on his parents' English fare. Dixon turned his head to laugh out of the window at this last stroke. This time he experienced nothing worse than a small rage at the thought of a little louse like that having a flat in London. Why hadn't he himself had parents whose money so far exceeded their sense as to install their son in London? The very thought of it was a torment. If he'd had that chance, things would be very different for him now. For a moment he thought he couldn't think what things; then he found he could conceive the things exactly, and exactly how they'd differ from the things he'd got, too.

Welch went on talking, his own face the perfect audience for his talk, laughing at its jokes, reflecting its puzzlement or earnestness, responding with tightened lips and narrowed eyes to its more important points. He went on talking even while he drove up the sandy path into the yard next to his house, grazed the shattered water-tap, nosed into the garage entrance, and, with a single frightful bound, brought the car to rest within a couple of inches of the inner wall. Then he got out.

Casting about for means to leave the car, Dixon rejected the six-inch corridor left to him between the door and the side-wall nearest him, and, after some bad-tempered leg-play with the gear- and brake-levers, slid across the front seat to the other door. As he did this, something seemed to pluck at the seat of his trousers. When he'd emerged into the giddy heat of the garage, he felt behind him and found he could comfortably insert his first two fingers into a rent in the material. A glance at the driver's seat showed the tip of what must have been a broken spring just emerging from the upholstery. He began slowly to follow Welch, his heart starting to pound and mist breaking out on his spectacles. He allowed a terrible grimace to dawn on his features, forcing his chin down as far as possible and trying to bring his nose up between his eyes. When this was nearing completion, he took off his glasses to rub them clear. His sight was good enough without their aid for him to observe that four witnesses of his actions were posted at the long window some yards away; they were (left to right) Christine, Bertrand, Mrs Welch, and Margaret. He quickly restored his nose to its normal position and began pensively fondling his dropped chin, in the hope of seeming assailed by imbecilic doubt; then, unable to think up any gesture or expression of greeting comprehensive enough to include all the members of such a quartet, pursued Welch's retreating figure round the corner of the house.

What was he going to do about his trousers? Which would be worst: mending them himself, which would involve finding, or more likely re-buying, the required materials, having them repaired at a shop, which meant remembering to ask someone where such a shop could be found, remembering to take the trousers to it and remembering to fetch and pay for them, or asking Miss Cutler to do them? Would the last be quickest? Yes; but it might carry with it the penalty of watching the operation and being talked to by Miss Cutler during it and for an incalculable time after it. Apart from a pair belonging to a suit much too dark for anything but interviews and funerals, his only other trousers were so stained with food and beer that they would, if worn on the stage to indicate squalor and penury, be considered ridiculously overdosed. Welch should do the repairs. It was his horrible car, wasn't it? Why hadn't he
torn his own vile trousers on the barbed seat? Perhaps he
would soon. Or perhaps he had already without noticing.

Passing under the thatched barbette over the front door,
Dixon averted his eyes from a picture Welch had recently
bought and talked about and which now hung in the hall. The
work of some kindergarten oaf, it recalled in its technique the
sort of drawing found in male lavatories, though its subject,
an assortment of barrel-bodied animals debouching from the
Ark, was of narrower appeal. On the other side was a high
shelf with an array of copper and china utensils on it. Among
them was Dixon’s special Toby jug, and, sneezing, he now
fixed this with his eye. He hated that Toby jug, with its open
black hat, its blurred, startled face, its spindle-limbs coalesced
with its torso, more strenuously than any other inanimate
occupant of this house, not excepting Welch’s recorder. Its
expression proved that it knew what he thought of it, and it
could tell nobody. He put a thumb on each of his temples,
waggled his hands at it, rolled his eyes, mouthed jeers and
imprecations. A third Welch property now manifested itself,
a young ginger cat called Id. It was the only survivor of a litter
of three; the other two Mrs Welch had christened Ego and
Super-Ego. Trying his best not to think of this, Dixon bent
and tickled Id under the ear. He admired it for never allowing
either of the senior Welch’s to pick it up. ‘Scratch ‘em,’
he whispered to it; ‘pee on the carpets.’ It began to purr
loudly.

As soon as Dixon had joined the company within, the
leisurely tempo of his day jerked abruptly into frenzy. Welch
wheeled towards him; Christine, more apple-cheeked even
than he remembered her, was grinning at him in the back-
ground; Mrs Welch and Bertrand moved in his direction;
Margaret turned her back. Welch said energetically: ‘Oh,
Faulkner.’

Dixon’s nose twitched his glasses up. ‘Yes, Professor.’

‘At least, Dixon.’ He hesitated, then went on with unpre-
cedented fluency: ‘I’m afraid there’s been a bit of a mix-up,
Dixon. I’d forgotten that we’d all promised to go to the theatre
this evening with the Goldsmiths. We shall have to dine early,
so I shall just have time to change and freshen up and drive
us into town. There’ll be room for you if you want a lift, you
see. I’m sorry about it, of course, but I shall have to rush off
now. We must have you over another time.’

Before he was out of the room, Mrs Welch moved up like an
actress dead on her cue. Bertrand was at her side. Rather red
in the face, she said: ‘Oh, Mr Dixon, I’ve been wondering
when I should see you again. I’ve one or two points I want
to take up with you. First of all, I’d like you to explain, if you
can, just what happened to the sheet and blankets on your
bed when you were our guest here recently.’ While Dixon was
still trying to moisten his mouth enough to speak, she added:
‘I’m waiting for an answer, Mr Dixon.’ The Englishwoman
in her seemed, for the moment, to have forged well ahead of the
Western European.

Dixon noticed that Christine and Margaret had moved
down the room together, talking quietly. ‘I don’t quite know
what . . .’ he mumbled. ‘I didn’t see . . .’ How could he have
forgotten what she’d said over the phone on the occasion of the
Beesley–Evening Post impersonation? It hadn’t crossed his
mind once in the meantime.

‘Am I to understand that you deny having had anything to
do with the matter? If so, the only other possible culprit’s my
maid, in which case I shall have to . . .’

‘No,’ Dixon broke in, ‘I don’t deny it. Please, Mrs Welch,
I’m desperately sorry about it all. I know I should have come
to you and told you about it, but I’d done so much damage
I was afraid to. It was silly, I hoped you somehow wouldn’t
find out, but I really knew you would, of course. Will you send
me the bill for what it costs you to replace it? blankets as well,
I mean. I must make it good.’ Thank God they still didn’t
know about the table.

‘Of course you must, Mr Dixon. Before we discuss that,
though, I want to hear how the damage was caused. Exactly
what happened, please?’

‘I know I’ve behaved very badly, Mrs Welch, but please
don’t ask me to explain that. I’ve apologized and promised to
pay for the damage; won’t you let me keep the explanation
to myself? It’s nothing very terrible, I can assure you of
that.’
'Then why do you refuse to say what it is?'
'I don't refuse; I'm only asking you to spare me a lot of
embarrassment that wouldn't help you at all.'

Bertrand now joined in. Putting his shaggy face on one side,
he brought it nearer, saying: 'We can put up with that, Dixon.
It won't hurt us to put up with your embarrassment. It'll be
some kind of small return for the way you've behaved.'

His mother put a hand on his arm. 'No, don't interfere,
darling. It won't do any good. Mr Dixon is used to being
talked to like that, I'm sure. We can leave this; it doesn't alter
the main facts of the situation. I want to get on to the next
thing. I'm now fairly firmly convinced, Mr Dixon, that it was
you who rang me up recently and pretended, in fact you lied
when I asked you, pretended both to myself and to my son to
be a newspaper reporter. It was you, wasn't it? It'll be much
better if you admit it, you know. I haven't mentioned any of
this to my husband, because I don't want to worry him, but I
warn you that unless I get a satisfactory . . .'

Like a criminal who, having begun to confess, sees no reason
for not going on, Dixon was about to admit it, but remembered
in time that this would incriminate Christine. (How much, if
anything, had Bertrand got out of her?) 'You're quite wrong
there, Mrs Welch. I can't imagine why you should think any
such thing. Your husband'll tell you I haven't been away once
this term.'

'Haven't been away? I don't see how that affects matters.'
'Well, simply that I couldn't have been here and in London
at the same time, could I?'

Restraining Bertrand, Mrs Welch said in puzzlement:
'What's that got to do with it?'

'How could I have phoned through from London if I was
here all the time? I take it it was a London call?'

Bertrand looked questioningly at his mother. She shook her
head and said quietly, hardly moving her mouth: 'No, it was
a local call all right. Whoever it was spoke right away. You
always get the operator first if it's a London call.'

'I told you you were wrong,' Bertrand said peevishly. 'I told
you old David West was behind all this. Damn it, Christine
was certain it was him on the phone to her, calling himself

Atkinson. It was some pal of his who spoke to us, not . . . ' His
eye fell on Dixon and he stopped speaking.

Dixon was savouring his defensive triumph. He'd remember
the advantages of pretending misunderstanding in this
situation. And it was now clear, too, that Bertrand had got nothing
out of Christine. 'Has that cleared things up at all?' he asked
the others politely.

Mrs Welch began to go red again. 'I think I'll just go and
see how your father's getting on, darling,' she said. 'There are
one or two things I want him to . . . ' Leaving the sentence in
the air, she went out.

Bertrand moved a pace closer. 'We'll forget all about that
business,' he said generously. 'Now, I've been wanting us to
have a little get-together for quite some time, old boy. Ever
since that Ball affair, in fact. Now look here: here's a question
for you, and I don't mind telling you I mean to get a straight
answer. What precisely was your game the other evening
when you induced Christine to skip out of the dance with you?
A straight answer, mind.'

This must all have been clearly audible to Christine, who
now came down the room with Margaret. Both girls avoided
Dixon's eye while they went out, leaving him alone with
Bertrand. When the door was shut, Dixon said: 'I can't give
any sort of answer, straight or crooked, to a meaningless
question. What do you mean, what was my game? I wasn't
playing any sort of game.'

'You know what I mean as well as I do. What were you up
to?'

'You'd better ask Christine that.'

'We'll leave her out of this, if you don't mind.'

'Why should I mind?' Dixon, in spite of the thought of how
Mrs Welch's bill would gobble up his bank-balance, suddenly
began to exult. The preliminary manevuering, the cold war
between himself and Bertrand, were over at least. This was the
whiff of grapeshot.

'Don't be funny, Dixon. Just tell me what was going on, will
you? or I shall have to try something a little more forcible.'

'Don't you be funny, either. What do you want to know?'

Bertrand clenched his fist; then, when Dixon took off his
glasses and squared his shoulders, unclenched it again. Dixon put his glasses back on. 'I want to know ...' Bertrand said, then hesitated.

'What my game was? We've been into that.'
'Shut up. What did you intend doing with Christine, that's what I want to know.'
'I intended doing exactly what I did do. I intended to go away from that place with Christine, to bring her back here in a taxi, and finally to return to my digs in the same taxi. That's what I did do.'
'Well, I'm not having that, do you understand?'
'It's too late not to have it. You've had it already.'
'Now just you get this straight in your head, Dixon. I've had enough of your merry little quips. Christine is my girl and she stays my girl, got mam?'
'If you mean do I follow your line of thought, I do.'
'That's splendid. Well, if I find you playing this sort of trick again, or any sort of bloody clever trick, I'll break your horrible neck for you and get you dismissed from your job as well. Understand?'
'Yes, I understand all right, but you're wrong if you think I'll let you break my neck for me, and if you think they chuck people out of academic jobs for taking their professors' sons' girl-friends home in taxis, then you're even more wrong, if possible.'

Bertrand's reply reassured Dixon that Bertrand hadn't so far found out from his father about Dixon's present standing in the eyes of College authority. The reply was: 'Don't think you can defy me and get away with it, Dixon. People never do.'
'People are beginning to, Welch. You must realize that it's up to Christine whether she sees any more of me. If you feel you must threaten someone, go and threaten her.'

Bertrand suddenly yelled out in a near-falsetto bay: 'I've had about enough of you, you little bastard. I won't stand any more of it, do you hear? To think of a lousy little philistine like you coming and monkeying about in my affairs, it's enough to ... Get out and stay out, before you get hurt. Leave my girl alone, you're wasting your time, you're wasting her time, you're wasting my time. What the hell do you mean by bugging about like this? You're big enough and old enough and ugly enough to know better.'

Dixon was saved from replying by the sudden re-entry of Christine and Margaret. The scene broke up: Christine, who seemed to be trying to flash Dixon a message he couldn't read, took Bertrand by the arm and led him, still loudly protesting, out of the room; Margaret silently offered Dixon a cigarette, which he took. Neither spoke while they sat down side by side on a couch, nor for some moments afterwards. Dixon found himself trembling a good deal. He looked at Margaret and an intolerable weight fell upon him.

He knew now what he'd been trying to conceal from himself ever since the previous morning, what the row with Bertrand had made him temporarily disbelieve: he and Christine would not, after all, be able to eat tea together the following afternoon. If he was going to eat that meal with any female apart from Miss Cutler, it would be not Christine, but Margaret. He remembered a character in a modern novel Beesley had lent him who was always feeling pity moving in him like sickness, or some such jargon. The parallel was apt: he felt very ill.

'That was about the dance business, was it?' Margaret asked.
'Yes. He seemed to resent it all rather.'
'I'm not surprised. What was he shouting?'
'He was trying to persuade me to keep off the grass.'
'As far as she's concerned?'
'That's right.'
'Are you going to?'
'Eh?'
'Are you going to keep off the grass?'
'Yes.'
'Why, James?'
'Because of you.'

He'd been expecting a demonstration of some strong feeling or other here, but she only said 'I think that's rather silly of you' in a neutral tone that wasn't ostentatiously neutral, but simply neutral.

'What makes you say that?'
'I thought we got all that settled yesterday. I don’t see the point of starting the whole thing over again.'
'It can’t be helped. We’d have started it again some time; it might just as well be now.'
'Don’t be ridiculous. You’d have much more fun with her than you ever had with me.'
'That’s as may be. The point is that I’ve got to stick to you.'
He said this without bitterness, nor did he feel any.
There was a short silence before she replied: 'I don’t hold with these renunciations. You’re throwing her away for a scruple. That’s the action of a fool.'
This time, a minute or more went by before either spoke. Dixon felt that his role in this conversation, as indeed in the whole of his relations with Margaret, had been directed by something outside himself and yet not directly present in her. He felt more than ever before that what he said and did arose not out of any willing on his part, nor even out of boredom, but out of a kind of sense of situation. And where did that sense come from if, as it seemed, he took no share in willing it? With disquiet, he found that words were forming in his mind, words which, because he could think of no others, he’d very soon hear himself uttering. He got up, thinking that he might go to the window and somehow derive alternative speech from what he saw out of it, but before reaching it he turned and said: 'It isn’t a matter of scruples; it’s a matter of seeing what you’ve got to do.'
She said clearly: 'You’re faking this up because you’re frightened of me.'
He looked at her closely for the first time since she’d come back into the room. She was sitting there with her feet drawn up on the couch and her arms round her knees; her expression was one of intentness. She might have been discussing some academic point on which she was both informed and interested. He noticed that she was wearing much less make-up than usual. 'Not after yesterday,' he said. Again he wasn’t conscious of having decided what to say.
'I don’t know what you mean.'
'Never mind. Stop objecting like this. The whole thing’s perfectly straightforward.'

'Not as far as I’m concerned, James. I can’t understand you at all.'
'Yes you can.' He went and sat beside her again. 'Let’s go to the pictures tonight. You can get out of the theatre. Carol won’t mind, I know.'
'I wasn’t going, anyway.'
'That’s all right, then.'
He reached out and took her hand; she made no movement. There was another pause, during which they heard someone run heavily downstairs into the hall. Margaret glanced at him for a moment, then turned her head away. In a parched sort of voice, she said: 'All right, I’ll come to the pictures.'
'Good.' Dixon felt glad it was over. 'I’ll go and find Neddy and book a seat in the car. He can get six in all right. You go up and get ready.'
They went out into the hall, where Welch, now wearing a blue serge suit of startlingly extravagant cut, was to be seen admiring his picture. When Margaret said 'I shan’t be a minute' and went up the stairs, Dixon reflected that their conversation, whatever its other peculiarities, had reflected an honesty on both sides that their relations had never shown before. That was something, anyway.
Welch’s mouth opened at his approach, no doubt in preparation for some pronouncement beginning 'The point about child art, of course', but Dixon got in first by explaining that Margaret would also, if convenient, like a seat in the car. After a very brief visitation from his wondering frown, Welch nodded and walked with Dixon to the front door, which he opened. They went out on to the step. A light breeze was blowing and the sun shone through a thin tissue of cloud. The heat had gone out of the day.
'I’ll just go and bring the car round,' Welch said. 'I’d quite forgotten we were going out, you see, or I wouldn’t have garaged it. I shan’t be a minute.'
He went off. As he did so, somebody else’s step could be heard on the stairs. Dixon turned round and saw Christine coming towards him wearing a little black bolero, but otherwise dressed exactly as he’d seen her on the arty week-end.
Perhaps these were the only ordinary clothes she had, in which case he oughtn't to have let her give him that pound for the taxi. She smiled at him and joined him on the step. 'I hope you didn't have too bad a time with Bertrand,' she said.

'Bertrand? Oh... no, it was all right.'

'I managed to calm him down after a bit.'

He watched her; she stood with her legs apart and looked very sturdy and confident. The breeze blew a small lock of hair the wrong way, half-across the parting. She screwed up her eyes slightly as she faced the sun. It was as if she were about to do something dangerous, important, and simple which she knew she could have a creditable shot at whether she succeeded or not. A feeling of grief that was also a feeling of exasperation settled upon Dixon. He looked away over the fields beyond the nearby hedge to where a line of osiers marked the bed of a small stream. A crowd of rooks, perhaps a couple of hundred, flew towards the house, then, directly above the stream, swerved aside along its course.

'About this tea tomorrow,' Dixon said, half-turning back to Christine.

'Yes?' she said, looking a little nervous. 'What about it?' As she said this, Welch started up his car at the side of the house. She added: 'You needn't worry. I'll be there all right.' Before he could reply she glanced over her shoulder into the hall and shook her finger at him, frowning.

Bertrand came out on to the step, glancing from one of them to the other. He was wearing a blue beret, which had much the same effect on Dixon as Welch senior's fishing-hat. If such headgear was a protection, what was it a protection against? If it wasn't a protection, what was it? What was it for? What was it for?

As if divining what he wanted to ask, Christine again frowned at him, then at Bertrand. 'Now whatever you two think of each other,' she said, 'for goodness' sake pull yourselves together, both of you, and behave decently in front of Mr and Mrs Welch. I thought you'd both gone off your heads just now.'

'I was only telling him where he... .' Bertrand began.

Well, you're not going to tell him anything now,' she turned to Dixon, 'and you're not going to tell him anything. If you start quarrelling in the car I'll jump out.'

They stood apart from each other for a few moments, while Dixon's regret concentrated on the fact that to abandon the pursuit of Christine meant imposing a cease-fire in the Bertrand campaign. Then Welch's car, with its owner at the wheel, came bouncing round the corner and the three of them moved towards it. Mrs Welch, accompanied by Margaret, came out of the house, shut the front door, and joined them, not looking at Dixon. A rather undignified scramble for places now ensued, ending with Dixon in occupation of the middle of the triple front seat with Margaret on his left. Behind them sat Mrs Welch, Christine, and Bertrand. Dixon thought the arrangement prettily symmetrical. Breathing noisily, Welch snatched his foot off the clutch-pedal, and, in the kangaroo mode to which it must by now be accustomed, the car started on its journey.

DIxon looked at the telephone where it stood on a black plush cloth in the middle of a bamboo table situated in Miss Cutler's drawing-room. He felt like an alcoholic surveying a bottle of gin; only by using it could he obtain the relief he wanted, but its side-effects, as recent experience had proved, were likely to be deleterious. He must cancel the tea-date with Christine, now only six hours ahead. To do that he must take the chance of Mrs Welch answering the phone. This, in other circumstances a certain deterrent, he'd decided to risk in preference to keeping the date and telling Christine to her face that their little adventure was at an end. The thought of such a meeting being their last was not to be endured. He sat down by the phone, gave the number, and in a few seconds heard Mrs Welch's voice. It didn't discompose him, but before saying anything he made his lascar's face in order to draw off his anger. Did Mrs Welch spend all her time sitting, had she
Michie entered. ‘Good afternoon, Mr Dixon,’ he said, then added politely ‘Good afternoon’ to the still-prostrate Bertrand, who at this stimulus struggled to his feet. ‘I seem to have come at an inconvenient time.’

‘Not at all,’ Dixon said smoothly. ‘Mr Welch is just going.’

Bertrand shook his head, not in contradiction, but apparently to clear it, which interested Dixon. He moved host-like to the door with the departing Bertrand, who went out in silence.

‘Good-bye,’ Dixon said, then turned to Michie. ‘And what can I do for you, Mr Michie?’

Michie’s expression, though as usual unreadable, was a new one to Dixon. ‘I’ve come about the special subject,’ he said.

‘Oh yes. Do sit down.’

‘I won’t, thanks; I must be on my way in a moment. I just dropped in to tell you that I’ve been into the matter quite thoroughly with Miss O’Shaughnessy, Miss McCorquodale, and Miss ap Rhys Williams, and we’ve all finally made up our minds.’

‘Good. What conclusion did you come to?’

‘Well, I’m sorry to say that all three of the ladies have decided that the thing’s rather too formidable for them. Miss McCorquodale’s decided to do Mr Goldsmith’s Documents, and Miss O’Shaughnessy and Miss ap Rhys Williams are going to do the Professor’s subject.’

This announcement pained Dixon: he wanted the three pretty girls to have conquered their objections and opted for his subject because he was so nice and so attractive. He said: ‘Oh, well that’s rather a pity. What about you, Mr Michie?’

‘I’ve decided that your subject attracts me a good deal, and so I’d like to be put down officially for it, if I may.’

‘I see. So I shall just have you.’

‘Yes. Just me.’

There was a silence. Dixon scratched his chin. ‘Well, I’m sure we shall have some fun with it.’

‘I’m sure, too. Well, thank you very much; I’m sorry I barged in like that.’

‘Not at all; it was a great help. See you next term, then, Mr Michie.’

‘I’m coming to your lecture tonight, of course.’

‘What on earth are you going to do that for?’

‘The subject interests me, naturally. I think it must interest quite a lot of other people, too.’

‘Oh? How do you mean?’

‘Everybody I’ve mentioned it to says they’re coming. You should have a very good house, I think.’

‘That’s a comfort, I must say. Well, I hope you enjoy it.’

‘I’m pretty sure I shall. Thanks again. Good luck for tonight.’

‘I’ll need it. Cheero.’

When Michie had gone, Dixon reflected with some complacency that he hadn’t called him ‘sir’ once. But how horrible next term was going to be. On the other hand, he was beginning to feel more and more positively that there wasn’t going to be a next term as far as he was concerned. Not a University term, anyway.

He fingered his chin again. He’d better shave before he did anything else. After that he’d run up and see if Atkinson was in. His company, and perhaps some of his whisky, were just what Dixon felt he could do with before starting the evening.

I hope it isn’t too painful, Dixon,’ the Principal said.

Dixon’s hand went up involuntarily to his black eye. ‘Oh no, sir,’ he replied in a light tone. ‘I’m surprised it’s come up at all, really. It was quite a light knock; didn’t even break the skin.’

‘On the corner of the wash-hand basin, you said?’ another voice asked.

‘That’s right, Mr Gore-Urrquhart. One of these silly things one does occasionally. I dropped my razor, bent down for it, and — bang; there I was reeling about like a heavyweight.’
Gore-Urquhart nodded slowly. 'Most unfortunate,' he said. He looked Dixon up and down from under his heavy brow, and his lips twitched into a pout and back again two or three times. 'If I'd been asked, now,' he went on, 'I'd have said he'd got himself into a fight, eh, Principal?'

The Principal, a small ventricose man with a polished, rosy bald head, gave one of his laughs. These strongly recalled the peals of horrid mirth so often audible in films about murders in castles, and had been known, in the Principal's first few weeks at the College just after the war, to silence the conversations of an entire Common Room. Now, however, nobody even turned his head, and only Gore-Urquhart looked a little uneasy.

The fourth member of the quartet spoke up. 'Well, I hope it won't interfere with your reading from your ... from your ...' he said.

'Oh no, Professor,' Dixon said. 'I guarantee I could read that script blindfold, I've been through it so many times.'

Welch nodded. 'It's a good plan,' he said. 'I remember when I first began lecturing, I was silly enough just to write the stuff down and not bother about ...'

'Have you got anything new to tell us, Dixon?' the Principal asked.

'New, sir? Well, in this sort of ...'

'I mean it's a subject that's been fairly well worked over, isn't it? I don't know whether it's possible to get a new slant on it these days, but personally I should have thought ...'

Welch thrust in with 'It's hardly a question, sir, of ...'

A remarkable duet ensued, the Principal and Welch both going on talking without pause, the one raising his voice in pitch, the other in volume, giving between them the impression of some ambitious verse-speaking effect. Dixon found that he and Gore-Urquhart were staring at each other, while the room began to grow quiet except for the voices of the two contestants. Finally the Principal broke free, and, like an orchestra that has launched a soloist on his cadenza, Welch abruptly fell silent. 'Worth restating in every generation or not,' the Principal concluded.

There now appeared a diversion in the shape of the porter Macnichie with a tray of glasses of sherry. Dixon willed his hand to stay at his side until his three seniors had helped themselves, then let it bear the fullest remaining glass to his lips. The Registrar, who controlled the liquor supply on such occasions, was notorious for cutting it off altogether after the first couple of rounds, except from the Principal and whoever might be talking to him. Dixon knew he couldn't hope to stay in this group much longer and was determined to make the most of it. He felt slightly ill in an indefinable way, but swallowed half his new glassful at one go; it slid warmly down to join the previous three sherries and the half-dozen measures of Bill Atkinson's whisky. In a sense, but only in a sense, he was beginning not to worry about the lecture, which was to start in twenty minutes' time, at six-thirty.

He looked round the crowded Common Room, which seemed to contain everybody he knew or had ever known, apart from his parents. Mrs Welch was a few feet away talking to Johns, for whose presence in this room, normally inadmissible, she must be in some indirect way to blame. Beyond them were Bertrand and Christine, not saying a great deal to each other. Right over by the window Barclay, the Music Professor, was talking earnestly to the Professor of English, no doubt urging on him the necessity of voting for Dixon's removal when the College Council met at the end of the following week. In the other direction the Goldsmiths were laughing at something Beesley had said to them. Elsewhere were figures Dixon barely recognized: economists, medicals, geographers, social scientists, lawyers, engineers, mathematicians, philosophers, readers in Germanic and comparative philology, lektors, lecteurs, lectrices. He felt like going round and notifying each person individually of his preference that they should leave. There were several he'd never seen in his life before, who might be anything from Emeritus Professors of Egyptology to interior decorators waiting to start measuring up for new carpets. One large group was made up of local worthies: a couple of aldermen with their wives, a fashionable clergyman, a knighted physician, all of whom were members of the College Council, and at the edge of the group, Dixon saw with a start, the local composer he'd seen at Welch's arty week-end.
He looked round distractedly, but in vain, for the amateur violinist.

After a moment the Principal moved over to the local worthies and addressed some remark to the fashionable clergyman that was received with general laughter, except by the knighted physician, who stared coldly from face to face. Almost at the same time a signal from Mrs Welch drew Welch away and left Dixon with Gore-Urquhart, who now said: 'How long have you been in this game, then, Dixon?'

'Getting on for nine months now. They took me on last autumn.'

'I've a notion you're not too happy in it; am I right?'

'Yes, I think you are right, on the whole.'

'Where's the trouble? In you or in it?'

'Oh, both, I should say. They waste my time and I waste theirs.'

'Mm, I see. It's a waste of time teaching history, is it?'

Dixon resolved not to mind what he said to this man. 'No. Well taught and sensibly taught, history could do people a hell of a lot of good. But in practice it doesn't work out like that. Things get in the way. I don't quite see who's to blame for it. Bad teaching's the main thing. Not bad students, I mean.'

Gore-Urquhart nodded, then shot a quick glance at him. 'This lecture of yours tonight, now. Whose idea was it?'

'Professor Welch's. I could hardly refuse, of course. If it goes well it'll improve my standing here.'

'You're ambitious?'

'No. I've done badly here since I got the job. This lecture might help to save me getting the sack.'

'Here, laddie,' Gore-Urquhart said, and snatched two glasses of sherry from Maconochie's tray as he went towards the group that now included the Principal. Dixon thought perhaps he oughtn't to drink any more - he was already beginning to feel a little splendid - but took the glass that was held out to him and drank from it. 'Why have you come here tonight?' he asked.

'I've evaded your Principal so many times recently that I felt I had to come to this.'

'I can't see why you bother, you know. You're not dependent on the Principal. You're only letting yourself in for a lot of boredom.'

When Gore-Urquhart looked at him again, Dixon had a moment's trouble disposing of a slight spin of the head, caused by the other's out-of-focus face. 'I let myself in for several hours' boredom every day, Dixon. A couple more won't break my back.'

'Why do you stand it?'

'I want to influence people so they'll do what I think it's important they should do. I can't get 'em to do that unless I let 'em bore me first, you understand. Then just as they're delighting in having got me punch-drunk with talk I come back at 'em and make 'em do what I've got lined up for 'em.'

'I wish I could do that,' Dixon said enviously. 'When I'm punch-drunk with talk, which is what I am most of the time, that's when they come at me and make me do what they want me to do.' Apprehension and drink combined to break through another bulkhead in his mind and he went on eagerly: 'I'm the boredom-detector. I'm a finely-tuned instrument. If only I could get hold of a millionaire I'd be worth a bag of money to him. He could send me on ahead into dinners and cocktail-parties and night-clubs, just for five minutes, and then by looking at me he'd be able to read off the boredom-coefficient of any gathering. Like a canary down a mine; same idea. Then he'd know whether it was worth going in himself or not. He could send me in among the Rotarians and the stage crowd and the golfers and the arty types talking about statements of profiles rather than volumes and the musical... He stopped, aware that Gore-Urquhart's large smooth face had tilted over to one side and was being held towards his own. 'Sorry,' he muttered, 'I forgot...'

Gore-Urquhart looked him up and down and then covered one eye with a hand, afterwards drawing a finger down the side of his face and smiling slightly. Though it wasn't a smile of ordinary amusement, it wasn't unfriendly either. 'I recognize a fellow sufferer,' he said. Then his manner changed: 'What school did you go to, Dixon, if I may ask you?'

'Local grammar school.'
Gore-Urquhart nodded. The fashionable clergyman and one of the aldermen now came over, filled glasses in their hands, and drew him off to join their group round the Principal. Dixon couldn’t help admiring the way in which, without saying or doing anything specific, they established so effortlessly that he himself wasn’t expected to accompany them. Then, as he watched incuriously, he saw Gore-Urquhart fall slightly behind his two companions and look across to where the Goldsmiths were standing. Cecil and Beesley were deep in talk and didn’t notice Carol catching Gore-Urquhart’s eye. An almost imperceptible and quite indecipherable glance passed between them. This puzzled Dixon, of course, and in some way troubled him, but, deciding to ponder about it later, if ever, he drained his glass and went up to Christine and Bertrand. ‘Hallo, you two,’ he cried gaily. ‘Where have you been hiding?’

Christine flashed a look at Bertrand that made him not say whatever he’d been going to say, and said herself: ‘I’d no idea this was going to be such a grand affair. Half the big-wigs in the city must be here.’

‘I’d like us to go over to your uncle now, Christine,’ Bertrand said. ‘There are one or two things I want to discuss with him, if you remember.’

‘In a minute, Bertrand; there’s plenty of time,’ Christine said ‘dignantly’.

‘No no, there isn’t plenty of time; the thing’s due to start in about ten minutes, and that isn’t plenty of time for what I want to talk about.’

Dixon had noticed that Bertrand always said ‘No no’ instead of ‘No’, combining at small outlay a simultaneous lowering and raising of the eyebrows in verbal form. He wished he wouldn’t do that. Past Bertrand’s head, he could see Carol beginning to edge away from Cecil and Margaret – he noticed her for the first time – in his own direction. Quoting from a film he’d once seen, he said to Christine: ‘Better do as he says, lady, otherwise he’s liable to kick your teeth in.’

‘Run away and play, Dixon.’

‘Bertrand, how can you be so rude?’

‘Me be so rude? I like that. Me be so rude. What about him? Who the hell does he think he is? Telling you to . . .’

Christine had gone red. ‘Have you forgotten what I told you before we came?’

‘Look, Christine, I didn’t come here to talk to this. . . . this fellow, nor about him, I may say. I came here simply and solely to get hold of your uncle, and it’s now . . .’

‘Why, hallo, Bertie dear,’ Carol said behind him. ‘I want you. Come over here, will you?’

Bertrand had performed a start of surprise and half-turn in one movement. ‘Hallo, Carol, but I was just . . .’

‘I shan’t keep you a minute,’ Carol said, and gripped his arm. ‘I’ll return him in good condition,’ she added over her shoulder to Christine.

‘Well . . . hallo, Christine,’ Dixon said.

‘Oh, hallo.’

‘This really is the last time, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

He felt petulant and self-pitying. ‘You don’t seem to mind as much as I do.’

She looked at him for a moment, then abruptly turned her head aside, as if he were showing her a photograph in a book of forensic medicine. ‘I’ve done all my minding,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to do any more now. Neither will you if you’ve got any sense.’

‘I can’t help minding,’ he said. ‘Minding isn’t a thing you can do anything about. I can’t help going on with it.’

‘What’s the matter with your eye?’

‘Bertrand and I had a fight this afternoon.’

‘A fight? He didn’t say anything to me about it. What were you fighting about? A fight?’

‘He told me to keep off the grass where you were concerned, and I said I wouldn’t, so we started fighting.’

‘But we agreed . . . You haven’t changed your mind about . . .?’

‘No. I just wasn’t going to let him tell me what to do, that’s all.’

‘But fancy having a fight.’ She seemed to be repressing a laugh. ‘You lost, by the look of you.’
He didn’t like that, and remembered her tendency to grin during the hotel tea. ‘Not at all. Take a look at Bertrand’s ear before you start deciding who won and who lost.’

‘Which one?’

‘The right. But there probably won’t be much to see. The damage was mostly internal, I should think.’

‘Did you knock him over?’

‘Oh yes, right over. He stayed down for a bit, too.’

‘My God.’ She stared at him, her full, dry lips slightly apart. A pang of helpless desire made Dixon feel heavy and immovable, as if he were being talked to by Welch. Then he felt that never had he been reminded so clearly of his first meeting with her as in the last couple of minutes, and glared at her.

At this moment of silence, Bertrand suddenly reappeared from behind the wife of one of the aldermen with a quick shuffling movement, rather like a left-arm bowler coming into a batsman’s view round the umpire. His face was red; he was obviously almost beside himself with rage, either in its pure form or compounded with some other emotion. Carol followed him, looking inquisitive.

‘That’s enough of that,’ Bertrand said, his voice a choking bay. ‘This is just how I expected things to be.’ He caught hold of Christine’s arm and pulled her away with some violence. Before moving off, he said to Dixon: ‘Right, my lad. This is the finish for you. You’d better start looking for another job. I mean that.’ Christine gave Dixon a brief, startled glance over her shoulder as she was virtually frog-marched towards the group that contained her uncle. Carol too looked at Dixon, a speculative look. Then she followed the other two.

A loud homicidal-maniac laugh came from the Principal.

Dixon experienced a return of the ill feeling he’d had some minutes before. Then he found his thoughts being blindly swept along by panic. Bertrand must mean what he said; whatever it was that went on in Welch’s head, the facts his son had to reveal must surely have a significant influence – and even if they didn’t, there were his wife’s contributions to add to the scale, that was if she hadn’t added them already on her own initiative. Dixon realized he’d been wrong in thinking that the Bertrand-campaign was over and won; the last shot had still to be fired, and he was in the open and unarmed. What he’d warned himself of at the outset had really happened; he’d let himself be carried away, the joy of battle really had robbed him of his discretion and prudence. He was helpless; above all, helpless to prevent that bearded slob from standing there with his hand on Christine’s arm, confident, proprietary, victorious. She stood by her boy-friend in an awkward, uncomfortable attitude, even an ungraceful one, but for Dixon’s money there could be no more beautiful way for a woman to stand.

‘Taking your last look, eh, James?’

At this sudden appearance of Margaret on his blind side, Dixon felt like a man fighting a policeman who sees another approaching on a horse. It dazed him. ‘What?’ he said.

‘You’d better have a good look at her, hadn’t you? You won’t get another chance.’

‘No, I don’t suppose I . . .’

‘Unless of course you’ve fixed it to run up to London every so often, just to keep in touch.’

Dixon stared into her face, genuinely surprised, surprised too that Margaret could, at this stage, do anything to surprise him. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked dully.

‘No use pretending, is there? Doesn’t take much imagination to see what you’re thinking.’ The tip of her nose wiggled slightly as she talked, in the way it always did. She stood with her feet apart and her arms crossed on her breast, as Dixon had seen her many times, making small-talk in this room or one of the little teaching-rooms upstairs. She didn’t look at all strained, or excited, or ill-at-ease, or annoyed.

Dixon heaved a sigh of weariness before plunging in with the kind of protests and excuses laid down for him by the conventions of this particular pursuit. As he talked, he reflected how easily, by what deft sleight-of-hand, he’d been deprived of his one moral advantage in recent dealings with Margaret: his uninfluenced decision to take no more active interest in Christine. It was a bit rough to be reproached for hankering after what he’d voluntarily turned down. His spirits were so low that he wanted to lie down and pant like
a dog; jobless, Christineless, and now grand-slammed in the Margaret game.

With no conclusion reached, their conversation was brought to an end by the drift of the Principal’s group towards the door. Gore-Urquhart was apparently deep in talk with Bertrand and Christine. Welch called: ‘Ready, Dixon?’ With Mrs Welch at his side, he more than ever resembled an old boxer, given to a bit of poaching now and then, standing with his ex-kitchenmaid wife.

‘See you in the Hall, Professor,’ Dixon called back; then, with a word to Margaret, he hurried out and into the Staff Cloakroom. Stage-fright was upon him now; his hands were cold and damp, his legs felt like flaccid rubber tubes filled with fine sand, he had difficulty in controlling his breathing. While he was using the lavatory, he began making his Evelyn Waugh face, then abandoned it in favour of one more savage than any he normally used. Gripping his tongue between his teeth, he made his cheeks expand into little hemispherical balloons; he forced his upper lip downwards into an idiotic pout; he protruded his chin like the blade of a shovel. Throughout, he alternately dilated and crossed his eyes. Turning away, he found himself confronted by Gore-Urquhart, allowed his face to collapse, and said: ‘Oh, hallo’.

‘Hallo, Dixon,’ Gore-Urquhart said, walking on past him.

Dixon went to the mirror above the wash-basin and examined his eye. It looked a good many shades brighter than he’d remembered it. In the circumstances, any attempt at smartness of clothes or hair seemed beside the point. He took from a shelf the stolen R.A.F. file that contained his lecture-script and was about to leave when Gore-Urquhart called:

‘Hold on a minute, Dixon, will you?’

Dixon stopped and turned. Gore-Urquhart approached and stood gazing at him intently, as if planning a funny sketch of him, in charcoal, perhaps, or ink-wash, to be begun as soon as the lecture was over. After a moment, he said:

‘Are you maybe feeling a little nervous, laddie?’

‘Very nervous.’

Gore-Urquhart nodded and produced a slim but substantial flask from his ill-fitting clothes. ‘Have a swig.’

‘Thanks.’ Deciding not to bother about coughing, Dixon took a good pull at what was evidently neat Scotch whisky – more evidently than any drink he’d ever had. He coughed wildly. ‘Ah, it’s good stuff, that. Have another swig.’

‘Thanks.’ Dixon did exactly as before, then, gasping and wiping his mouth on his sleeve, gave the flask back. ‘I’m very grateful for that.’

‘It’ll do you a power of good. Out of my sherry-cask. Well, we’d best get along if we don’t want to keep them waiting.’

The last stragglers were still leaving the Common Room and moving up the stairs. At the stairhead a little group was waiting: the Goldsmiths, Bertrand, Christine, Welch, Beesley, and the other lecturers in the History Department.

‘We may as well go up the front, sir,’ Bertrand said.

They began moving into the Hall, which was disconcertingly full. The front row of the gallery held an unbroken line of students. There was a loud mixture of conversations.

‘Well, give it to them, Jim,’ Carol said.

‘All the best, old boy,’ Cecil said.

‘Best of luck, Jim,’ Beesley said. They all moved away into their seats.

‘Here you go then, laddie,’ Gore-Urquhart said in an undertone. ‘No need to worry; to hell with all this.’ He gripped Dixon’s arm and withdrew.

Aware that a shuffling for places was going on behind him, Dixon followed Welch on to the platform. The principal and the father of the two aldermen were already there. Dixon found that he felt rather drunk.

WELCH uttered the preludial blaring sound, cognate with his son’s bay, with which he was accustomed to call for silence at the start of a lecture; Dixon had heard students imitating it. A hush gradually fell. ‘We are here tonight’, he informed the audience, ‘to listen to a lecture.’

While Welch talked, his body swaying to and fro, its upper
used two if she had used two? No, she forgot to tell a lie there. She thought it wouldn't matter. She couldn't predict my getting hold of you in this fashion. I can't blame her for that: even the best planner can't think of everything. She'd have checked up, of course, that she'd be in no danger with one bottle. Perhaps two bottles wouldn't have killed her, either, but she wasn't taking any risks.' He picked up his drink and put half of it down. 'Well, I'm extremely grateful to you for doing this for me. I'm completely free of her now. No more worrying about how she is, thank God. That's worth a great deal.' He gazed at Dixon with his hair falling over his brow. 'And you're free of her too, I hope.'

'You didn't even mention the question of marriage to her, did you?'

'No, I wasn't fool enough for that. She told you I did, I suppose?'

'Yes. And you didn't go off to Wales with a girl around that time either?'

'Unfortunately not. I went to Wales, yes, but that was for my firm. They don't provide their representatives with girls to go away with; more's the pity.' He finished his drink and stood up, his manner quietening. 'I hope I've removed your suspicions of me. I've been very glad to meet you, and I'd like to thank you for what you've done.' He leaned forward over Dixon and lowered his voice further. 'Don't try to help her any more; it's too dangerous for you. I know what I'm talking about. She doesn't need any help either, you know, really. The best of luck to you. Good-bye.'

They shook hands and Catchpole strode out, his tie flapping. Dixon finished his drink and left a couple of minutes later. He strolled back to the digs through the lunch-time crowds. All the facts seemed to fit, but Margaret had fixed herself too firmly in his life and his emotions to be pushed out of them by a mere recital of facts. Failing some other purgative agent than facts, he could foresee himself coming to disbelieve this lot altogether.

Miss Cutler provided lunch, for those who asked for it, at one o'clock. He'd planned to take advantage of this and catch a train home just after two. Entering the dining-room, he encountered Bill Atkinson sitting at the table reading a new number of the wrestling periodical to which he subscribed. He looked up at Dixon and, as sometimes happened, addressed a remark to him. 'Just had your popsy through on the blower,' he said.

'Oh God. What did she want?'

'Don't say "Oh God."' He frowned threateningly. 'I don't mean the one that gets me down, the one that's always chucking dummies, I mean the other, the one you say belongs to the bearded sportsman.'

'Christine?'

'Yes. Christine,' Atkinson said, contriving to make the name sound like a term of abuse.

'What did she want, Bill? This might be important.' Atkinson turned to the front page of his journal, where two Laocoons were interlocked. He indicated that the conversation was still in existence by saying: 'Wait a minute.' After reading attentively something he'd written in the margin, he added in a wounded tone: 'I didn't get all of it, but the main thing is her train goes at one-fifty.'

'What, today? I heard she wasn't going for a few days yet.'

'I can't help what you heard. I'm telling you what I heard. She said she had some news for you that she couldn't tell me over the old phone, and that if you wanted to see her again you could see her off on this one-fifty caper. It was up to you, she said. She seemed a bit set on the idea that it was up to you, but don't ask me what she meant by it, because she didn't let on. She did say she'd "understand" if you didn't come. Don't ask me to translate that, either.' He added that the train referred to was leaving, not from the main city station, but from the smaller one near Welch's house. Some trains not originating from the city stopped at this station on their way towards London.

'I'd better get moving, then,' Dixon said, making calculations.

'You had. I'll tell the bag you won't be wanting your lunch. Go and get on that bus.' Atkinson lowered his face towards his paper.

Dixon ran out into the street. He felt as if he'd been hurrying
all his life. Why wasn't she getting a train from the city station? There was an excellent one to London at three-twenty, he knew. What was her news? At any rate, he had some for her; two lots, in fact. Did her unexpected departure mean that she and Bertrand had had another row? A bus was due to turn up College Road between one-ten and one-fifteen. It was that now. The next was at one-thirty-five or so. Hopeless. He ran faster. No, she wouldn't have left just because of a row. He'd stake anything on her not being the type to take a revenge of that sort for a thing of that sort. Oh, hell, her news was probably just that 'Uncle Julius' was going to offer him a job. She wouldn't have counted on his having heard so quickly. Would she have asked him to come all this way just to tell him that? Or was it all just an excuse for seeing him again? But why should she want to do that?

He suddenly bounded aside into the road, where, some yards away, a large taxi-like car was waiting in a side-street to insert itself in the further stream of traffic. Dixon cut through the nearer stream, bawling 'Taxi! Taxi.' Just what he wanted. In a moment he was able to make for the far pavement, but the taxi simultaneously drove out into the main road and began to gather speed away from him. 'Taxi! Taxi.' He was nearly there when the face of the Principal's wife, wearing a hat like a biretta, appeared at the back window, frowning at him from what had looked like an empty rear compartment. The taxi was clearly not a taxi, but the Principal's car. Was the Principal in it too? Dixon veered away through an open gate into someone's front garden, where he knelt for a minute behind the hedge. Was it really so important for him to meet Christine at the station? Wouldn't he be able to get in touch with her afterwards through 'Uncle Julius'? Had he still got the piece of paper with her phone number on it?

A rapping on glass made him turn round. An old lady and a big parrot were glaring at him from a ground-floor window. He bowed deeply, then remembered his bus and ran out on to the pavement. A couple of hundred yards away a bus was coming slowly up the hill from the city. It was too far off for him to be able to read its destination screen, and in any case his exertions had misted his glasses over. But it must be the one and he must get it. He sensed, as far as he could sense anything at the moment, that something would go badly wrong if he failed to turn up at the station, that something he wanted would be withdrawn. He began running even faster, so that people began to slip out of his way and look at him with wondering resentment. The bus, unable for the moment to begin its turn into College Road, was halted in mid-traffic and was, he could now see, his bus. He ran steadily towards the corner of College Road, but the bus began moving again and reached it before him. When he next saw the bus, it was halted about fifty yards away up College Road, and someone had just got on.

Dixon broke into a frenzied, lung-igniting sprint, while the conductor watched him immobile from the platform. When he was half-way to the bus, this official rang the bell, the driver let in the clutch, and the wheels began to turn. Dixon found he was even better at running than he'd thought, but when the gap between man and bus had narrowed to perhaps five yards, it began to widen rapidly. Dixon stopped running and favoured the conductor, who was still watching unemotionally, with the best-known obscene gesture. At once the conductor rang the bell again and the bus stopped abruptly. Dixon hesitated for a moment, then trotted lightly up to the bus and boarded it with some diffidence. He found himself unwilling to meet the eye of the conductor, who now said admiringly 'Well run, wacker' and rang the bell for the third time.

Dixon gasped out a question about the bus's time of arrival at the station, which was where it terminated its run, got a civil but evasive answer, spent a few moments beating down the stares of the nearby passengers, and climbed effortlessly to the top deck. There he made his rebounding way to the front seat and collapsed into it without being able to afford the breath to groan. He began swallowing the thick burning substance that filled his mouth and throat, panted energetically for a time, and tremulously took out his packet of small cigarettes and his matches. After reading the joke on the back of the matchbox a few times and laughing at it, he lit a cigarette; this was the only action he could take for the moment.
He looked out of the window; the road unfolded itself in front of him, and he couldn’t help feeling some sort of exhilaration, especially at the brightness of the landscape under the sun. Beyond the lines of green-tiled semi-detached villas open fields were already appearing, and through some trees he could see a gleam of water.

Christine had said that she’d ‘understand’ if he failed to turn up to see her off. What did that mean? Did it mean that she ‘understood’ that his commitments with Margaret would have decided him not to come? Or had it some vaguely unwelcome overtone, implying that she’d ‘understand’ that the whole thing between them now appeared to him as a romantic mistake, Margaret or no Margaret? He couldn’t allow Christine to escape him today; if she did he might not see her again at all. Not at all; that was a disagreeable phrase. Suddenly his face altered, seeming to become all nose and glasses; the bus had moved up behind a lorry slowly drawing along an elaborate trailer, which had a notice on it recommending caution and saying how many feet long it was. A smaller notice added further grounds for caution in the elliptic form: Air brakes. Lorry, trailer, and bus began moving, at a steady twelve miles an hour, round what gave firm promise of being a long series of bends. With difficulty Dixon snatched his gaze from the back of the trailer and, to fortify himself, began thinking about what Catchpole had said to him about Margaret.

He realized at once that his mind had been made up as soon as he decided to make this journey. For the first time he really felt that it was no use trying to save those who fundamentally would rather not be saved. To go on trying would not merely be to yield to pity and sentimentality, but wrong and, to pursue it to its conclusion, inhumane. It was all very bad luck on Margaret, and probably derived, as he’d thought before, from the anterior bad luck of being sexually unattractive. Christine’s more normal, i.e. less unworkable, character no doubt resulted, in part at any rate, from having been lucky with her face and figure. But that was simply that. To write things down as luck wasn’t the same as writing them off as non-existent or in some way beneath consideration. Christine was still nicer and prettier than Margaret, and all the deductions that could be drawn from the fact should be drawn: there was no end to the ways in which nice things are nicer than nasty ones. It had been luck, too, that had freed him from pity’s adhesive plaster; if Catchpole had been a different sort of man, he, Dixon, would still be wrapped up as firmly as ever. And now he badly needed another dose of luck. If it came, he might yet prove to be of use to somebody.

The conductor now appeared and negotiated with Dixon about his ticket. When this was over, he said: ‘One forty-three we’re due at the station. I looked it up.

‘Oh. Shall we be on time, do you think?’

‘Couldn’t say, I’m sorry. Not if we keep crawling behind this Raf contraption we shan’t, I shouldn’t think. Train to catch?’

‘Well, I want to see someone who’s getting the one-fifty.’

‘Shouldn’t build on it if I were you.’ He lingered, no doubt to examine Dixon’s black eye.

‘Thanks,’ Dixon said dismissively.

They entered a long stretch of straight road, with a slight dip in the middle so that every yard of its empty surface was visible. Far ahead an emaciated brown hand appeared from the lorry’s cab and made a writhing, beckoning movement. The driver of the bus ignored this invitation in favour of drawing to a gradual halt by a bus-stop outside a row of thatched cottages. The foreshortened bulks of two old women dressed in black waited until the bus was quenched of all motion before clutching each other and edging with sidelong caution out of Dixon’s view towards the platform. In a moment he heard their voices crying unintelligibly to the conductor, then activity seemed to cease. At least five seconds passed; Dixon stirred elaborately at his post, then twisted himself about looking for anything that might have had a share in causing this caesura in his journey. He could detect nothing of this kind. Was the driver slumped in his seat, the victim of syncope, or had he suddenly got an idea for a poem? For a moment longer the pose prolonged itself; then the picture of sleepy rustic calm was modified by the fairly sudden emergence from a cottage some yards beyond of a third
'No restaurant car.'
'What about the one-fifty?'
'No one-fifty. Haven't got it mixed up with the one-forty, by any chance?'
Dixon swallowed. 'I think I must have done,' he said.
'Thanks.'
'Sorry, George.'
Nodding mechanically, Dixon turned away. Bill Atkinson must have made a mistake in taking down Christine's message. But it wasn't like Atkinson to make mistakes of that sort. Perhaps it had been Christine who'd made the mistake. It didn't really matter. He walked slowly to the entrance and stood looking out from the shadows at the little sunlit square. He still had his job. And it wouldn't be very difficult to get in touch with Christine. It was only that he felt it would be too late when he did. But, anyway, he'd met her and talked to her a few times. Thank God for that.

As he watched, wondering what to do next, he caught sight of a car with a damaged wing moving uncertainly round a Post Office van. Something about this car held Dixon's attention. It began to crawl towards him, roaring like a bulldozer. The roar was cut off by a spine-tingling snort of cogs and the car froze in its tracks. A tallish blonde girl wearing a wine-coloured costume and carrying a mackintosh and a large suitcase got out and began hurrying towards the spot where Dixon stood.

Dixon skipped out of sight behind a pillar, as best he could under the impact of what must surely be a lesion of the diaphragm. How could he, of all people, have ignored the importance of Welch's car-driving habits?

Another frenzy of mechanical rage outside told him that Welch was still at the wheel. Good; perhaps he was under orders to return without delay. Dixon had no feelings or thoughts beyond the immediate situation. He heard Christine's steps approaching and tried to press himself back into the pillar. Her feet took a few paces on the boards of the entrance-hall; she came into view four or five feet away, turned her head, and saw him at once. Her face broke into a smile of what seemed to him pure affection. 'You got my message, then,' she said. She looked ridiculously pretty.

'Come here, Christine, quickly.' He drew her into the shelter of his pillar. 'Just a minute.'
She stared about her and then at him. 'But we ought to be running up on to the platform. My train's nearly due.'

'Your train's gone. You'll have to wait for the next. At least the next.'
'That clock says I've got one more minute. I can just . . .'
'No, it's gone, I tell you. It went at one-forty.'
'It couldn't have done.'
'It could and did. I asked the man.'
'But Mr Welch said it went at one-fifty.'
'Oh, he did, did he? That explains everything. He was wrong about that, you see.'
'Are you sure? Why are we hiding? Are we hiding?'
Ignoring her, his hand unnoticed on her arm, Dixon leant carefully past her. Welch was now broadside-on across the main exit from the square. 'Right, well we'll just give the bloody old fool time to get clear, and then we'll go and have a drink.' He would begin with an octuple whisky. 'You've had lunch, I suppose?'
'Yes, but I could hardly eat a thing.'
'Not like you, that. Well, I haven't had any, so we'll have some together. I know a hotel not far from here. I used to go there with Margaret in the old days.'
They left Christine's case in the luggage-office and walked out into the square. 'A good thing old Welch didn't insist on putting you on the train,' Dixon said.
'Yes . . . Actually I was the one who insisted.'
'I don't blame you.' Dixon's physical discomfort grew steadily at the thought of Christine's 'news', now nearing revelation. He wanted to bet himself it would be bad so that
he might stand a chance of its being good. His head, and an inaccessible part of his back, itched.

'I wanted to get away as quickly as I could from the whole bunch of them. I couldn't bear any of them for another moment. A fresh one arrived last night.'

'A fresh one?'

'Yes. Mitchell or some such name.'

'Oh, I know. You mean Michel.'

'Do I? I picked the first train I could get.'

'What's happened? That you wanted to tell me.' He tried to force his spirits down, to expect nothing but unexpected and very nasty nastiness.

She looked at him, and he again noticed that the whites of her eyes were a very light blue. 'I've finished with Bertrand.' She spoke as if of a household detergent that had proved unsatisfactory.

'Why? For good?'

'Yes. Do you want to hear about it?'

'Come on.'

'You remember me and Carol Goldsmith leaving your lecture in the middle yesterday?'

Dixon understood, and felt breathless. 'I know. She told you something, didn't she? I know what she told you.'

They stopped walking involuntarily. Dixon put out his tongue at an old woman who was staring at them. Christine said: 'You knew about Bertrand and her all the time, didn't you? I knew you did.' She looked as if she were going to laugh.

'Yes. What made her tell you?'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I couldn't. It wouldn't have done me any good. What made Carol tell you?'

'She hated him for taking her for granted. I didn't mind what he'd done before he started going about with me, but it was wrong of him to try to keep us both on a string, Carol and me. She said he asked her to come away with him the night we all went to the theatre. He was quite sure she would. She said she began by hating me and then she saw the way he was treating me, things like the way he behaved at the sherry thing. Then she saw he was the one to blame, not me.'

She stood with her shoulders a little hunched, saying all this quickly and with embarrassment, her back to a shop-window full of brassières, corsets, and suspender-belts. The lowered blind shadowed her face as she looked almost slyly at him, possibly to see whether she'd said enough to satisfy his curiosity.

'A bit noble of her, wasn't it? Bertrand won't look at her after this.'

'Oh, she doesn't want him to. I gather . . .'

'Well?'

'I sort of gathered from what she said that there's someone else in the background now. I don't know who.'

Dixon was pretty sure he did; the last thread was untangled. He took Christine's arm and walked off with her. 'That's enough,' he said.

'There's a lot more about what he told her about . . .'

'Later.' A leer of happiness suffused Dixon's face. He said: 'I think you might like to hear this. I am going to have nothing more to do with Margaret. Something's come up - never mind what for now - which means I needn't bother with her any more.'

'What, you mean you're absolutely . . .?'

'I'll tell you all about it later, I promise. Don't let's think about it now.'

'All right. But it is genuine, isn't it?'

'Of course, perfectly genuine.'

'Well then, in that case . . .'

'That's right. Tell me: what are you going to do this afternoon?'

'I suppose I shall have to go back to London, shan't I?'

'Do you mind if I come with you?'

'What's all this?' She pulled at his arm until he looked at her. 'What's going on? There's something else, isn't there? What is it?'

'I've got to find somewhere to live.'

'Why? I thought you lived somewhere in this part of the world.'
‘Didn’t Uncle Julius tell you about my new job?’
‘For goodness’ sake tell me about this properly, Jim. Don’t tease me.’

While he explained, he pronounced the names to himself: Bayswater, Knightsbridge, Notting Hill Gate, Pimlico, Belgrave Square, Wapping, Chelsea. No, not Chelsea.

‘I knew he had something up that sleeve of his,’ Christine was saying. ‘I didn’t know that’d be it, though. I hope you’ll be able to put up with him. Couldn’t be better, could it? I say, there won’t be any difficulty about you leaving your job with the University here, will there?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘What job is it, by the way? The one he’s given you?’

‘The one Bertrand thought he was going to get.’

Christine began laughing noisily and blushing at the same time. Dixon laughed too. He thought what a pity it was that all his faces were designed to express rage or loathing. Now that something had happened which really deserved a face, he’d none to celebrate it with. As a kind of token, he made his Sex Life in Ancient Roman face. Then he noticed something ahead of them and slowed in his walk. He nudged Christine.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

‘See that car?’ It was Welch’s, parked slightly nearer one kerb than the other, outside a teashop with green linen curtains and copper pots on the window-sills. ‘What’s it doing there?’

‘He’s picking up Bertrand and the others, I suppose. Bertrand said he wasn’t going to have lunch in the same house with me after what I said to him. Hurry up, Jim, before they come out.’

Just as they drew level with the shop-window, the door opened and a crowd of Welches came out and blocked the pavement. One of them was clearly the effeminate writing Michel, on stage at last just as the curtain was about to ring down. He was a tall pale young man with long pale hair protruding from under a pale corduroy cap. Sensing the approach of passers-by, the whole group, with the natural exception of Welch himself, began automatically shifting about out of the way. Dixon squeezed Christine’s arm encouragingly and walked up to them. ‘Excuse me,’ he said in a fruity comic-butler voice.

On Mrs Welch’s face appeared an expression of imminent vomiting; Dixon inclined his head indulgently to her. (He remembered something in a book about success making people humble, tolerant, and kind.) The incident was almost closed when he saw that not only were Welch and Bertrand both present, but Welch’s fishing-hat and Bertrand’s beret were there too. The beret, however, was on Welch’s head, the fishing-hat on Bertrand’s. In these guises, and standing rigid with popping eyes, as both were, they had a look of being Gide and Lytton Strachey, represented in waxwork form by a prentice hand. Dixon drew in breath to denominate them both, then blew it all out again in a howl of laughter. His steps faltered; his body sagged as if he’d been knifed. With Christine tugging at his arm he halted in the middle of the group, slowly doubling up like a man with the stitch, his spectacles misting over with the exertion of it, his mouth stuck ajar in a rictus of agony. ‘You’re...’ he said. ‘He’s...’

The Welches withdrew and began getting into their car. Moaning, Dixon allowed Christine to lead him away up the street. The whinnying and clanging of Welch’s self-starter began behind them, growing fainter and fainter as they walked on until it was altogether overlaid by the other noises of the town and by their own voices.