



GOOD APPLE

**FROM LONELY BLACKMAILER
TO CALCULATING KILLER**

By the master of historical crime

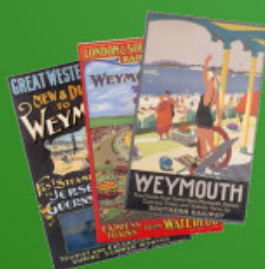
Merlin Smallbone

First of the *Department Five* series

GOOD APPLE

BOOK ONE 1921

Bored and lonely, blackmailer and WWI shirker Tom Putt jumps at the invitation to visit an ex-army chum in Dorset. He spots blackmail and teams up with the Chief Constable to bait a trap... But Scotland Yard won't act which suggests corruption. Tom investigates further. He makes enemies and friends in the Metropolitan Police. Now he's been 'adopted' by the Chief Constable's wife, Tom uses his criminal skills to help Dorset police ensnare men who were untouchable. Dorset police manage to keep one step ahead of London police. Tom shows he's good at making families and getting people to be friends then work closely together to save tired businesses and deal with unsavoury crimes. By the end, after only eight months he's spread happiness, is about to get married, fancies being a business investigator and might try spying.



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Preview

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This is the first of a series of three which should be read in sequence.

Good Apple

Book 1

Merlin Smallbone

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First edit print 20 Aug 2015

Small edits July 2016, Jan 17

Reformatted + ebook : Jan 17

Reformatted + PDF and Paperback : 9 Mar 17

Lots of minor edits 12 Oct 18

Produced on 8 Apr 2019 at 19:27:32

MSBC : G1-C-11

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Accuracy

This series is set in a place, mostly the English County of Dorset, in the South of England about 120 miles South West of London; and a time, 1921 onwards. The background of politics and very shaky economies in Britain and Europe were current affairs at the time. For example the *Geddes Axe* was an across the board cut in civil servants including the police. The 1920s would see a social and political confrontation in Britain while in Europe there was a lot worse. Nearly all the characters and events are fictional but Jeremiah Lynch existed and was one of the original Flying Squad officers and he was instrumental in the prosecution of fraudster Horatio Bottomley. William Horwood also existed and wasn't much

liked by his men and there was a stink of corruption in the Metropolitan Police. Sir Henry Wilson was assassinated on 22nd June 1922, but the tip-off from Dorset is fictional.

Practically all long distance travel was by train. Dorchester was about three and a half hours from London by a good train by the London and South Western Railway (LSWR) route via Bournemouth, Southampton, Basingstoke and Waterloo terminus. Just as you can enjoy the idealised LSWR railway posters of the time so please enjoy a world that never quite existed.

London, May 1921

I was waiting at one of my clubs for old army chum Boffo Bracegirdle so we could have lunch. I normally have three clubs at any one time as they're a good source of victims. Some of my business cards say *Thomas Putt – Researcher*, others *Charles Ross – Researcher* and I like to give the impression that 'researcher' might include the investigatory skills of Sherlock Holmes, especially the unwholesome aspects. This gives me many openings into convoluted and blackmailable lives. Even those investigations that couldn't be exploited were paid for. As a researcher I keep meticulous records, something I learned by necessity in the Indian Army before the war, so I would trace a client's problems back through the sources so as to find similar dark crevices to exploit. It was very interesting detective work and profitable. The only trouble was that I kept making enemies and some day one of them might rebel.

Boffo arrived complaining of the way a May shower in London brought smuts and stinging eyes while in Dorset it brought fresh ozone and sparkling colours to the countryside flowers. We exchanged greetings but he wasn't enthusiastic and my own outlook had been rather jaded recently. I'd just discovered the idiotic fun to be had with a magnifying glass. As we waited for our lunch I played with the glass between us for effect. Huge distorted eyes then lips

and so on. Then I played it over my crutch under cover of the table. None of this seemed to cheer him up. Captain Bedevere Bracegirdle, scion of the Dorset branch, makers of wire rope, used all over the world apparently. As a 'researcher' I was an expert in reading faces and stances. Lunch wasn't very entertaining. I don't talk about my business. I admitted to him that I didn't really have much of a social life. "Girls, dancing and Bridge Clubs seem to happen to other people Boffo." He'd inherited the family estate and business three months ago but he wasn't forthcoming on anything. He simply asked me down for a weekend. He muttered that I would see for myself. "Oho. Ugly but rich is she and you want uncle Tom's advice?"

"No! I can't talk about it here Tom."

I could see he was upset and as he was my only army chum, I promised to lend a practical and sympathetic ear. "It's about time I took a closer look at some wire rope." He looked disappointed. "I bet you don't get many wire rope enthusiasts." I mimed examining something with my magnifier. "Shall I'll be there Friday teatime old boy? Hey! I'm not going to get stranded there am I?" Boffo sighed. I don't like to see a chap flat. "I say you're looking rather weary. I'll bring a concoction or contraption to cheer you up." This didn't seem to lift his spirits as I'd hoped. "Stranded? Stranded as in strands of wire."

At last he seemed to perk up. "Ah! Yes. Stranded as in strands of wire not stranded as in marooned upon a tropic isle." Realisation dawned but then his face turned into the scowl of an Egyptian

beggar denied alms. "Aristotle made that joke. If you can't be original then don't bother coming."

"Oh sorry old chap. Didn't mean to open old wounds and all that. It was original for me. Just made it up on the spot." I offered him one of my better cigars I keep for just this sort of tense occasion. After lighting it for him I reached for my pipe but remembered that the Club Steward had respectfully requested I stick to more conventional smoking apparatus. I had to consume the last of my peace-offering cigars. Sotto-voce I said "There's nothing, ah-em, about the wire business that's on your mind is there Boffo? Everything tickety-boo?"

I'd got to know Boffo when we were serving fourteen days in jug together because we'd whitewashed the Colonel's polo ponies after we'd overheard him say "the lighter the better". We were drunk and learned the Colonel didn't have a sense of humour. Happy days. How the women must have wept as we boarded the train for Blighty and some Hun-bashing. By the time we'd braved the grey waters full of submarines the reason for leaving our horses in India became apparent. Cavalry were suddenly obsolete. When we realised wheeling in formation and impressing the natives wasn't on the menu we were scared. And trapped. Machine guns and trenches were not for me. The two of us debated what to do as we consumed a bottle of whiskey. I've never had any reason to be honest so my suggestion was blackmailing the officers. Although as a useless runt he'd been stuck in the Kings 99th shit shovellers, his father had

contacts and he could spout bullshit on anything to do with factories and machinery. Under the influence of Mister Johnny Walker he decided to become an expert in the impossible art of fighting at night. "Secret weapons must take time to get ready and obviously are secret so nobody can find out exactly what you're doing Boffo." As the level in the bottle sank he improved his vision of visiting friends around the country on the pretext of perfecting technicalities while my vision faded. By dawn we'd decided to go our separate ways but help each other. He brought the camera and I used it to see there were no questions asked when Boffo applied for leave and a travel allowance to build his reputation. Using the camera, my brains, various chemicals and, if I recall correctly, cochineal and egg-white, we invented fake passes making us members of the invented *Air Police* and another for the *Ultra-steel research board*. Both of these had photographs of ourselves in uniform with the identifying insignia obviously painted-out but also shoulder rank markings, which neither of us had, painted out. We were to be men of mystery to any that chose to take a closer look.

As my 'customers' became casualties in Flanders so I had to keep dodging keen newcomers who thought it was about time I had my chance of glory in France. I was almost exposed when the 14th were officially disbanded to become a reconnaissance unit. On the advice of Boffo I got a transfer to a training battalion. With my initial help he'd got a foothold in weird warfare. He had a narrow escape when he stuck his head over the parapet in a meeting of boffins

on how Chlorine might be used but pleaded asthma to get out of getting near the stuff. Very wise from what he told me later. Then a change came over him. Tanks! Tanks, wireless and night photography! He had to explain what these tanks were. He actually helped make tanks work by getting his industrial contacts involved where it mattered. I was recruited as a supposedly expert reconnaissance man to sit at base and organise training and cameras for crews. I was back with the cavalry in a way, and it made me proud to be doing something for the King and Country. Just so long as nobody was shooting at me. Now I knew the dodges I could seek out the perpetrators and demand a cut.

After the war Boffo was a small captain of industry as his father's health declined. He had medals for his 'secret' war effort, and knew many industrialists. I know he had a guilty secret, but we'd long ago understood the need for trust amongst thieves. I liked him and wished him well. It was me who pulled Josephine out of the ornamental pond at Boffo Towers as I called it, or Girdle Hall as it's shown on the Ordnance Survey. I'd always assumed twins were the same sex but apparently I was ignorant. Boffo blamed me but I knew I was completely innocent. To me Jo was one of the family and I'd never have touched her except to dance and be a jolly partner who was pleased with her without being besotted. It was like brother and sister. I'm not a coward. Well I am if the alternative is certain death. In the spring of 1918 Toffs from the 77th Wrexham mud-sloggers or some such were billeted in bell-tents by the lake at end of the park. I'd been

down there of course, with whiskey, to help discover the less circumspect officers. Naturally the couple I selected for softening-up were 'exceptional and perhaps just what was needed for something a bit special'. I'm absolutely sure neither of them molested Jo. The Colonel and his coterie looked a bit provincial and all had Welsh accents but would Jo have let any one of them get near her? I doubt it. So why did she end up face down in the fountain? I'd been chatting to her only half an hour before and we'd had a dance. When we found her, I can't remember the details, I lead the charge but in the dim light of the hall's ballroom curtained windows it was an expedition into the unknown. I was sure she was a dead Ophelia as I recognised a bare foot poking out of the midnight water between a jumbled mass of lily pads. I stupidly called "Jo!" as if a corpse could hear me. The next thing I remember is splashing into the ornamental fountain pond. Looking back on it there was no time in my life that I'd ever ignored my own discomfort or danger. I was a brave rescuer with no thought for my own safety! I jumped into the fountain. It came up to my knees! The lily leaves gave way and the stems were a clinging annoyance as they gripped at my arms and legs. I had to understand this new terrain then negotiate it without making a fuss. By now lights were appearing as candles and Tommy-torches were sweeping across the black water. Then came the bombardment of instructions. I reached the limp body of Jo in a clinging curtain of ball-gown. We had to go through the heroics. They tell me I was 'efficient'. They tell me I recovered the body with great intelligence and speed, keeping its

head above water and even though it was only five yards I was the one who made the rescue possible. Jo recovered. I didn't. I'd never been brave before in my life and now I was a hero for a girl who had been pretending! It wasn't me. I was a fraud to myself and I couldn't face being married and spied-on and questioned and drag her into my crimes.

Now in 1921 I was an ex-soldier with hints of scientific knowledge that might excite some interest and make people wonder what I really did. What I really did was spend my empty days in the Central Library researching anything rather than staring at a wall or into a glass. Unfortunately my experience was with men not women. I could chat with chaps but I'd never understood women. I was pleased to see Boffo again. We'd kept in touch but not needed each other. Now I had the excuse I needed. With well over a thousand pounds in various banks and safe deposit boxes I decided to try and take a year off from London and see if there wasn't an ordinary and honest life to be had away from the smoke, slums and skulking. My enemies must catch up with me one day so perhaps it would be best for Tom Putt to disappear. He was already living on borrowed time. Even though I changed my lodgings every month I could work out the mathematics of one of me against ever-increasing opponents.

I sent my valise ahead to Boffo Towers and took my bicycle on the train so as to have a pleasant twenty-five mile meander through the early summer lanes. I photographed some village

scenes for postcard practice in case that should turn out to be a sideline to earn a few bob. I staged a portrait of yokel drinking a frothy pint outside a pub. The beer was very refreshing. When the landlady asked me what I did I admitted to "A bit of this and a bit of that... But never the other."

They're either very slow at jokes or very quick in the village of Crossways because she said "Oh you poor man. They say. They do say – though I wouldn't know of course – They do say the other is as good as this and that put together." Was it so obvious? I resolved to have one more pint and consider my future seriously. "Nearly two-thirty sir. You'll have to be quick." She was right again, crime pays but where's the future in it. I must learn a trade or find a wife or emigrate to the colonies or all of those things. I hadn't been going anywhere while in London. Women! I'd enjoyed the coloureds in India but white girls raised my temperature with nerves. I could dance with them of course but when they started pawing and putting their arms around me I had to run away. I'd developed an alter-ego to discourage them. I decided to put my cards on the table with Boffo and see if he had any ideas.

That Friday evening dinner was a dull affair. I could see the problem. Boffo was in the clutches of a gold-digger and her mother. Robyn, a slight flat-faced girl without a trace of character was attached to him like a limpet. Her mother had the grace and face of a buffalo determined to get a good price for its hide. There was light relief with me

and Boffo's mother Zan, who was as batty as a bag of butterflies now she'd buried her husband. I liked her. She was full of the outrage of allowing men to vote at twenty-one but women having to wait until they were thirty. She ran the village of Girdlegate like a hospital matron inspecting anything and everything for slackness and dirt. Then Jo, Boffo's sister, and her husband seemed to be sniping at each other across the table. After being nice to Jo after all these years I decided to stick a pin through the dull moth that was Jo's husband. He'd got a high forehead, moustache with wire rim glasses that made him look like Kipling or a county council clerk. Pomposity shall meet pomposity! "What a lovely day Eric. I approached here today by means of my velocipede carriage. The aroma of hops about me is purely in your imagination."

I let his rusty emotional compass creak in all directions. Before it could settle I said "I'd better introduce myself. I'm a blackmailer. If there's anyone you don't like just let me know and we'll soon have them wriggling on a hook."

The whole table looked at me. Jo said "Stop it Tom. Eric's now the Solicitor for the County Council."

Something I happened to learn in the orphanage was to pretend to be on first name terms with important people. Since I was making an expedition into Dorset and I was a 'researcher' I'd taken the trouble to find out the names of the Chief Constable, Lord Lieutenant, and a few magistrates. Then of course I needed the mark to give me information. "What do you think of Harry Porter Eric?"

There rest of the table had lost its slight conversational momentum so in the

silence he'd got no escape. "I'd rather not say. Good officer, means well but..."

"But what Eric? Perhaps he needs a friend to have a quiet word. A friend like you perhaps?"

His disregarded of my blackmailer's story showed how he thought I was a genuinely good character. I've been doing this for a while. He'd been sitting by the fire in County Hall while his school friends were being killed by shells, sliced by bullets into gangrenous corpses, left to rot on the wire or staggered home with missing limbs. "Old fashioned." was all we got after a pause.

I replied immediately. "Just my sort. Boffo! Can we get the old boy down for a day?"

"I'll try." Our rapport had returned! Boffo was back on our shared path. He smiled for the first time this evening. I watched Robyn's reaction. It was confused. Later I wished I'd paid more attention to the buffalo as I had no weapons against her.

"Midnight swimming naked in the lake." Was Zan's contribution. Some of looked forward to historical secrets being revealed while Robyn and Buffalo looked disgusted.

When the women withdrew the three of us men tried to find some common ground. Why had Jo married this frond of shit. Then I guessed. I may have guessed wrong but it made sense. He was very young for a senior position. Perhaps he was a blackmailer and that's how he'd reached his position. Now he needed a respectable wife so what could be simpler than a threatened scandal.

At dinner he was trying to make her look a small irritant. Well done a second time for asking me down Boffo. He wanted me to help him and Jo but didn't know how to ask straight. After realising I was up against two nasty situations I'd pretended to enthusiastically drink three or four glasses of red wine. The clever thing is that if you look at your victim and pretend to drink they will really swallow if you're playing 'friendship'. Eric was my friend even if I'd challenged him to begin with. So I played on good intentions... "I'm sorry Eric. I shouldn't have bullied Boffo into inviting Harry. I should have asked you first. I'm sorry. What do you reckon – between ourselves?" ...And trapped him with his own goodwill. I really like getting victims to sign their own death-warrants.

Eric turned to Boffo. "It's your weekend Bedevere Please enjoy his company. I think your mother will. I'm a public servant without a personal view."

Like hell! I could see Boffo was back with me in the army where we hunted the higher ranks together. Boffo said "You see Eric – Tom had a war that can't be written down and I'm his only confidant, but when it comes to sorting the honourable from the dishonourable I don't know anyone better."

I followed on immediately because it was so clear. "You may be a small-time dealer in favours and shame but I'm a slasher. Harry and Jo will make up my mind. For the rest of my stay here I expect you to make Jo happy." I leant over casually to the empty decanter, picked it up then, with enough slowness to let a sozzled man react, threw it spinning at his head. "Catch!" He didn't react and the corner of

the cut-glass decanter hit him directly on the centre of his forehead. He collapsed backwards and the stopper came out and rattled across the floor. Eric was knocked unconscious.. Boffo and me were still on the same wavelength. Why was he keen to see his brother-in-law knocked-out in an 'accident'?

"Thank you Tom. I wish I'd invited you years ago."

"You've got problems with Robin and the buffalo too."

"Buffalo? Oh yes Tom – I see what you mean."

"Well can we have a private talk tomorrow, man to man?"

"It was what I was going to suggest."

"You don't know me like you used to Boffo. I need your honest advice. You're the only one I can trust."

By now the staff had peered around the half-opened doors and started a reinforcement-in-retreat exercise. "I'm fucked Tom."

"I'm not Boffo. That's my problem."

He said "I suppose we better get this turd to bed."

"I like the idea of getting the Chief Constable over Boffo. Perhaps he hates Eric and we've got a death in the family in favour of Jo."

"You make it sound so obvious Tom. Where have you been?"

"Keeping a life-saving low profile."

After Eric had been dragged-off to somewhere we joined the ladies. Boffo

explained Eric's indisposition in polite terms then I said "I threw the decanter at him but he was too sozzled to catch it. It's a trick I learned from the Australians." My gamble paid-off as Zan and Jo approved. Robin and buffalo went with the undercurrent. "Come and sit beside me Robyn. Boffo's my best friend and I don't want him falling into feeble hands... The poor boy needs looking after. We went though a lot together. Things he'll never tell you about." I knew I was hero of the Bracegirdles, men and women, and judging by her thin pursed lips, sworn enemy of Buffalo. That told me I was on the right track. Boffo had pleaded for rescue so I'd make a start. I'd got nothing to lose. I looked at Jo with her glossy black wavy hair. She needed a better husband than a slimy solicitor. Within ten seconds I'd twigged Robyn wasn't completely honest. I shared memories of schools with her then asked the name of her school. A flick of the eyes and fraction of a second delay was enough to betray her. She volunteered it was now closed which told me she wasn't in my league when lying. I encouraged her with pride in her imaginary school days and then pride in the boys and men who fought at the front she must have known, then the pride in the British Empire's heart of commerce, steel wire included, beating as it recovered from those dark days. I daren't look at Buffalo in case I smiled and gave the game away. This was fun. Well done to Boffo for inviting me down.

As the evening broke-up I managed a private word to Boffo that he'd been right to get me in. Eric hadn't reappeared so I accompanied Jo, bare-armed into the

garden. It might have been the first week of June but there was still a dew.

"I'm sorry Tom." She faced me and put her arms round my neck at maximum distance. In the limited light it was difficult to see anything but I thought I knew every inch of her body.

"What about Jo?"

"That night you rescued me from the fountain. I'm really sorry. That's why Beddy asked you here so I can say I'm sorry." I let this part truth pass. "I wanted you so much Tom. Sorry."

"I love you Jo. Like a sister. I've never had a sister or mother or father. You're the first girl I've loved."

"I jumped in to the fountain so you'd rescue me and hug me tight. I was a silly girl. I'm sorry. Then you went mental. That makes it worse. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault Jo. Really it isn't. I'm scared of women so was scared of you. I didn't really go mental but closeness is scary for a coward like me."

"Was?"

"Am still a bit old girl. Look Jo I want to give you a hundred children in one night but I'm scared you'll find me out for the pointless bit of slime that I am. I'll happily run up to wherever Eric is now and smash a decanter into the same place to smash-in his skull – but crimes of passion usually end with a noose. Let's plan." She pushed me back over the stone wall to make my first erotic kiss... and shared body contours... and then echoing grappling... then, after a moment of fiddling with clotting clothing, being one in a celebration of something I'd dreamed of through a dark

glass. It was natural. Tomorrow morning I would have some explaining to do. Then I realised I didn't have anyone to explain to.

Saturday. Boffo Towers. Jo beside me like Fabulous my stuffed toy horse. I'd been caught! I'd wake up and find the nurse had given me the wrong dose, but for now I'd enjoy my dream. Untangling the previous night's events I realised I was a hero and an enemy. Jo snored like a hog. It was hardly light. After calculating my options I decided to ask Boffo before stealing Jo from Eric. Thinking of Boffo made me worry about him and Robyn. I sat up in bed, arms crossed, thumb to lips to think. If Robyn was a liar then she was some sort of con-artist aiming for a reward. Buffalo doing the pimping, putting up the money for dresses and jewellery. There was an outside possibility that Eric was connected. Strange he didn't object when I called him a bit dishonest. Either he was sozzled or knew the score. Perhaps I'd ask Jo if she wanted to stay with him for a while and enjoy meeting me to cuckold him, or find a way to put him in prison or what. Perhaps Boffo and me could lure Robyn to commit a crime when whatever hold she had on him would be exposed as the spite of a whore-adventuress. If Boffo knew the Chief Constable then we might have a quick way to stop and search them 'on information received'. A soft woman's voice calling my name interrupted my thoughts. I came back to shades of soft grey that must be real. Jo had a really lovely voice, a warm bread and coffee voice. She really was there reaching up from under the sheets to touch me. The

nurse must have given me far too much medicine and this was heaven. Still I'll not refuse heaven. When I'd registered her presence with a stroke of her hair she sighed. I'd no way to know what that sigh meant. Frustration, peace, resignation?

"I love you Tom. The way you think in silence. I've been watching you for the last five minutes. Like a Buddha with a mind that spans the whole world. And you're a man in bed. Eric's a ballerina, five minutes of extravagant posing then a quick dash into the dirty den."

"I learned in the brothels of India. I'm just a trooper with a prick."

"Let's do it again Tom."

"You're my wish come true Jo. You're the first woman I've made love to. You made it so easy. I'm shell shocked with it all. Kiss me first as a wife and we'll see what happens."

"You're so calm. Steady Tom always the faithful servant." At this she pushed me back on the pillows and smothered my face with hers. Her hands found my arms and controlled them. I heaved my breaths and fought her mouth with mine. She'd had to wait as long as me for the next hour of sex, satisfaction then solitude before the reckoning. I knew she must be making calculations about the future but I'd got the next couple of days to sort out. We were happy in our different ways.

She'd decided to tell Eric she'd stayed the night in my bed to his face and let him do what he wanted. It was my time to say sorry for seducing her as I was completely worthless so please for her sake not to burn her boats. I would

stand by her if she'd stand by me but she shouldn't.

After breakfast Boffo took me in his car to the factory. In five minutes I explained my understanding of the Robyn and Buffalo situation. "Jo slept with me last night Boffo. She was determined. I didn't scheme it but ask her yourself how she's going to play slimy Eric. I think he's got a weakness."

"Robyn came to my room. She's a houri and no mistake. She wandered all round my room out of reach discarding a sandal here, a stocking there for ages then, and you've got to remember she'd still got sparkly clothes on where it mattered and she applied more lipstick to her mouth then made as if to creep up on me as a wild animal with jaws open ready to devour me whe- Shit!" Smash! The car had run straight into the fingerpost at a road junction. There was no other traffic but the cast-iron post was leaning at a nearly forty-five degrees and the radiator was smashed and steaming with who knows what other damage. His fraction of a second alert had been enough for me to brace myself for the impact. He was annoyed and shocked. I was an unharmed passenger.

"Oh dear Boffo. What's the score. Eric one you nil." When I smiled Boffo could smile at the misfortune too. "The County Council will want paying for this and who better to demand ten pounds and make a report to the Chief Constable about reckless drivers than official County Solicitor Eric. Bad boy Boffo!" We were mates in a scrape together again.

"It's alright for you Tom but I've just wrecked my car." By now a lorry and urchin had appeared to investigate the excitement. Boffo's car blocked the way.

I put my hand on his shoulder to calm him. "I think you were right to steer round that dog Boffo. Many people would have run it over but you risked your car." He was confused, I expect the shock was slowing him down. "What's a busted radiator compared to some poor lost dog being maimed." I saw him recover.

"It's just one of those instinctive things. Excuse me driver? Have you got a rope to pull my car out of your way?" After that Boffo was fine. He was in charge even if it was a bit of a personal embarrassment. That's what people expected from officers. A constable arrived and was soon being helpful when he saw there was no anger and only remorse from the officer class for causing a bit of trouble. I made a note of names and faces. Police Constable Killick.

We walked the last mile into Weymouth in the pleasant morning. That gave us the chance to admit our hopeless lives to each other. He'd suspected Robyn wasn't everything she said but there were some secrets he didn't want telling and she seemed to know people who were involved with those secrets. I explained how I was scheming a trap.

"Look Tom old boy, there's something else I've been wanting to tell somebody. There's something going wrong with the old firm. Either money is missing or there's fraud or fellow directors are gathering to make look like I've

defrauded the company. I don't understand politics. They've stitched me up. I'm the Chairman but they insist on sub-committees for one thing and the other – and now they want to do a merger which means selling-out and leaving the business to a bunch of financiers."

"I don't know anything about financing corporations and shares but everyone has a price. You need to know what they will accept and what they can afford to pay."

"I think it's too late for that. They've tied my hands with minutes of board meetings."

"Don't give up Boffo. Ten minutes ago I invented a dog to make you a hero. Give me a chance here. I don't know the lie of the land or who is behind all the others for example." We arrived at the open gates of the Hercules Wire Works. We went in by the office door to meet the trim receptionist. I recognised her as just the piece of innocent and efficient skirt Boffo should be interested in. She stood up to welcome him, starched and plain with her hair in a bun with just a twist escaping. Twenty eight I'd say. I wanted to know more about her. Boffo strode past. I stopped, smiled and introduced myself. "Hi. I'm Al Pippin, management advisor, Affiliated to Carnegie and Robbins of New York. Pleased to meet you Miss?..."

"Miss Levington"

"Great to make your acquaintance Miss Levington. Hey Beddy! Come back." For the second time today Boffo was showing slow reactions. "Suppose Mister Singh turns up with an order for a hundred miles of rope he wants to discuss then

he's in a strange country and as nice as Miss Levington is he's got no idea if she's the cleaning woman or the chief concubine – oh I'm sorry miss – I didn't mean anything rude. Hey but you're pretty enough for a rough hand like me."

Boffo was now fully aware of my shenanigans. Why was I able to invent other randy people but never invent myself? "It's alright Hilda – Mister Pippin means well and I think he's got a point. I'll see you have your name on show in future."

"You are an attractive ambassador miss Hilda. Hilda's a lovely name." Boffo pulled me away before I exploded with my own infatuation. In the Chairman's office I said "The bitch stayed behind her desk. I wanted to see her legs!"

"That's all you think about isn't it Tom!"

"No. But why not be nice to Hilda like I showed you? I bet she could love you more than poisoned Robyn."

"You're still sick Tom."

"Why? What have I said that's off-colour?"

"Bugger! You're right again Tom. I'm chasing my own tail with worry."

"I know it's a bit cheeky of me to say this Boffo but I've found true love last night. Why haven't you?"

"I was busy with the war then father died and I didn't want to be sucked back into the huntin', shootin', fishin' crowd we met in the Indian army. Once you've slit their gizzards you know what filth is inside."

"So that's why the tart is on your tail."

"Yes Tom. You've got it in one. Anything coarse and you're straight there."

"But you've got Zan and Jo to think of and the vultures are circling around the wire works."

"Exactly. What can I do?"

"First we'll get Robyn and Buffalo gaoled. Then we'll let Jo work on Eric. Then we'll see what your price is for selling the wire works."

"I'm never going to sell. It's the family business. Being an orphan you wouldn't understand."

"I do Boffo. We decide a price and see what happens. Selling might be a bloody good idea just to make any money at all. I guess it depends on technology. If you've got modern machinery and stable exports then you're probably safe but if not then sell tomorrow." I was still playing the role of Al Pippin from Cincinnati. As I said my spiel I knew by Boffo's reaction that he was blown safe to land with my waves of invented logic.

His private office was wooden panelled with well worn furniture, full of samples and cabinets with cross-sections of wire cables and certificates from trade fairs from thirty years ago. At least they'd discovered electricity. He offered me a cigar from the box on his desk. "Drink?"

"No thanks Boffo. Cheer up. We're back in business together. I think you let yourself get trapped by Robyn just to lure me out of retirement. Only joking old boy. There's probably no money in torpedoing her but we'll get in shape for the financiers or fraudsters. Secret business man creeping in for a private look around on a Saturday might scare somebody."

"You were always the brains Tom."

"No. You were the brains. I just didn't believe anything people told me."

"When I was playing secret weapons I was always thinking how you would puzzle it out."

"So why not now."

"I've lost my nerve."

"I've lost all excitement. We'll have an exciting time with Robyn, there's no chance she's innocent do you think?"

"No Tom. I'm sure she's working to a plan."

"Well done to you for letting her trap you so we can trap her."

"But my nights at the Trojan Horse Club mustn't become public or else I'll be ruined. I thought I'd set a thief to catch a thief."

"Don't worry Boffo. If they do spill the beans then we'll find a way to deal with it or turn it to our advantage."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is. Ask who would know anything about the Trojan Horse Club. If they'd heard the name then how did they know what goes on there? Let he who knows cast the first stone. You can boast about it to a bunch of eager men without the guts to go there themselves."

"But shareholders don't like scandal and I'll be voted off the board. It'll be a disaster. Even if not the board rumours will dry up trade and that's bad enough as it is."

"Stop worrying Boffo. We'll be the ones setting the agenda for the shareholders. Now is there any part of the factory that needs investment? Tell me and I'll

suggest it to you in public hearing and you can defer to me."

"Why?"

"So I appear to know what I'm talking about and put my finger on what matters. Word will soon flash around if there's something fishy going on. I've got an auditor as one of my clients who I can get down for a few days at a reasonable cost. We'll get him to give us a first view of what's going on."

"I'll have to get permission from the finance committee."

"Not if I'm thinking of buying the business. Tell them if they object to the surprise audit they need to put their reasons in writing and bring it up in formal management business."

"You make it sound so simple Tom."

"I'm worried about you Boffo. Your reactions are slow and uncertain. Is it worry making it worse or something else? Drugs?"

"I've missed you Tom. Can I show you the works before the noon hooter goes?"

Some of my hundreds of time-passing hours in the Central library had been spent reading management efficiency books. Boffo showed me stores, all sorts of machines, treatment baths with hot acid, dark oil, heat treatment furnaces called 'lehrrs' and testing machines. I asked to see the clerical side to see what was made specially and what was made for stock. I talked to the men and women. There was no doubt that after the war there was reduced pressure but steady recovery in colonial countries

seemed encouraging. The hooter cut short my cascade of questions. Back in his private office I said "If I'm to buy your business Mister Bracegirdle I need to know how healthy it is. When can you give me an expert's report?"

"You can stop acting now Tom."

"Not really. I can never stop acting. Anyway you need an expert to tell you what I can only guess at. Your business is like you – it's lost its way and may be being taken for a ride. Get your report, I'll help as I said, but you don't know your own position."

"I can't spend money without permission Tom."

"That's not like you Boffo. We'll plan so I'll distract whoever can block you until it's too late. My auditor is a nervous chap but I'll make this a holiday that's interestingly different and the end of my contract with him. Um. The truth is Boffo I'm feeling guilty about what I do."

"Cheer up. We're working together again Tom. I'll look after you. I suppose we'd better be getting back."

"Four or six miles. Shall we run Boffo?" He looked at me shocked. "It'll do us both good. It was you that wrecked the car! – or should I say *automobile* if I'm to be a transatlantic enigma."

"We can't run in these clothes Tom!"

"I suppose you're right. Let's think! How can we turn the crash to our advantage?"

"I don't know Tom. I was just going to get a taxi from the station – but bugger it! You've spoiled my easy life. I want to run."

"OK Boffo. We're grown men. Let's make it happen."

So we jogged back to Girdle Hall in vests and pants after giving our clothes to the motor-taxi office at the station. We were both a bit out of condition but so what? A little bit of exercise would put that right and we felt better for having shown ourselves as game sportsmen. It was a pleasure to run along the sides of valleys sculpted in the chalk reminding us of dawn in India. As we arrived back we debated diving into the lake but Boffo rightly observed that would be childishness. Encouraging Eric to join us wouldn't be childishness of course! At that moment we dipped a toe into our childhoods that we'd never really had.

I didn't want the aggravation of Jo and Eric or Robin or Buffalo so we decided on a common front of silence about what really happened at the junction. They must have heard about the smash but now we were hunting together as blood-brothers. After being allowed a cold beef sandwich by cook we used both bathrooms of Girdle hall. After-all, the staff were the ones who would have to mop up after us so why care? Once plunged into the tepid water I was soon soaped and loofered but apart from making sure I was purified for another evening with Jo, I didn't want to linger in the half-full excuse for a few minutes of self examination and thought.

Eric had left in a rage and a head bandage. Jo went with him. I discovered a note from her on my pillow.

Ever yours J XXX. For a moment I had a mad impulse to keep it but it would be stupid to leave incriminating evidence so I burnt it and crushed the ashes into the empty fireplace. Zan had taken it upon herself to drive the governess cart a dozen miles over to the Chief Constable's modest house at Piddlehinton. Later I found she'd taken a basket of home grown medicinal herbs for his wife so crippled with a mystery debilitating disease. I should have guessed these herbs were 'medicinal' because they were steeped in alcoholic spirit. If they cheered-up the invalid then what's wrong with that? I'm all for making people happy.

Boffo brought this news to me as I was pacing. My eccentric-scientist alter-ego had taken to deliberate pacing the grounds. Anyone can do that but to an observer it looks like the nervous tick of a war-damaged soldier. I don't want pity, I want respect. A notebook and pencil makes me a scientist exploring something scientific. It also means I can jot down thoughts about Robyn and the wire-works. Boffo fell in beside me and let me estimate the angle of the sun and bearing of the house before saying. "The Chief Constable is coming to supper Tom. You asked for it. I suggested it to Zan."

"Oh that changes things."

"Is it a problem Tom?"

"No. I want to get on his good side so we can trap Robyn. Is that a problem for you Boffo?"

"Have you got a plan?"

"A bit. She steals your silver after breakfast tomorrow and we tip-off Harry

– That was a bluff for Eric's benefit I've never met him – so she gets caught red-handed at Waterloo. Yes! Excellent!"

"Why?"

"If you telegraphed Scotland Yard saying you suspected two women of stealing your teaspoons they wouldn't blockade the barriers at Waterloo and search all likely passengers. But if the telegram came from the Chief Constable of Dorset they'd do it. Brilliant. Thank Zan for solving a problem."

"I'm confused Tom."

"You plant some family silver in their cases as the servants take them to the taxi tomorrow. Then the police find it and they haven't got an explanation."

"They'll say someone tampered with their cases."

"Who'll believe that? They'll know damn well somebody planted it but what can they do? It tells them they're up against professionals."

"They could claim all sorts of things. Promises of marriage."

"Scotland Yard probably know at least one of them. They won't get far. The object is to blacken their characters further if they try anything."

"Oh I see Tom. You're so clever."

"I've been surviving in the grey world for years. It's what I do. I could do with twenty-five quid for the next week when I'll be looking at competitor rope-works and other things. I'll leave you and my tame auditor Derek to sort out your own terms. Remember if you have to sack staff he might like a job by the seaside."

"I'll get him to cable you with 'Pippin needs figures'."

"OK Tom. Can you really sort out the business?"

"No idea Boffo. Give me a couple of juicy jobs to dangle as bait before the wire manufacturers. I'll visit them over the next fortnight posing as a customer and get a factory tour and ask technical questions."

"But I know our competitors Tom."

"Let me find their weakness and strengths for myself. I want to bluff my way around the business. Add another five pounds for travelling and printing business cards. I've got other things to do as well. You concentrate on your finances. I still want a financial bill of health Boffo."

"You sound like you own the business."

"Who are you to say I don't own a single share? I just want a break from London boredom but I'm still a researcher."

In the absence of Eric and Jo we had Chief Constable Harry Porter and his wife Agnes. Harry was a cheerful old boy with a russet face framed by white sideburns turning into a cocky beard and topped with animated bushy eyebrows. He was surprisingly small. He wouldn't have been out of place in short trousers begging pennies in Cheapside. His wife was in a wheeled-chair but had a pale glow rather than a shrunken and sour cripple's look. These were people I could like.

Boffo introduced me as an old army friend involved in unusual secret

activities. After finding love with Jo the Porters found my raw love-spot. I liked his cheerfulness and the way she smiled up at me with interested hope while stuck in an invalid chair. She cooed the words 'please love me – I won't be any trouble' then 'you *naughty* boy'. That's what I heard though her lips never moved. What had Jo unlocked? After the formalities I couldn't keep my eyes off Harry and Agnes. After my warm flush of excitability had passed I knelt down beside Agnes. "What a lovely part of the country you live in Mrs Porter."

"Yes. Interesting too. From the Stone age to Thomas Hardy it's full of human interest wherever you tread."

"That's a lovely phrase Mrs Porter. 'Human interest wherever you tread'."

"Please call me Ahladita." She pronounced it in a strange singing way.

"That's an unusual name. Please say it again."

"Ahladita"

"It means 'quiet one'. My ayah gave it to me."

"Oh of course. Now I recognise the voice of India. It takes me back to those days of heat, scowling natives, endless train journeys with the horses. Blacks asking to be bullied. Bullies beating black backs. I was one of those kids. I beat them because that's what we did – but at night I remembered the beatings I'd had at the orphanage."

"India's a cruel and loving place. You beat them and yet I was loved by my ayah like I was her own child. When Harry retires we plan to visit."

"But what about your complexion..." I'd realised what I'd said after it came out of my mouth. "Oh I mean" I was being swept away by the undertow of loving women! "I meant you've got a lovely complexion Mrs – Ahladita. Noble beauty trumps young puffy skin."

"Thank you Tom."

I couldn't keep out of the current. "I really mean it Ahladita. You have a great beauty for me." Desperate to divert suspicion I said "How do you know Zan?"

"All the girls round here knew Harry. His father had made money in railways and sent him to good schools but when he told him his methods Harry looked around for something else to do. His father was bankrupted in some share scandal which meant he could enter the police as a junior officer, but he kept being cheerful with our friends and eventually I married a Deputy Assistant Constable. We were around most weekends and Zan was one of our best friends while we were poor."

I didn't need a map to read the lie of the land. Lie. "Friends are nice. False friends are poison Ahladita."

"What's your background Tom?"

"Orphanage. Sent to be a cadet in the army. The Bombay Scouts were sawdust. We mopped up useless scum like me who might one day become men. We were dragged back from the brassy skies of India to die in the mud of trenches until real soldiers could be found."

After a pause she said "Can you remember your mother or father."

Her question was one I'd asked myself and always answered no. "Vaguely. I think. Like you Quiet One. Gentle." She was the first woman ever to put her hand over mine in sympathy. I was glad I wasn't chained to the hospital but this was too much emotion to deal with. I didn't want to run away, just have a few minutes to understand the wave of tears that wouldn't be held back for many more seconds despite blinking. I excused myself, found the nearest door and hid my gasps in the shadows of a corridor. After a while, I wasn't counting the time, Harry came looking for me. His arm was out to me.

"Tom! Ahladita says she thinks she's upset you and is sorry."

"It's not her fault. You've got a lovely wife Mister Porter. I let slip something that pains me."

"You're amongst friends here Tom. I know your sort who served and kept silent. Freedom's butchers to save a big butcher's bill. My eldest son disappeared in the Balkans and the younger – Fergus – was murdered in Beirut." Even on my uppers I saw half-truths that could be brothel excesses and drunken fiascos. "Tortured to death by Christians." I woke up! Woke up!

"I'm sorry for your sons Mister Porter. I'm not a war hero, more a victim. I watched while others suffered. I calculated while people died. I helped at home while others never came back. I'm guilty."

In the closeness of that corridor it was a while before the single clasp of hands could let me discharge his emotion. Five minutes before Ahladita had done this for me so I tried to do it for him. Power! He

put his arm round my shoulder. Then I put mine round his. Joining the generations.

Stain. Dirt. Filth. His sons were heroes and I was a fraud. Not only that but I was caught. I couldn't ever admit my coward's war. I was turned inside out "Harry, we've all got sorrow. I'm as scarred as you are. Your wife upset me because I've never had a mother – I'm an orphan – and she asked a mother's questions. It's a shock. She's a quiet angel to me."

"We should go back. They'll be worrying about us Tom."

"Thanks for coming to rescue me Mister Porter. Don't blame your wife. She should be proud she'd scratched me who's always been diamond-hard."

"Bollocks Tom. Beddy told me about your stay in a home. Nobody is Diamond-hard. I've known a few diamonds that went away to be scratched out. Come on back. We all know those that didn't."

At dinner I thanked Ahladita for her wisdom and sending Harry to catch me. I let her think my crisis was war-related. I tried to compare Zan with Ahladita but all I could see was two first-division clubs playing each other. With my nervous energy I ought to be able to provoke Buffalo and Robyn. They'd both admitted to living in London but my moaning about the fog, buses, trams and trains only got a shrug. These were professionals not to get upset by gross delays and overcrowding. Nothing I could say about public transport would get them to react. These guys were as hard as I'd been soft when I'd rested my

hand on the arm of Ahladita's chair. Then! Oh buggery buggery buggery! Robin had an Adam's apple. To cover up my surprise I launched into an alter-ego story. "I had a terrifically exciting jog back from Weymouth earlier. When I'd synchronised my stride and systolic heart pulse I could look at the fascinating chalk flora passing underfoot such as Gentian Violets - like a ladies eyes I always think. The geology and history needs hours of study just to be at one with it, what the Chocktaw Indians call Twoshash." This didn't seem to be of much interest to Robyn. The pattern was obvious now I'd fallen in to the obvious. Probably a drug addict as her, or rather his, mind seemed to be emaciated. Zan was keen to hear more about plants and Indians but I'd used up my ammunition there. "Your cook makes beautiful beef sandwiches Zan. Did you make the condiments yourself?"

"If you had the mushroom and crocus bulb pickle then yes. The crocuses are supposed to be a bit poisonous but mine is only likely to worry someone with a weak heart. I can vouch for the mushrooms, I grow them in the cellar on best heated horse manure."

"Sounds fascinating Zan. One day it would be an honour to be shown your methods if you don't mind me snooping on your secrets."

"No of course not for a botanist. Any time." My ecstasy at this seemed to offend Buffalo. Not that I expected much from Buffalo, her refined tones were about forty years out of date and I suspect rather spoiled by forty years of smoking cheap cigarettes in the brothels

of Marylebone. I'd see if I could puncture her refined veneer.

"Some households are so disorganised but after our jog it was less than half an hour before I could plunge into a vaporous hot bath. Once again Zan I congratulate you." I raised my glass to her and watched to see if there were any other takers. Watching Robyn and Buffalo's uncertainty was a joy. They must suspect me but didn't have the fluency to set the subjects for discussion or approval themselves. The confidence of confidence-trickster comes from having it as well as seeking it. "Your good health Zan."

"Thank you Tom." She smiled back. "You're a prefect guest. Beddy needs friends at this difficult time."

If Robyn let this prompt go she was sunk. She roused herself. "I'll look after him Zan. He only has to say the word." Zan would have looked at hot horse manure with more interest. Any lingering ideas of making social progress must have been torpedoed. Boffo was occupied by the Porters and a harmless-looking Deacon. I never trusted his sort as they often had too much time on their hands and a library to study things I'd only overheard on a train. Do-gooders who would drop everything to be amateur sleuth to look under my curtain of crime. Enthusiasts! Oh yes, something coarse.

"As I said Zan I was able to take advantage of your hostility - oh I mean hospitality..." I waited for the reactions which were a giggle from Robyn, a smile from Zan and rolled eyes from Buffalo. "A most welcome facility after our run back. Despite being semi-poisoned by the nightshade and toadstool pickle on

one of your delicious beef sandwiches – I was determined to pass the last few minutes of my brutish life on this 'Mortal Coil' as the Bard has it in a hot bath full of the rarest unguents. I can see by your skin Zan that you have a secret herd of pedigree asses so you can pamper yourself as Cleopatra of Dorset – I think she married a few brothers and cousins and might have or poisoned an uncle or two – so I'm glad we've got Harry here to keep you in check." The straggling conversations stopped to hear a raconteur. "Anyway what would I want with asses' milk? Plunging off granite crags into ice cold mountain streams is what my physique craves." I tensed every muscle in my face and neck for show. I could see grins breaking out amongst friends. "Boffo and I thought about the lake but that's for kids. All or nothing for us – but even with the best will in the world you're not over-accommodated with pinnacles of rock where maidens in brass breastplates bellow out Wagnerian laments in the hope of attracting a hero." I mimed the appropriate operatic outpouring of growls and shrieks, took a sip of wine, smiled at Zan, beat on my breast while clanking fork against a tureen in time, and gave a drunken smile to Robyn and Buffalo to see if they were in a laughing mood. I caught Buffalo's gaze, she was enjoying her wine but not broken yet. I switched my gaze to Robyn, repeated the tapping on the brass breastplate joke again then made that hunching-up of the sagging breasts you see drudges do when they're gossiping. I drove a fixed smile straight into Robyn's eyes. He or she must have understood I was acting in his or her direction with a reason. I'd lock my bedroom door tonight. "Well – in the absence of a sheer cliff to throw myself over all I had was the gentleman guest's bathroom. Was I downhearted? No! Whenever I enter a tiled temple of steam and porcelain I'm never downhearted or depressed." By now my acting had caught the whole table. "Have I ever tried to backslide my way from a bath by... Hemlock?" I held up my glass, waved it near my lips then put it down. "By ritual suicide?" I examined a knife, rejected it, then a fork and decided to plunge it into my chest slowly but obviously to slide harmlessly though my fingers, and so I looked at the tines in my hand after the failed self-stabbing attempt and shook my head. No ladies and gentlemen – I am British and I was going to immerse myself in whatever that bath held." I changed my tone from the histrionic actor to the philosopher. "Baths when you want them are what makes us civilised. I expect the Mongolians, Aborigines and Belgians might disagree – but I say it is every Britisher's right to have a bath. How can we rule an empire without being better bathed than the natives?" I raised my glass to the table. "Who will join me in a toast to the Great British bath." Boffo and Harry were instantly there. Ahladita and Zan were more decorous but equally enthusiastic. The Deacon joined in. All except the Deacon were tickled-pink by my acting. At last I'd got Robyn and Buffalo to join-in. They had their glasses raised even if it was clear they were following what others did not thinking for themselves. Boffo had been an idiot to be trapped by these two. "To the great British bath, may it never overflow." Hear-hear's came from all around. I let the moment dangle, my mouth was wide open in horror! "Or get empty!" I stared

at my glass in front of my face. I was empty, but I was drunk on performing, so a third wasn't too many for me. I put it on the table for the footman to fill up again. It is a wonderful thing to have a silent audience, understanding the actor needs a personal moment yet confident they will resume in good time. I paused to gauge how rude I should be. A little innuendo should be enough as Boffo and Harry were well away. "Where was I? Oh yes I remember. I'd survived the poisoned sandwich. I'd listened for the squallings of a Rhine-maiden who might lead me to a crag and icy torrent. So now it was the gentleman guest's bathroom. I was equipped... Do you think I go to the bathroom unequipped ladies and gentlemen? No I do not! A dressing gown with a nail-brush and magnetic compass in the left pocket and a – er thing for – er and translation of the works of Li Du written in Indian ink on a bamboo scroll."

Boffo rose to the bait as I hoped he would. We were working together again. "I didn't quite catch that Tom. What's in your left pocket again?"

"You know. What men have in the left pockets of their dressing gowns."

He saw my 'No' hand signal as I held my glass. "OK That's fine. Sorry I interrupted Tom."

Misdirection is the name of my game. Boffo had guessed what to spotlight magnificently. Two minds that think alike. I'd forgotten why I'd launched on this ridiculous story. Ah yes, to break Robyn and Buffalo. "I took it upon myself to ascertain the temperature of the water previously deposited into the bath by the servants. Once again I must show my

appreciation for your hostility – hospitality by providing running hot and cold water. By these means a temperate bath may be obtained with little more than the adjustment of taps. In this case the valves had been adjusted to provide an aquatic fluid of the most perfect temperature imaginable. With pink jasmine blossom floating on the surface." As an aside I admitted I'd made that bit up. "Placing an elbow into the enamelled vessel I was overcome by the diligence of your staff..." I paused to wander into my own thoughts for a second. "Of course Mary the under-maid may have a special affection for me but that's supposed to be a secret." This fiction was to test the audience. I winked at Zan. Boffo guessed. Harry's eyebrows took a deep breath. Ahladita froze. Robyn and Buffalo giggled. "Only joking. I don't even know her name. Anyway having determined that the arrangement of the faucets was acceptable I divested myself of dressing gown and climbed into the bathing apparatus taking care not to slop over the sides – after all it is a *Gentleman's* bathroom. I have to say the screeching of the Peacocks outside was a distraction – but otherwise I was in that state of isolation a man likes where responsibilities may be thrown into a corner while the next expedition into the world of wild women or sneaky finance or how to betray his wife – I'm not married! – or guess how close his wife is to discovering his betrayal. Then the all-over scrubbing of the skin just enough to make it manly and rough." I flexed my shoulders and looked at Robyn. He dropped his eyes for a second then stared back at me with defiance. "And let's face it – we're all grown up – the 'parts' of men are wrinkled so they need a moment of

charity. When I'm at home in Surrey I have a lady rinse my hair but now I've got to lather using something that was spewed from a gasworks for myself. I don't know about the shampoos ladies use but us men are always getting the damn stuff stinging our eyes."

Robyn said "Use a gentler shampoo more often." I looked around and this wasn't a big deal.

"I make it a rule not to sing in the bath without the explicit permission of my host as I fear my days in the army spoiled my ear for the gentler airs and popular ballads suitable for a general audience." I winked at Boffo. "That was my undoing. What could possibly go wrong in my moment of rejuvenation – imagining I was dancing with nymphs at the spring of Mount Parnassus? In my haste to soap away the cares of the day in a glorious cloud of warm vapour and subtle scents I'd forgotten to put the latch on the door. If I'd been on one of the twenty verses of the *Calcutta Ladies Polo Club Ball* then one of Zan's efficient staff wouldn't have broken into my temporary sanctum just as I was about to step out. I'm truly sorry Zan. She didn't scream, just apologised, so I presume she knew what horses in the farmyard get up to in the spring." I let each of the audience picture and repicture the vision of me standing in the bath facing the door. Nobody wanted to start. "I made that last bit up Zan." I looked at Robyn to line-up my knock-out blow. "I only know seven verses of the *Calcutta Ladies Polo Club Ball* – and I had put the latch on the door." It's one thing being compared to a stallion soaking in silky suds but decency must prevail.

Zan said "You're very naughty Tom. I wish I was your age again. I leant over and gave her a nice kiss on the cheek to show I was touched by her admission. When a lady mentions age be prepared to be gallant. The Deacon was confused. Robyn's eyes were wide and I would definitely be locking my bedroom door tonight.

After the ladies had withdrawn and we'd settled into the port and cigars Harry stumbled through one of the verses of an army song. Boffo continued. I needed a break to polish a homosexual joke to see Boffo's reaction so I admitted I'd made up the name of the song but I expected there were some like it in circulation while Boffo and I were out there. I passed the baton to the Deacon. His small circular spectacles glinted with the electric light but otherwise he was dead. Harry said "Come on Jokko. There must be rude versions of hymns."

"Erm I can't remember any."

Harry wasn't going to be denied. "Onward Christian Harlots. Everyone a whore. With the cross of Jesus the only thing they wore. Christ! They're keen and eager. There's nothing they don't know. Get stuck-in and satisfied. Fourpence for one go. What do you say to that Jokko?"

"I like to think I'm above that sort of thing."

"Think yes, but are you?" I said. My professional instincts watched for a hint of blushing. Prudes were always good marks. Tiny nervous signs were obvious when you know what to look for. I was trying to give up blackmailing but it was

fun. I'd be making enquiries about him another time.

He said. "High spirits is one thing but vulgarity is something else."

Harry had obviously enjoyed his wine. "Men who went to war will always be coarse Jokko. They've had the softness ripped out of them."

"Like shrapnel through a corpse" I added. Boffo stayed silent.

The Deacon said "I'm sorry gentlemen, I was always a soldier of God rather than the Empire."

Harry grinned. "Apology accepted. Good story Tom. You should come more often. Too many Jokkos and not enough Toms round here."

To them all I said "What do you think of blackmail? – I'm a blackmailer – that's what I do as a profession. Sordid but necessary."

The Deacon said "I'm not falling for another one of your stories Mister Putt."

Boffo said. "It's true. That's what he's been doing since 1914. That's why I'm alive to talk to you. He blackmailed the army to keep me out of the trenches."

Harry caught up "I hope you're still not at it Tom."

"Afraid so but I'm really trying to give it up. It's so easy when you know how. That's why Boffo's invitation to do investigations for him is so welcome. I don't know anything else so how will I earn a crust? Thanks Boffo."

The Deacon said "Has Bedevere invited you to blackmail us?"

"No of course not. He's being blackmailed and asked me to turn gamekeeper. And other things."

"Blackmail is criminal." Said Harry. "I should arrest you."

"Don't be so harsh Sir. You must know gentry, businessmen, corrupt solicitors and blackmailers who can't be brought to justice. I can bring a sort of justice. Of course there are secrets the Bishop of Dorchester is desperate to keep secret so he'll pay me. Think of it as fine. I do the investigation and collect the evidence so why shouldn't I get paid?"

"What's Langton got to hide?"

"I'm making it up. I didn't even know there was a Bishop of Dorchester but if he knows I'm asking questions then there's a fifty-fifty chance he won't sleep well at night."

The Deacon said "Langton is a good sort."

"Good. So he's got nothing to fear. Nothing to hide. Nothing to fear. What's he going to pay to protect you Deacon?" The tell-tale signs were there again. "You see? You've shown me tonight you have a guilty secret so what's it worth? How much does your Bishop love you?"

"You're a fiend!"

"Stop! You don't have to get upset. I've got more important things to do than chase country deacons – but don't you see how your knowledge that there's someone like me who knows you've sinned might stop more sinning?"

"How did you know?"

"I've told you I'm not interested. If you want to confess to a crime then pick someone else. You see Harry? The

deacon has had plenty to drink which makes it easy but he'll never admonish you for being late to church again."

"We should talk another day Tom. I take your point well. What's this about Boffo being blackmailed?"

"You tell them what you must Boffo and I'll say what my plan to catch them is." He stalled. I passed the decanter across to give him a distraction to play for time. Still no words. "OK I'll start. This is for your benefit Harry and for your benefit Deacon I'll say I know some very brutal people and if you spread a smut of this then I expect you'll learn quite a few vulgar words in your last minutes on this earth."

The idiot rebelled. I don't like his tedious sort. "Are you threatening to murder me?"

"Yes. After bleeding you by blackmail. If you don't like it move to South America. Boffo is being blackmailed and all you can complain about is being upset at being told not to tell a living soul. Think how you'd feel and shut up."

Harry said "Tom's making me like blackmail Jokko. Let's listen and see if we can help."

"Thank you sir. The issue is Robyn and Buffalo. Who do you take them for Deacon?"

"An effete middle-class daughter and matron of a mother."

"Buffalo is a good name. She calls herself Evadne but I guess it's really Mags. What can you tell me about Robyn. I always thought it was a boy's name. The modern fashions are funny aren't they?"

"She's a bit odd. Reserved. Very feminine but reminds me of a painting rather than a jolly 'gel'."

"And she's got an Adam's apple." I like echoing silences. "Boffo knows." Instructive silence. "Boffo invited her." Investigative silence. "Blackmail." Illuminating silence. "You made a mistake Boffo and you know it."

Boffo said "He was my lover but a bitch. Then they stuck the claws in. I feel sick with worry every day. How can something beautiful become so putrid?"

I said "So now you know gentlemen. I've got the best answer I can think of. It's criminal but if you know of something better then speak up. They're returning to London tomorrow – Sunday – so we sneak identifiable family silver into their cases as they get taken to the station then *discover* the theft in time for them to be caught at Waterloo. That way the Metropolitan Police have a definite crime and any allegations or photographs will be treated for what they are – blackmail. Scotland Yard must already know them anyway."

The Deacon asked "Why would Scotland Yard know them?"

"Because vice is the main business of Scotland Yard. Safecrackers and burglars have their specialists but sex is the largest criminal market. Sentences are rarely for more than a few months so it goes on."

Harry said "Why wait until they get to Waterloo. I can have my men at Dorchester station."

"Good idea Harry. Shows you're still alert after all that wine – but my thinking is

that Scotland Yard probably have a file against them which will make them unsympathetic to excuses. You could send them a telegraph of intelligence."

The Deacon said "Aha! But what if they've got incriminating photographs?"

"Then Robyn and Buffalo have got incriminating negatives so hiding them won't make a difference. Once Scotland Yard have got black marks against their names then photos will be destroyed if you ask. It still won't get the negatives but it sends a sign."

Boffo raised himself from his hunch. "Robyn told me he was safe because he knew – in the biblical sense – a chief commissioner."

"And you believed him Boffo."

"Yes Tom."

"If that's the case they can't get let off for theft – even one they know they're innocent of – and we'll know, or to be more accurate – I'll know – there's a queer being blackmailed high up in Scotland Yard. Harry and me will deal with that together. Is that a deal Harry? I hate bent policemen."

"Yes Tom. Funny business this blackmail. You're a clever young man." I saw a stumble in his praise as his two clever and adventurous sons must have appeared in his thoughts.

I got up and walked round to put my arm around Harry's shoulders. "I've never had a father but I'll be a son to you." Perhaps it was the drink. Perhaps I was growing up.

Straight after a light early breakfast, with beef sandwiches in my saddlebag, I set out for thirty country miles towards Wareham. I gave instructions that my luggage was to be put on the train after the one Robyn and Buffalo were catching. A minor inconvenience, but I didn't want to risk it being out of my sight yet within the sight of Robyn and Buffalo. I knew I'd be joining their train later along the line but they didn't. I can't think of anything more pleasurable than cycling through the spring countryside. There might be thunder in the afternoon brought on by the heat but my plan was to use the cooler morning for my ride. Cows without worries in water meadows, children without worries spinning tops in village streets, men working their allotments with honest sweat, women getting ready to go to church. This peace was inside me. The gentle warmth of the day was inside me. Church bells sang across valley fields. I had to stop and listen. Even when I thought this was the pre-dawn before going over the top to face the guns at Ypres I couldn't get nervous. The worst that could happen was they'd not be stopped. With nearly two hours to spare before the train, I went into a hotel bar in Wareham high street to take a pint and wonder how my life had changed since the last time I was drinking beer. Approximately two days. I'd found a purpose. Found love. Found parents to love and be loved by. Re-found a mate in trouble. Found confidence in society. Found respect. All in two days. Cycling is thirsty work, I had another pint of best. The bitterness of the hops was balanced by the body and yeasty aroma. I hardly listened to the conversation of others.

Well before I needed to catch the train I went to the Police Station and asked if there was a message for Tom Putt. The constable behind the desk was at immediate attention. "Yes sir. The CC phoned to say the birds were in the trap and one of our plain clothes men will meet you at the railway station for the two twenty two. He's got your description sir."

"You've got a very peaceful county here. Thanks to you constable. What's your name?"

"PC Jenkins sir."

"It's just I like to praise efficiency and I have a feeling I'll be seeing Harry in the near future. Thank you again." As I stepped back into the bright sun I felt I was stepping into the sun with my life this weekend.

So off to the railway station baking in anticipatory silence. After asking the porter which end of the platform the guards-van for my bicycle was likely to be, I settled down on a bench amongst the posters for special tickets, Devon beaches and London attractions then unwrapped my packet of sandwiches. There was a card inside. The ink was haloed pink due to taking moisture from the bread. *Dearest Tom, Thank you for rescuing Bedevere. I'm relying on you. Harry's told me. Come again. All my love Xan.* I held it between my hands with my hands to my mouth like a love-struck girl. I was just realising that this was the first precious love-letter I'd ever had, when a farmer politely asked if he could join me on my bench. "Of course." I ignored him as the glowings of Zan's card flowed

through me. This was better than beef sandwiches. I was one of them!

"Excuse me sir..." The farmer interrupted my dreambath. "Any news of Harry?"

I took a while to peel away layers of family, now, timetables and plots. I looked at him. He was fifty, day-old beard, sun-battered hat, practical boots, small suitcase and raincoat over his arm. "I'm Tom Putt. PC Jenkins at Wareham told me to expect you. You're convincing. A pleasure to meet you. Why are you going to London?"

"To help nick the two birds."

"No. Sorry I meant what's your pretend reason?"

"Oh. I don't have one. Mind my own business and all that."

"Come on man. What's your name? You've got time on your hands so invent a role. Visiting an aged aunt, reading of your uncle's will, lusty brother taking you to a show and something saucy before he emigrates to Australia?"

"John Summer sir. Thank you for your advice. The CC said you were a clever man and now I can see for myself sir. Here comes the train. I've been told they're in the fourth carriage. Did you want them to see you?"

"I hadn't thought of it John. Well done. The guard's van is at the front so let's stay out of sight. Unless they look out of the window we'll be safe."

I could see he was really no more than forty. By the way he used his arms in

Then...

Tom becomes close to the Chief Constable and his wife. He is very successful at using unorthodox methods to deal with hidden crime the CC isn't able to get at. At last the orphan loner finds 'parents' and a wife.

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Important: These three books are a series and should be read in sequence.

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.