In a Green Shade

by

ADR

Apologia and dedication

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,
And Innocence, thy sister dear!
from *The Garden* by Andrew Marvell

IN SOME MURDER MYSTERY CIRCLES these days it is deemed polite to open with the discovery of a body. Or, at the very least, to advertise its imminent arrival: to give notice.

There's a crooked sort of logic to this, clearly; for once you have a murder, you can then, to coin a phrase, cut to the chase.

It wasn't always done this way. In the days when the Talkies were still young, books liked to underline their superiority by refraining from crude melodrama.

For there is a virtue in some forms of restraint; and, as it happens, in this particular instance, we open on a man dressing for dinner…

In a Green Shade is dedicated to Jill Paton Walsh, who has recently finished Dorothy L Sayers' final novel, *Thrones, Dominations*; and to Sophie Hannah, who has been taking up where Agatha Christie left off.

Perceptive readers will note with interest that passages in Kit Duncannon's diary for the month of June 1936 seem to echo incidents, themes, attitudes and modes of expression to be found within some of the entries in the published diaries of Henry "Chips" Channon for the exactly same month in the exactly same year.

It may also be noted that the Duncannon journal touches upon episodes described in the letters and journals of, among others, Gerald Tyrwhitt, Tom Driberg, Harold Nicolson and Duff Cooper.

[Credits where due]

I

Chapter one

Friday, 26 June, 1936. As he dressed for dinner, deftly, methodically, unfussily, Classen's reflection in the blistered silver of the cheval glass was clouded and ghost-like. It was almost as if this were another man, staring back dispassionately at him. A man strangely familiar to him, a man with whom he might, under different circumstances, feel empathy.

An idle thought, this: though perhaps it compounded his sense of detachment. Methodically, deftly: collar studs, buttons, cuff-links, tie. The jacket was slightly too accommodating across the front, the trousers slightly too short.

A lesser man, noting all of this in a mirror, might have felt discomfort. But of course Classen was not a self-absorbed man. Vanity was not his thing. Not his thing at all.

His reflection, ghost-like, clouded, looked back at him impassively, sceptically, inscrutably.

Finished, he stood there surveying the results.

His hair, ever so slightly long on top, light brown, naturally curly, frizzy even, looked as it always did. Wayward. Wild. He'd patted it down with water but even now it was reasserting itself. And, in the discoloured glass, it somehow seemed prematurely (he was not yet 34) grey. His face, too, usually so open and boyish: the glass stole its colour.

So he stood there, grey, staring; and then, half-turning his head toward the door, he listened intently.

The silence up here, in this bare room under the eaves, was profound.

Profound, yet not entirely complete. He became aware of the way a floorboard beneath his feet creaked faintly every time he shifted his weight. He was aware of the almost imperceptible crackle and rustle he made as he adjusted, one more time, his starched shirt front.

Outside, a wood pigeon called softly from the topmost branches of a tall tree.

But up here, his isolation from the rest of the house seemed definitive.

An plain oval rug on bare floorboards; an iron bedstead; a night stand; a flimsy chest of drawers; an unforgiving fan-backed chair; a barren mantel above an empty fireplace; the ancient, rickety cheval glass. This and no more. Save for the silence.

Again, stood before the cheval glass, he listened. And then, at three minutes past eight, he turned and left the room.

Downstairs, as he crossed the main hall, the air seemed stale, the light uncertain. A stuffed owl stared out at him from a glass case. And he too almost succumbed to gloomy thoughts.

But then the double doors facing him were thrown open. And he smiled, almost despite himself. The lights were not yet lit; but there was a vividness about the room within. The drawing room at Elmcote. It was all somehow as it ought to be. And it was as if he had stood here a hundred times before. Here they all were: Norah Kemp and her daughter, Nancy; the polo star Jamie Waterbury; Country Life magazine writer Dorothy Moore; Christopher Duncannon; Mr and Mrs Raeburn from neighbouring Nineveh Court; and, of course, Major Jenkinson and his assistant, Miss Voysey. Mrs Merrill, too. She was, as promised, on hand to introduce Classen to the drawing room for drinks before dinner.

“Mr Classen,” she announced to everyone and no-one.

“Please. Call me Nicholas,” he responded, cheerily.

The ice was soon broken. It was established in good order that, yes, Classen’s was the royal blue Riley now parked in the courtyard; and that, yes, there had been a bit of a mix up and he was, in a sense, standing in for Sir Herbert Smith – in fact he was, so to speak, Sir Herbert’s representative on earth.

A silence greeted this revelation.

Mrs Merrill it was who brought it upon herself to dispel any awkwardness. “The more the merrier,” she stated, blandly. And then, somewhat ambiguously, she added something to the effect that, what with the tennis tournament planned for Saturday, this was not an entirely formal weekend. Not that they were ever really sticklers for formality.

“Yes, the tennis. Let no-one forget that,” Major Jenkinson sang out.

This sounded forced, his voice too piping and reedy, too cheery by half. Perhaps, as a result, there was another awkward silence; and Major Jenkinson was clearly sensitive to this – for he all-too-readily conceded centre stage and sought consolation in his dachshunds. The dogs, a slow-moving mêlée of a good half-dozen of the things, seemingly followed him everywhere; and he bent down to admonish the one nearest him, blameless though it might have been.

Classen said he only hoped he wouldn’t let the side down. He begged leave to throw himself on their mercy.

“My dear fellow. I do hope it won’t come to that.”

This was Duncannon, who’d seemingly taken it upon himself to make good Major Jenkinson’s deficiencies as a host.

He, Duncannon that is, stepped forward and, in a comically exaggerated fashion, made much of sizing him up. He reached out and felt Classen’s lapels, running the satin-smooth material between fingers and thumbs. He stepped back again. “It fits rather well, I think.”

“Oh,” said Classen. “It’s yours. Thank you.”

“Yes. You’ll do, I think.”

Then he stepped forward again and, rather unsettlingly, took Classen by the hands. He held them palms-down for a while, as if assessing the cleanliness of Classen’s nails; then, pulling toward him, he turned them over: a manoeuvre that, rather neatly, exposed Classen cuffs.

It was deftly done.

“Ah,” said Duncannon, seemingly as hurt as he was surprised, “but you are not wearing the cuff-links I left out for you.”

Classen was smiling; but a sense of mild discomfort was evident too. “No. I found I had brought an adequate pair of my own.”

Perhaps Duncannon seemed disinclined to accept this, for he still had Classen’s hands in his.

And who knows how this little vignette might have ended; but at this point Mrs Merrill reasserted herself. She stepped in, took Classen by the arm and, busying herself unashamedly on his behalf, steered him toward Miss Moore. Miss Moore was an American, she explained, and was a writer with an interest in architecture. So they were bound to have lots in common.

Miss Moore was also (but this hardly needed saying) improbably glamorous. She was tall, she had sumptuously waved black hair, she had the most beautiful dark sapphire blue eyes, full of sparkle and nice mischief; and she was dressed rather daringly too. The other women in the room had presented themselves conventionally for dinner. Miss Moore was wearing a rather loose trouser suit in the style of the beach pyjama outfits that, a decade previously, would have been rather noteworthy even on La Croisette. And this was no quietly unassuming beach pyjama outfit – it was a dazzling polka dot affair, white on purple.

But Mrs Merrill was right. Despite the best efforts of Jamie Waterbury, they did get on. Rather famously in fact. And when the time came, he and Miss Moore went through, together, to dinner.

The dining room was, everyone agreed, magnificently presented. You became aware of a heavy scent of flowers long before you reached the door; and then, as you entered, you were overwhelmed by the colours of great fan-like floral displays, vibrant in monumental Lalique crystal vases. Only slowly did you become aware of plainer architectural delights: not least, facing you at the room's far end, the vast casements of leaded mullion windows, with a delicate veil of garden greenery beyond.

Chapter two

Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, he found himself at the wrong end of the dinner table. Major Jenkinson (but of course, famously, everyone referred to him as Johnny), the brilliantined Christopher Duncannon MP (who answered universally to Kit), plus Norah and her daughter… they were thick as thieves at one end; while the less well-appointed guests, including Classen and Miss Moore, found themselves struggling to make small talk at the other. The silver lining, from Classen's point of view, was that he had Miss Moore to his left; and he also found, as he warmed to her, that he hugely enjoyed the company of Mrs Raeburn, a reassuringly genial mother hen, to his right.

Jamie Waterbury, a well-oiled and (as a result) rather impatient man in his mid-to-late twenties, was alone in attempting to embrace both camps. He was clearly intrigued, perhaps dazzled, by the conversation at the top end of the table; but, equally clearly, seemed determined to pursue a spirited dialogue with Miss Moore.

And it was true, of course, that he and she had at least this much in common – both were American. Well educated Americans, from rather wealthy backgrounds, it seemed, because you could barely detect any hint of an accent. But they were Americans none the less.

She was obviously a couple of years older than Waterbury and affected a superiority that seemed to rile him and captivate him in equal measure. He, it had to be said, was a prize bore in the making. He'd clearly had a number of letters from home or from friends he clearly expected Miss Moore to know or care about – and he was determined to share scraps of information gleaned from these letters, almost at random. In turn, this fragmentary narrative prompted him to reflect on the scheduling of polo tournaments and the logistics of transporting polo ponies.

All of which, he clearly assumed, would impress Miss Moore. He was sadly mistaken. For the most part she teased him, albeit with a certain amount of charm and generosity. This didn't deter him in the slightest, though he must have been aware of the laughter she was winning at his expense.

You could easily see why he was drawn to her. She was pretty; elegant without being fussy; and there was something compellingly provocative about her, funny and mischievous and somehow irrepressible. You didn't have to be particularly astute to work out that, at the very least, she represented, to Waterbury, a challenge.

But then Waterbury clearly thrived on challenges: he had a spirited nature, verging on the quarrelsome. When he intervened in conversations at the top end of the table, for instance, he seemed always to be taking issue with Kit; and it didn't help Waterbury's mood that his thrusts were effortlessly parried.

Kit, polished and urbane, was holding forth largely on foreign affairs. And of course he knew a thing or two about foreign affairs, you were invited to presume, by virtue of the fact that he was a Conservative member of parliament. And yet, Waterbury seemed to have a particular bee in his bonnet (and by this stage in the evening, it was a very buzzy bonnet) about the revelation that Kit had not only accepted an invitation to attend the Berlin Olympics but was, he confessed, particularly looking forward to the whole business. Unfortunately, Waterbury began

losing control of his high horse, if that's indeed what it was, when he was forced to reveal, yes, it was true, that he too had plans to travel to the Games.

The person who most intrigued Classen, though, was Johnny. In truth, he found his host a little disappointing. Here he was, this supposedly Renaissance man, not just a soldier (he'd acquitted himself admirably in both the Boer and Great Wars) but a keen sportsman, an accomplished painter and the creator of a celebrated garden; and yet he lacked the gravitas of an old soldier; and, actually, he lacked even the gravitas or the confidence you'd expect of any wealthy man in his mid 60s. He was uncomfortable, fretful, sulky even, at the head of his own table, with his lugubrious expression, his thinning, fine-spun hair, his high forehead and his mild blue eyes. It didn't help, either, that he had a slightly quirky manner of speaking in which his "v"s were softened into "w"s.

Had he, Classen wondered, been ill recently?

Miss Moore was unable to help him on this point; and indeed she seemed mildly scandalised to hear him suggest such a thing. Maybe, though, she conceded, it was true that he sometimes appeared a little reserved.

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And so it went. The lights, in good time, were lit. The windows were left open a fraction – and a fragrance permeated from the garden beyond. A fragrance of flowers, jasmine perhaps, but of something more earthy too. One among them, possibly Norah, said that June had a velvety scent – and she held forth at length about the sorts of flowers that hold back the best of their fragrance during the day, so that they might give it up to the evening twilight.

But she soon deferred to Kit. She always did. And he steered the conversation back to politics. Kit was one of those people who could effortlessly hold a whole room. He had, it seemed, a never-ending supply of anecdotes. You were drawn to him – and it was not difficult to work out how and why.

"I'll tell you a thing or two about Lord Rothermere," he was saying… and he knew instinctively that the whole table was lending at least half an ear. "Rothermere took Hungary's part, of course, in its determination to overthrow the Treaty of Trianon. His position was hardly a secret. But did you know," he added, ostensibly for Norah Kemp's benefit, but rather too loudly for her alone, "that in return, his son Esmond

was offered the Hungarian throne? Rothermere split the difference. He said he'd settle for a fountain named after him in Budapest."

Kit paused here for laughter that did not come. And indeed Norah seemed particularly unamused. So this was clearly something of a faux pas – but Kit, unabashed, waded on into the silence he had now created. He launched into a slightly risqué story about Prince Paul of Yugoslavia, a disquisition on the Amalienburg Hall of Mirrors in Munich; and then a tragically funny set-piece about how King Alexander of Greece had been bitten by his pet monkey – and had subsequently died. King Alexander, that is. Not the pet monkey.

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And then a rather odd thing happened. Kit ran out of steam just at that point when, coincidentally, conversation had run dry at both ends of the table. There was a deathly hush.

In that silence, Johnny looked up and caught, by complete accident, Classen's eye. And he seemed to startle himself (even more than he startled the rest of the table) when he said, in a voice that seemed terribly loud:

"Sir Herbert at Cliveden this weekend then, is he?"

And now, of course, all eyes turned to Classen – who so far had contributed little to the general conversation. In the heat of the moment, Classen recognised immediately that the question had been more clumsy than provocative; but either way, he knew he had to meet it head on.

"I'm sorry. I rather assumed that he had written to you at length explaining his situation. And expressing his regrets."

Johnny offered the slightest hint of a shrug: as if not entirely pleased with Classen's response.

"Yes, he wrote to me," he said; and, once again, there was an unmistakably sulky undertone to his voice.

The matter, though perhaps not entirely settled, might have rested there; but Jamie Waterbury's curiosity had been aroused.

"Cliveden?" He directed this challenge at Johnny, the question mark hanging there, pointedly.

But oddly enough, it was Dorothy Moore who answered him. “I do believe Johnny may be referring to a cabal of the great and good who meet at the Astor’s house in Buckinghamshire.”

This statement evidently amused Kit, who pursed his lips as if relishing some sublime irony. Dorothy was alive to this, for she added, pointedly: “Is that not so, Mr Duncannon?”

In turn, Kit, though he made a great show of choosing his words with care, now looked even more pleased with himself. “There are those who continue to value the pursuit of peace,” he stated, as blandly as he was able, adding: “And there are those who’d continue to argue that peace will best serve the interests of the Empire.”

“I don’t get it,” said Jamie.

“No, Jamie, I don’t believe you do,” Dorothy said.

There was general laughter at this.

And that might have been that. But Jamie wouldn’t let it lie.

“Well?” he said, gesturing in Classen’s direction. “Well?… I’m sorry,” he stumbled, indicating he was temporarily at a loss.

“Classen. My name is Nicholas Classen.”

“Well Classen. How about it? Is he at Cliveden or isn’t he?”

“Well, all I can say is, he’s a rather remarkable man if he is.”

“How so?”

“Because we last heard from him two days ago, in a telex from a liner in the Mediterranean en route to Suez.”

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After that, Classen was allowed to return to the relative obscurity whence he’d come. And of course the whole business could have been terribly awkward. The whole business, that is, of Classen’s status.

It wasn’t a class thing. Not as such.

Social class, in the old-fashioned sense, was rarely an issue at Elmcote. For a start, the gathering was even more American than Classen realised. Even Johnny had been born an American. His father, a controversial magnate who’d made a fortune selling to both sides in the Civil War, had been a very wealth man. But he’d died when Johnny was ten years old; and his mother, an indomitably strong woman, had brought

Johnny to Europe to cure him of some of the tendencies that a sensitive child may acquire if brought up solely by an indomitably strong woman.

Her aim was to make of him a gentleman farmer; and to some extent she succeeded. He was, at the very least, gentleman enough to fight for his adopted country in two wars.

Kit, too, had been born an American. And he also came from a sublimely wealthy family. He'd crossed the Atlantic principally to study at Oxford; and in the Spring of 1915, the university having emptied, he had been moved to follow his contemporaries to Flanders, where he'd found his *metier* as the driver of an ambulance. After The War he'd returned to Oxford, then drifted to London, and had become one of the lesser-known Bright Young People. Like Johnny, he had, in time, become a naturalised citizen.

Norah Kemp, now, like Johnny, in her early 60s, wasn't an American: in fact she came from a genuinely impressive Anglo-Irish bloodline; but she'd become dislodged from the very top drawer decades ago. So… neither Kit nor Norah would have cared a fig about Classen's provenance. Ditto Johnny. Ditto Jamie, a (comparatively) poor relation from the branch of Johnny's family that had remained rooted in the States. Nor was Miss Moore a snob, not noticeably at any rate. Mr and Mrs Raeburn, whose relatively recent projection from the Home Counties into Gloucestershire was powered by money made in the City, were similarly grounded.

Miss Voysey and Mrs Marsden? Yes, as employees, they'd have aspired to affectation.

But, no, generally speaking, if people regarded Classen awkwardly, the awkwardness wasn't necessarily a class thing.

It was more in the nature of a rudeness thing.

Johnny and Classen's employer, Sir Herbert Smith, the renowned architect, went way back. They had many friends in common. Sir Herbert had, once upon a time, been involved in one of Johnny's plant-hunting expeditions to South Africa. And fifteen years ago, maybe more, Sir Herbert had overseen the most recent phase of building here at Elmcote.

They'd not spoken in a long time; but recently, Johnny had attempted to revive the connection. Because, of course, Johnny had new plans.

For years, all of his energy and focus had been on the garden. He had created one of the wonders of the age. Now, it was only fitting that he recreate the house in order that it be worthy of such a setting.

He'd written to Sir Herbert. He'd invited him to be a guest at one of his house parties. One of his tennis parties, perhaps. And Sir Herbert had accepted. They'd have a pow-wow. They'd talk about the old times; and together, looking to the future, they might aspire to create something special too. Sir Herbert was especially looking forward to seeing the gardens again. They'd been merely in their infancy the last time he'd seen them – though, even then, he had applauded the majesty of Johnny's vision.

However, just days ago, Sir Herbert had written to apologise profusely.

He would no longer be able to make it.

But might he not send, in his stead, his right hand man? A talented young chap, name of Classen.

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Dorothy spent most of dinner drawing Classen's attention, in a steady stream of whispered asides, to an interesting pattern of emotional tectonics at the top end of the table. She started off explaining it in terms of a four at Bridge. But that was not really right. In fact it was probably more like a love triangle. Not that there was anything erotic involved. Nothing unseemly like that. And it wasn't so much a triangle as a square. Johnny, Norah, Kit, Nancy formed a cat's cradle, a parallelogram of irresolvable forces.

Johnny fought for Norah's attentions.

Norah loved Johnny dearly but was drawn magnetically toward Kit.

Kit hated Nancy.

Nancy lived to impress Johnny while confounding her mother.

Kit and Johnny breathed each other's air uneasily.

It was an odd little clique; and it was dominated, arguably, by Norah. Norah had, in her heyday, been a celebrated Society beauty; she was even now undeniably glamorous. In the day-time, she could appear unashamedly rusticated; but in the evenings she would emerge as from a chrysalis, a vision in satin and damask and jewellery, though never too much.

The contrast between Norah and her daughter, said some, was stark. Nancy had coarse black hair, a pale face and she wore a too-dark shade of lipstick, too-too-dark; so there was often, in her appearance, a hint of the cadaverous. Her voice could sound terribly harsh. She scowled a lot and seemed prone to sarcasm even when she was trying her best to be cheerful.

Except, that is, where Johnny was concerned. Nancy fawned on him and appeared to hang breathlessly on his every word, an affectation that irritated both Kit and Norah. Johnny, though, treated her like a daughter.

Perversely, this appeared to diminish Johnny's hold over Norah. Johnny clearly had feelings of an old-fashioned sort for her. Chivalric feelings. And perhaps he rather expected these feeling to be reciprocated, utterly, instinctively, unquestioningly. Yet she flirted brazenly with Kit. They conspired together; they spoke to each other in a private language that no-one else could understand.

Nancy's fawning on Johnny seemed a dismally second-rate version of this flirtation. Both Norah and Kit were capable of playing supremely accomplished roles; whereas Nancy hadn't an iota of sophistication: as was proved by dinner's most (or, in fact, only) notable incident.

Jamie it was who'd clearly said something to upset her, for she rounded on him and countered, in a voice pitched for the whole room to hear:

"Oh, for pity's sake, grow up Jamie."

Jamie immediately coloured; and, for a breathless heartbeat, it seemed as if he'd almost certainly explode.

Yet he didn't. His eyes narrowed; he smiled to himself. He leaned back, becoming comfortable with the notion that his audience now feared the worst.

"All I said was that I felt a murder coming on."

He said it clean and clear: and it felt to Classen as if the room had instantly frozen. Jamie surveyed the faces ranged against him, as if daring a rejoinder; but none came.

"How about it Kit? What do you say?"

Oddly now, Kit could not meet Jamie's eye.

"No? The victim might be called, let's say, Wilson. His body might be found, drowned. In The Pool Garden."

Nancy it was who broke the spell. She stood (furious, shaken, it was hard to say which), threw down her napkin and walked out. She said nothing, looked at no-one;

and, in some senses, the melodrama was understated – but no less shocking for all that.

And Jamie? He merely lifted an eyebrow, raised his glass as if toasting the room – and then drained it defiantly.

And that was that. Conversation resumed around the table as if it had never left off.

"What was that all about?" asked Classen of Dorothy when he had the chance.

"Oh nothing," she replied. "Kit does this party piece. It's rather like charades. He acts like he's the detective in one of those mystery novels. Gathers everyone together in the drawing room, outlines a fiendish murder, then accuses someone in the room of having committed it. It's just a way of twitting someone about the way they're behaving or teasing them about a secret they're trying to keep. He does it all rather well, though. Maybe you'll see later."

"Or not," he said.

"No. Yes… you're right. That's not very likely now, is it?"

They'd soon find out: a slightly different theatrical diversion was unfolding at the head of the table. It was the sort of scene designed to make you smile, one that had surely been played out a hundred times before. Here, on the one hand, was Norah Kemp, pleading with Johnny to entertain them after dinner by playing piano; and there, on the other, was Johnny insisting that he was not up to the task: he had not the talent, he had never had the talent – and whatever talent he'd ever had had been squandered. He was, not to put too fine a point upon it, rusty. And here again, rallying once more, was Norah: insisting, nay demanding, that he desist from this false modesty. And there, in riposte, was Johnny, affecting to be exasperated beyond measure, accusing her of being a most terribly tiresome woman. And yet… and yet (a faintest glimmer of hope renewing itself), if his guests were hard-hearted enough to insist, he might consent to play… if, and only if, Norah could be persuaded to join him at the piano so that they could perform some duets. Perhaps there was some suitable sheet music that he could look out.

Outwardly, he continued to exhibit every natural sign of discontent. But clearly Johnny was inwardly rejoicing – and, indeed, was happier now than he'd been at any stage that evening.

Chapter three

At some point, Classen managed to slip away. He'd felt ill-at-ease in the drawing room. The music, courtesy of Johnny and Norah seated side by side at the piano, did not soothe him; and the potential for rival diversions seemed thin at best.

He had no set aim, other than to take the air; but it had barely gone nine-thirty and it was still tolerably light outside… so a brief stroll in the stillness of a summer evening turned into a rather more prolonged exploration of the garden. And in fact, as was inevitable, he lost himself in it.

He had been briefed, obviously, by Sir Herbert; but either the briefing had been inadequate or Classen had been a poor listener. Because he was first astonished, then utterly disorientated by the garden. Or gardens, plural. No shame in this. Elmcote was now at the height of its powers; and this, a sultry evening in late June, was when it cast its strongest spell. Towards sundown in high summer, in the heart of England, the deepest, darkest heart of England, Elmcote begins drawing the day around itself – manor house, garden, hamlet and tree-lined lane, tight in the fields and the woodlands beyond.

It begins to seem like the very last place on earth, the end of the road; and yet, at the same time, an omphalos, the world's very centre, its *font et origo*. Classen had not been prepared for this. And yet, thinking back, he'd surely had an inkling as he'd neared his destination, pointing his Riley ever more hesitantly along narrower and narrower sunken lanes: lanes already aspiring to twilight, lanes threaded through tree-tunnels, squeezed between lush verges and tall hedgerows.

Somewhere north of Moreton, on the back roads, you always started to suspect you had passed the point of no return. At crossroads, the signposts (or, more accurately, the fingerposts) were inevitably overgrown; and the hedgerows, dense inter-weavings of elder and hawthorn and hazel, sycamore and buckthorn and woodbine, were cut increasingly rarely by the sorts of gaps in which you might hope to uncover a stile.

Yes, Classen had been aware of all of that.

Now, though, as he penetrated ever deeper into the garden… as he, as it were, entered the very heart of the matter, its powers almost overwhelmed him.

And, yes, it's true: a lot of nonsense was written about Elmcote in the late 1920s and early 1930s, not least in the pages of *Country Life*. Writers tended to stretch not for metaphor but for analogy: the pleasure gardens of Kubla Khan, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and of course, that most archetypal of all gardens, the Garden of

Eden. All were cited in their turn. One contributor to an American journal rather ambitiously compared the gardens at Elmcote to the grounds of William Randolph Hearst's retreat at San Simeon. Foolish talk – but almost excusably foolish.

Because how do you convey what cannot adequately be conveyed, explain the inexplicable? These writers were surely attempting to make manifest a feeling that here was a garden so unique that it was, in effect, all gardens.

Yet in some senses, Elmcote's situation was not entirely promising, located as it was on the northernmost edge of the Cotswold uplands as they fell away toward the Vale of Evesham. In other words, Elmcote's existence, clinging to the very edge of a plateau of high ground, had always been slightly precarious. Due west of the manor house, where much of the garden lay, the land sloped gently; but north-west, if you walked in a dead straight line, you'd find the land dropping away by almost four hundred feet within a mile and a half. Hardly precipitous – but hardly insignificant either.

Not that you were ever really aware, except in the vaguest of senses, a falling off here, a climb there, of naked topography. If this had been a treeless terrain, the manor house might have seemed a latter-day analogue of a hill fort or a commanding imperial villa, haughty on its ridge, dominating the valley below. But this was no treeless terrain. This was a richly wooded corner of England. To the south, vast areas of the Cotswolds had been cleared, down the millennia, for sheep pasture. But Elmcote lay in marginal land, atavistic woodland; and, as if to emphasise this point, facing it across the Vale of Evesham were the last vestiges of the southernmost edge of the ancient Forest of Arden.

It was hardly the largest garden in England. In acreage terms it was a mere bagatelle compared to the vast parklands of the more celebrated Great Houses of England. Chatsworth, say, or Stowe. But even the most ambitious of the vast estates featured much parkland and very little garden – garden, that is, in the vernacular English sense.

Elmcote was, in comparison with the dreary essays of a Capability Brown, a work of art. Or, rather, a series of works of art. It was an art gallery in which the rooms themselves were the exhibits. Nothing in England rivalled it for its level of its ambition, the dense richness of its design or its intensity. And indeed there were those who believed they could detect something metaphysical or transcendental within its innermost being.

The garden's central axis began under an ancient cedar of Lebanon, a tree whose lower branches shaded the house's the dining room windows; and this axis ran for half a mile or more to the north west. It featured room after glorious garden room, each enclosed in walls of high yew hedging – and the narrow doors in these hedges were aligned down the whole axis, forming the equivalent of the enfilade of a Renaissance palace. This enfilade terminated, beyond steps taking you up to a raised *palisade a l'italienne* of pleached hornbeams, in an impressive wrought iron structure called Heaven's Gate.

At the Summer Solstice the sun, dipping down below the tree-line across the valley, set dead centre within the framework of this gate.

So. It was almost inevitable that Classen, having meandered (the central enfilade had many antechambers; and there were antechambers to the antechambers) for the better part of an hour, would find himself here.

He stood and watched as the sun, a fiery red ball bathed in milky haze, made good its nightly promise. For ten minutes or so he stood, stock still, absorbed.

Just being here: he felt blessed, fortunate, privileged even.

But he was also aware of a niggling sense of confusion.

The judgement of history has not been kind as regards Nicholas Classen. The central indictment is that he was a man who had an untidy knack of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or, to put it another way, the reckoning is that, while he had many wholly admirable qualities, he rarely brought them to bear in the right ways.

In turn, this implies a lack of awareness, not least self-awareness.

Unfair, as it happens. Very unfair.

Even now, as he stood staring at the setting sun, he had a clear sense that he had misjudged his host. That he had under-estimated him.

He'd assumed that, because Sir Herbert had delegated this commission, it must be dull or second rate. Why else would the great man have decided to pass?

Standing here, staring at the setting sun, he realised what an idiot he'd been. Surely, the opportunity here at Elmcote was, in point of fact, hugely exciting. Perhaps career-defining.

"He's a pain, isn't he?" said a female voice in the gathering darkness behind him. He knew this voice: though its timbre, in this intimate setting, had a deepness and a richness he'd not been aware of earlier. He didn't need to turn. But he did anyway.

"Jamie Westbury. He's a pain, isn't he?" she repeated.

"Miss Moore," he said.

"Dorothy," she corrected.

"Dorothy," he conceded.

"He's a pain. But he's not all bad you know."

"Well… I look forward to making his acquaintance when he's sober."

It was hard to gauge her reaction in the half light – but she seemed to hesitate before she answered: "That's fair, I suppose."

"So," he speculated, jauntily, "have you come to tell me I've been missed?"

"No. Not really."

He liked that. Flippancy, it has to be said, was his thing. After all, it was part-and-parcel of the spirit of the age; and he was consciously a man of his time.

And yes, he was enchanted by the notion that she had decided to follow him out here. Yet… he was also somewhat wary too.

"You're curious, though," he speculated. "You're dying to know more about Johnny's plans for the house."

She laughed at this.

And this laughter clearly stung him. Not much; it was merely a pang, a twinge or irritation. But still:

"What?" he demanded. "What's funny?" And when she struggled to answer this, he added: "Clearly, I amuse you."

"May I be frank?" she asked.

"Of course."

"I suppose I came out here to tell you you might as well drop the pretence. They know, you know."

"Pretence? What on earth are you talking about?"

"The whole business about Sir Herbert Smith… and Johnny's big plans."

"It's all true, I can assure you."

"No it isn't."

"Why on earth would you say that?"

"Because there's no money."

It was Classen's turn to laugh.

"Well, Miss Moore. I clearly bow to your greater knowledge."

"We all know about the latest turn in the court case. Every last detail. In fact we'd been assuming that Johnny was preparing to make an announcement, maybe after the tennis."

"Court case?"

"You know… in the States."

"Honestly, I swear I know nothing abut any court case."

"Well, OK, that much might be true. But the rest ain't so, that much I know for sure."

"Miss Moore, I can assure you…"

"My guess is you're a valuation agent."

He laughed again. Shook his head.

"Go on," she said. "You might as well come clean."

Chapter four

Saturday, 27 June, 1936 In the uncertain half-light before dawn, the house's main door opened, first barely a crack, then silently by degrees: and a shadow emerged. No legerdemain was needed here; this door, almost as an act of faith, was never locked while Johnny was in residence. You were free to come and go at any hour, just as you pleased.

This shadow merged briefly with other more angular, architectural shadows within the pillared portico; then, fluidly, silently, with purpose, it moved away from the house toward The Old Garden. As it passed beneath the overhanging branches of a great tree, the shadow resolved itself, first into a silhouette, then into a figure: a man, it seemed, carrying a holdall in one hand and, in the other, a long and heavy implement of some sort, wrapped in sackcloth.

He progressed in a zig-zag fashion across the garden, but ever northward, meeting its outer edges where it flirted not with arable fields and pasture but with the margins of an ancient forest. Even as he entered this dense domain, he still moved with purpose; and a narrow woodland path, hidden almost from sight in a sea of ferns, delivered him ever deeper within.

By the time he reached a clearing, there were more unambiguous hints of light in the sky. There, in this clearing, by a fallen tree, there was a carcass. A badger it had been, now some days dead, partially consumed. Its fur was matted with congealed

blood and its exposed flesh and viscera were losing their sheen and had entered the more gruesomely lurid stages of decay.

The man crouched by this fallen creature and began unravelling sackcloth from around the object he had carried here. It was a rifle. It looked like a Lee Enfield of Ypres vintage. He drew the bolt back then disengaged it three times with difficulty. The gun had been cared for and was well-oiled: but you could see that he was not practised in this.

Next, he rummaged in the holdall and produced a magazine of cartridges. His fingers trembled with excitement as he attempted to clip the magazine into place; and eventually, after much fumbling, he forced it home with a metallic click. Next he raised the rifle and, cheek against its stock, he rehearsed an aiming routine. Then he looked down at the carcass.

It lay there supine, its head thrown back, the flesh pulled back on its muzzle to display a rictus grin. There were maggots where its eyes once were. He eased the rifle's barrel between its teeth into the open mouth. Now a long pause, a terrible pause; and he closed his eyes. Then at last he pulled the trigger.

For a mile around, birds rose from the trees in uproar, crows mostly, cawing angrily. From afar it looked as if the forest had coughed a cloud of black feathers into the violet-pale grey of the dawn sky.

Filled with urgency once more, he wrapped the rifle in its sackcloth, wedged it under the trunk of the fallen tree and hid it further with sticks and stones.

Twilight was well advanced – it had gone 4 am – as he emerged from the woods not far from the threshold of Heaven's Gate. He entered the garden here and almost immediately cut off at an angle onto The Long Walk: an avenue of a quarter of a mile or so, hedged in on both sides to lead the eye to a distant vanishing point. It would deliver him into the fields just to the south of Elmcote Bartrim. He hurried now, as if aware he was racing the sun.

Chapter five

Classen woke, in confusion, well before six. He was suffering from a terrible headache. And worse: a gnawing sense of anxiety.

He did not often doubt himself. But here was the thing: his memory of events after he'd returned to the house the previous evening was now a little hazy.

He'd felt uneasy as he'd re-entered the drawing room. It was unsettling to feel that they'd been talking about him. Flattering too, in a way – but mainly unsettling.

Classen's sense of unease was made all the more tedious by the fact that everyone was now choosing to be chummy. They were being excessively polite, not just to him but to each other. But for all that, there was still an unsettling undercurrent. This was no longer a room at ease with itself. Nothing you could explain definitively. But it was there.

It was as if they'd been playing their murder mystery game – and it had somehow gone wrong. Now and then, the mood festered.

For instance, at one point Jamie turned to Classen and said: "I hope you don't mind me asking… but have you ever killed a man?"

Seemingly, this was lightly done – a matter of idle of curiosity, a question asked much as you would ask an acquaintance if they preferred whisky or cognac. But it was provocatively done too.

There was a brief silence. Then Kit laughed and told Classen he mustn't mind Jamie, he could be so clueless sometimes.

But Jamie made nothing of this implicit rebuke and continued: "It's always worth asking thought, isn't it? It says so much about a person. Johnny's killed a man. Men, plural, haven't you Johnny?"

Johnny, still seated at the piano, though no longer playing, chose not to hear this; and Kit drew a line under the whole episode by insisting it was time he mixed some more cocktails.

Which in fact came to pass.

Classen had been planning on making his excuses at the earliest possible opportunity. But one thing led to another.

So that, when eventually he'd made it up to bed, he'd slept like a baby. Except, of course, that he hadn't.

He'd woken at one stage to the sound of raised voices. How far away he couldn't say. It was certainly pitch black: so it must have been the middle of the night. Two men arguing. Sometimes far away; sometimes nearer at hand; then again, maybe in the room below.

Later, in the not-so-wee small hours, he'd been woken by subtler noises. Creepier noises. A creaking perhaps; a suppressed cry; whispering. He'd lain there, staring into darkness, listening – as if curious to recall the stuff of dreams. And yet the whispering

was perhaps not a human noise at all. Not as such; more, perhaps, like stray papers rustling in a courtyard or the sound of the wind ebbing and flowing in the leaves of a great tree. Or maybe it was all in his head.

And even later, in the uncertain light of very earliest dawn, the most unsettling notion of all: that his door had been pushed ajar and that there was a figure standing there, looking in. Had he dreamed this? Was this how ghost stories started? Surely it must have been a dream, for if he'd had been fully awake, he'd have risen to confront this figure. At the very least he'd have demanded to know who was there.

He had the impression it was a young man. A hale and hearty young man; not at all ghost-like. A tall fair-haired stranger, slightly dishevelled in an open-necked shirt. An outdoorsy type.

So, yes, Classen awoke in confusion, but strangely rested, well before six.

Outside, the sun was already shining.

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Dressed, washed, reasonably clear-headed, he set off to explore, the notion being that he'd have the best opportunity to build an impression of the house – its architecture, its situation, its raw character – if he did so before anyone else was up and about.

He was thorough. Twice he circumnavigated the building, close up, almost hugging its walls; stepping back a bit, he made a circuit, as best as he was able, at a greater distance; and lastly, to obtain even greater perspectives, he walked out from the house and returned from afar along every feasible compass bearing. Then he explored nooks and crannies and outbuildings, especially those that defined the main courtyard, huddled under the north gable of oldest part of the manor house.

This part of the structure had, in the mists of long-lost history, clearly been a farmhouse of sorts; but this had been spruced up into a classic Cotswolds manor house at some point during the 17th Century. In the 18th Century, a new wing, as big as the originally house, had been added. Stretching westward from the "back" northwest corner of the original house, this had been a botched attempted to add not just spaciousness to the dwelling but good taste too: as figured, most prominently, in its passable imitations of Queen Anne windows. Around about this time, the east or "front" façade of the old house had clearly been buffed up too: the front door had been given ideas above its station with the addition of stuccoed Ionian pillars.

Within a century, however, this front door had been consigned to genteel obscurity; because, in the early 19th Century, a whole new house had come along to dwarf all that had gone before. Again, as the first extension had been, this new build was offset to the north and west and had clearly been envisioned as a stand-alone structure. It was in similarly dubious architectural taste too. Reeking of crows and lowering grey skies, it was essentially a gloomy early-Victorian grange, straight out of Tennyson's Marianna, with a roof ridge in a double-cross pattern: in other words, with two gables on each long facade and a gable on each end. A sense of cheerily chaotic architectural eclecticism was completed by the addition of a stack of neo-Tudor chimneys atop the west gable.

Eclecticism: that's the polite way of putting it. For every critic who saw an paean to the powers of infinite variety, at least half a dozen saw a ghastly melange; and of course the stew had been given its final little stir by Sir Herbert Smith himself. Just after The War, during the mini economic boom that had followed Versailles, Johnny had commissioned Sir Herbert to essay a modest structure that might tie the two parts of his domicile together, connecting epitome of Victorian grange to Queen Anne pastiche. Sir Herbert had obliged: he'd not only constructed a witty little sliver of architectural linkage, he'd also added Arts and Crafts flourishes (lintel detailing, for instance, and the re-engineering of a handful of windows) to the existing structures.

It would be an understatement to suggest that none of this was to Classen's taste. He saw himself as the heir to Shaw, Barnsley, Gimson, Peto and Lutyens. Heir – or last true believer. His aesthetic was rooted in vernacular, particularly Surrey vernacular, blended, where appropriate with an English Classical sensibility as defined by Wren and his school.

So he also found it rather regrettable that the house was so tastelessly obscured by greenery. Thanks to ingenious arrangements of hedge and tree and shrub, it was impossible to view it in its entirely from any point in the garden, near or far. It was too damned coy; it played hide and seek with you. As you flirted with it (or it with you), you were offered merely glimpses, jigsaw pieces of architecture, almost at random: a chimney here, a gable or a mullioned window there.

This lack of an integrated perspective irritated Classen immensely – until he began to recognise that, actually, in this case, it helped cover a multitude of aesthetic sins. And after all, he was as pragmatic as he was open-minded. He'd come prepared to listen, not to lecture.

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Next, he headed down the lane towards Elmcote Barton, the manorial hamlet. The lane was no more than a primitive track – and though the weather had been warm and dry (more or less) since the thunder storms and torrential downpours of the previous weekend, there were muddy puddles still in its rutted surface. A duck pond on the outskirts of the village was engorged and brimming by the roadside.

Elmcote Barton, with its handful of thatched cottages and a smithy clustered by the lane just to the south of the manor house, was one of those villages that appeared to have existed, utterly unchanged, for an eternity. Classen knew that its buildings were owned by the estate and housed the estate's workers: solely farm labourers at one stage but, as the garden was extended into ever-greater proportions of the estate's acreage, now garden labourers too. Yet this seemingly unspoiled rural simplicity was not the whole story: Classen was aware that at least one of the cottages was retained for guests – and he had been warned that Johnny might be seeking to consult on its redevelopment.

He exchanged a few words with a group of shirt-sleeved men, half a dozen or so, braced and booted, standing in a group by the roadside, waiting, he assumed, to be assigned that morning's duties. Classen had few airs and graces – he made it a principle never to stand on ceremony – and in any case, he rather enjoyed being able to offer around his cigarettes. In exchange for the insight (not entirely untrue) that he was a somewhat bored houseguest of Johnny's, the men gave him to understand that, though it was not unusual to be asked to work on a Saturday morning, on this occasion an unusual task awaited. Several tons of large rocks had been delivered to the outskirts of the hamlet the week before; now these rocks were to be transported, in wheelbarrows, a mile or so around the outer boundary of the garden to a point at its north-west corner where a new rock garden was being constructed.

It was sheer madness. But you learned to live with such madness if you worked at Elmcote.

He headed on up the lane and soon discovered that there was not much to see beyond the hamlet: the track petered out into open countryside, fields and copses and hedgerows falling away gently in the general direction of Burnt Norton and Chipping Campden. The world was silent save for the sound, near and far, of birdsong as the

sun rose higher into the sky. Another bright day seemed in prospect: though it was also true that he could see clouds massing in the southwest and that there were hints once more of a sultry heaviness in the air.

Classen retraced his steps now and headed back up the lane.

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When he returned to the grounds, Classen had not meant to stray as far as The Kitchen Garden or The Orchard – for he'd now worked up something of an appetite and breakfast called.

He'd been drawn initially by a glimpse, between apple tree boughs, of a solitary man digging. The man seemed to be on a patch of ground, toward the farthest northwest extremity of the grounds, in which colonies of wildflowers grew undisturbed in a forgotten corner of weed and meadow-grass.

Then the man stopped digging, straightened his back, stretched, took off his cloth cap and wiped his weather-beaten brow with the back of a weather-beaten hand. Though he was middle-aged (in his mid-fifties or thereabouts), his cloth cap and his clipped moustache made him seem more ancient, like some sort of eternal Victorian relic. And it was no wonder he was warm – the day was dappled in sunshine, yet he was wearing a baggy tweed jacket.

Having stretched once more, he looked down, as if inspecting his handiwork; and then, shouldering the spade, he waded back through the long grass to the orchard's boundary path.

He clearly hadn't seen Classen at this point and was unaware he was being watched. For his part, Classen wasn't hiding himself. Not as such – he'd merely found it impossible to tear himself away.

Having reached the path, the man propped his spade against a rotting wooden post – the last vestige, clearly, of a long-lost fence. He stretched again, looked thoughtful, his brow becoming furrowed; and then, having thought some more, he began nodding to himself, as if counting back some sort of sequence.

He looked back over his shoulder.

And, his frown evaporating now, he stepped back into the overgrown plot.

As he did so, the spade slipped from its prop and fell, burying itself in the long grass.

So that, when he returned less than thirty seconds later, he was confronted with a new mystery. He frowned, he thought to himself, he looked around, he took off his cap again and scratched his head.

And there might have been more in this vein; but Classen, having resolved to come to his assistance, was moving in his direction: and the man now spotted him.

Classen, not ten yards off by now, waved and hailed him.

"I'm sorry," Classen said. "I don't mean to intrude. I was just taking a walk before breakfast… and I couldn't help seeing what happened to your spade."

The man couldn't have looked more astonished if Classen had been a ghostly apparition; but he soon gathered himself.

"You're a guest up at the house, sir?"

"Yes, I am. Name's Classen."

"Frank Adams, head gardener."

They shook hands – and Adams didn't flinch from meeting Classen's eye.

"I couldn't help noting. Your spade. It slipped into the long grass here."

And, stepping in, Classen retrieved it.

The thing was, Adams seemed more amused than grateful; though he was not impolite. "I don't know what I'd have done if I'd lost this," he said. "A royal hand – a King's no less – has touched this spade."

"Oh?" said Classen, genuinely surprised. "How so?"

"Oh, sir," Adams replied, smiling, the memory clearly still playing behind his eyes. "It's a long story."

Chapter six

Somewhat to his surprise, Classen breakfasted alone. Or as good as.

As he served himself with scrambled egg, he greeted the room's only other occupant, Nancy Kemp. She ignored him utterly.

He thought he'd judged the timing about right – it was now dead on eight – and reckoned the room might have been cheerfully full. But Johnny's other guests clearly had no appetite for breakfast or had breakfasted early.

As he sat down, he again said hello; and again Nancy didn't so much as acknowledge his presence, not even by a blink or a flicker of an eyelid. She continued to chew blankly, ruminatively, on a slice of toast and marmalade.

There was something unsettling about Nancy – and Classen couldn't decide whether she deserved to be indulged or confronted. For the time being, he did neither. In any case, Mrs Merrill (appearing as if from nowhere) had manifested herself. A solicitous Mrs Merrill, a hyper-efficient Mrs Merrill, a Mrs Merrill presenting herself for all to see as a bundle of tireless energy, inquiring if the eggs were to Classen's satisfaction, whether more toast might be required and if the tea was still drinkable. It was all too much for Nancy, who snapped at her ("Oh, for heaven's sake") as a prelude to her exit.

When he'd arrived yesterday afternoon, Classen had been rather confused as regards Mrs Merrill. She it was who had greeted him and settled him in; and, of course, she it was who'd been on hand to introduce him to his fellow guests before dinner. The thing was, though she'd supervised the two housemaids in the preparation of the dinner table and though her husband clearly acted in part (in other words, rather informally) as butler, she had a place at table and sat in with the party as she was able.

There was a plainness about her features – a well-fed English stolidity – and her hair, rich and dark as it clearly still was, though she must have been in her late thirties, was cut for functionality and tidiness. Yes, she exuded a somewhat militant efficiency; but there was a certain charisma too. Her stockings were flesh-toned and of a heavy gauge and her cardigan was clearly the sort of cardigan fit only for domestic chores. There was about her an odour of the linen cupboard. And yet, underneath the cardigan was a silk blouse with frills and laced edgings – and she was wearing a string of pearls too, almost as a chain of office.

Now he thought he understood. She was clearly, in effect, Johnny's chatelaine – and, as such, not to be underestimated. There was no harm, Classen reflected, in acknowledging this. So he told her, in short, that he assumed she would be arranging his meeting with Johnny later that morning.

"Has Miss Voysey not talked to you?"

Miss Voysey was Johnny's secretary and de facto estate manager.

"Miss Voysey? No, I don't think so."

Mrs Merrill tutted and all but rolled her eyes. Honestly, she seemed to be saying. That woman.

This was, of course, uncalled for – and she seemed to acknowledge her want of discretion, for a flicker of shame briefly clouded her eyes and she coloured slightly.

But Classen couldn't help himself. He smiled.

And she, despite herself, smiled too.

"I had assumed you would be concluding your business this morning," she said. "I had been led to believe you would not be joining us for lunch."

"Oh," he said. He paused, as if for thought; and Mrs Merrill stared at him pointedly.

"Yes," he concurred eventually, as if still mulling this over. "Yes of course."

"Will you be in the morning room after breakfast?" she added. "I'll see what I can do – and send someone to let you know when he's ready."

Chapter seven

In The Old Garden, within the shade of a vast cedar of Lebanon, folding wood and canvas chairs had been set around a white-painted wrought iron table – and sitting there, mother and daughter, were the Kemps.

Both were silent, both reading, the mother a cheap detective novel, the daughter a slim volume of Andrew Marvell's poetry. Classen asked Norah if he might join them – and she readily consented.

They sat quietly and contentedly for a while, all three seemingly self-absorbed; the only sounds were the breeze in the leaves of nearby trees, the plaintive piping call of an unseen bird and the rustle every so often of a turned page.

And then Classen became aware that Mrs Kemp had looked up from her book and was smiling at him.

Perhaps, he realised, he might owe her an apology.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted last night," he offered. "I think I must have been terribly tired."

"Oh that!" she exclaimed, rather alarmingly – clearly she had some specific misdemeanour in mind, one that Classen couldn't, at this stage, possibly recall. "Think nothing of it," she continued. "I think you must have been given one of Kit's cocktails. They're legendary."

He looked relieved. The thing was, they had met once before; and though she clearly didn't remember him, they'd bonded again. He recognised in her a fellow connoisseur of the arts of mischief. She was, if you paid sufficient attention, wickedly funny. And, yes, she was a fraud. Of course she was a fraud – as fraudulent, in point

of fact, as only the truly genuine article could be. Or, to put it another way, she was her own most accomplished creation.

In turn, she could surely sense that Classen, with his evident love for the dry and the sardonic, was an ideal audience member. On a number of occasions, around the dinner table, he'd become aware that she was playing to him, delighting inwardly when he alone seemed to get the joke. He knew of course that he would have to pay for this complicity: she would undoubtedly choose at some stage to make an example of him. That's how these things worked, after all. But he was already preparing to forgive her.

Yesterday evening, she had been classically stylish in a black evening gown. Now, she was playing a more Edwardian role, dressed, as she was, in a voluminously lacy blouse, a long pale-blue skirt and boots that laced all the way up her shins. Not to mention the gardening gauntlets that underwrote her status as England's most prominent (save for the odd Sackville-West here or there) lady garden designer. They, the gauntlets, were carefully laid out cross-bones fashion, marking some sort of a spot, in the middle of the table.

"I enjoyed your playing last night," Classen said, anxious to stop Norah losing herself once more in her book.

She frowned slightly at this – as if disappointed to hear any form of flattery on his lips.

"Do you know," she continued, "that Johnny only recently bought that piano. And he bought it for me. He's a very fine player, of course, but there hasn't been a piano at Elmcote for years. I used to have to walk across the fields to Mrs Raeburn's if I wanted to play. And I tend to like to play."

"What, do you think, persuaded him to humour you?"

"What makes you think he is humouring me, Mr Classen?"

"I am only trying to imply, in my own clumsy manner, that he loves you dearly."

She had been leaning in across the table. Now she drew back, as if surprised. Then her eyes narrowed.

"Nancy dear."

"Yes mother," her daughter replied wearily.

"Were you not just saying that you rather fancied a walk?"

"No, mother."

"By yourself. Perhaps in the rose garden."

Nancy put down her book and looked daggers at her mother.

"I feel almost certain that you did, my dear."

She stood reluctantly.

"Your hat dear," added Norah. There were two hats on the table – on the one hand, a wide-brimmed creation, festooned with lace and ribbons and a thousand silk flowers; and, on the other, a petite trilby of the sort that had been fashionable a decade or more since. Norah was indicating the latter.

Again Nancy looked daggers at her mother; but then shrugged. With the smartest of glances in Classen's direction, and having once again ignored the hat, she walked forlornly towards The Circle: a circular lawn, not far off, that marked the western edge of The Old Garden. As he watched her go, Classen felt sorry for her; and somewhat ashamed of himself for his utter silence. Mrs Kemp watched her too until she was quite out of sight.

"Now," Mrs Kemp said. "Tell me. Tell me all. Just what is Johnny up to?"

Classen had to admit that he didn't know. He hadn't the first idea. He'd not yet been briefed.

Yes, yes, yes, she said. Absolutely. "You must think us somewhat unsophisticated. You say you're an architect. Some of my fellow guests think you're Johnny's bank manager – or whatnot. If he has such a thing. You know that don't you?"

Classen gave an exasperated little shrug; and Norah continued: "But we know better, don't we, Mr Classen."

"Nicholas, please."

"Bank manager indeed," she repeated, with warm emphasis.

But Classen was clearly not about to be drawn. So she continued: "You know, of course, that he has a house in the south of France too, not far from the coast? On the Riviera, you know. It's rather lovely. He has been talking of spending a lot more time there."

"He keeps rooms for you there too?"

"Yes he does. However did you know that? How clever of you."

He didn't quite know how to respond to this. Happily, he didn't have to.

Kit, arriving as if out of nowhere, passed close by their table, waving, with a flourish, a baton of rolled-up newspaper. "I have a copy of today's Times, if anyone is interested," he announced cheerfully – and walked on, without further ado, toward

The Circle. When he reached it, he stopped and stood there, slightly nonplussed, as if expecting the world to be waiting for him there.

"He must have been into Chipping Camden."

"Yes," agreed Classen – and then a further thought struck him. "When I arrived, I noticed a beige and brown Ford – a little model Y, I think it is – in the courtyard. Does it belong to Kit?"

"Good heavens, don't for pity's sake let him hear you calling it beige," she laughed. "You must say it is pink and maroon."

"It's just… I assumed he would drive something rather more impressive."

"Oh he does, of course he does. He has his Rolls – and a driver. The Ford is just his faithful little runabout. I assume Grace requires the Rolls this weekend."

Grace was, famously, Kit's wife.

"Yes, I wondered about that. Why she isn't here."

Norah shook her head in wonder. "He is the dearest of friends. But he does get himself into the most terrible of scrapes. I don't suppose it can be helped."

They both continued to gaze in his general direction. And it was true that there was something terribly incongruous about Kit. Here he was in a beautiful English garden on a lovely June morning – and he was wearing a dark blue Savile Row pinstripe suit and a silver-grey tie held in place, ostentatiously, by a ruby tie-pin. He was slickly groomed, his brilliantined hair immaculate in the morning sun, slick with a high shine matched only by his shoes. There was, naturally, a pink in the button-hole of his lapel. He looked for all the world as if he were loitering on party business in the central lobby of the House.

His evident desire for company was soon answered: Mrs Merrill appeared and it didn't take long for Kit to engage her in what was clearly an animated and jolly conversation.

"Oh Kit," said Mrs Kemp, distractedly, witnessing all of this. "What are we to do with you? Why did you insist?"

"What do you mean?"

Something in Classen's voice must have made Mrs Kemp come to her senses; for she focused on him suddenly, as if only just aware – truly aware – that he was sitting there.

"Oh, nothing," she said.

It didn't sound like nothing: it was said with feeling; and he might have pursued the matter were it not for the reappearance, far off, but clearly heading their way, of Nancy. As she came within the ambit of Kit and Mrs Merrill they hailed her with cheerful good mornings – but she passed them by without so much as an acknowledgement, continuing, with ever greater reluctance it now seemed, back toward her mother. And then, not two dozen paces off, she stopped.

All Norah did at this point was to beckon to her.

So no-one, least of all Classen, could have been prepared for what happened next.

Because she boiled up, without warning. "I will not wear a hat," she declared. "Do you hear me? Never, never, never, never. Do you HEAR me? Never." And then, with particularly shrill emphasis: "I WILL NOT WEAR A HAT!"

And then she exited again.

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Strangely, no-one seemed in the least put out by this little scene. Aside from Classen, that is. He felt he should do something – run after Nancy, perhaps, to see if he might get her a glass of water perhaps. Or a cup of tea. And yet he felt absolutely paralysed.

During Nancy's outburst, Kit and Mrs Merrill had turned to see what was up. But almost immediately they'd glanced away again, underlining their determination not to stare. Likewise, Norah had merely looked off into the middle distance, as if distracted by something rustling in the shrubbery. And then, in the silence that followed (she appeared not even to have noticed Nancy's exit), she had sought Classen's eye and smiled. It was as if he had only just seated himself and she was now giving him permission to strike up a conversation.

Thus the moment passed. And indeed it was all but forgotten because of what happened next.

First Jamie passed by their table, heading towards The Circle. Swaggering in his jodhpurs and his riding boots, he was swishing a golf club as he walked.

"What on earth are you playing at now, Jamie?" Norah called out.

"The Long Walk," he replied jauntily. "I've been trying to persuade Johnny to lay in a golf green at the garden end. It's the perfect length for a par three. As I now mean to prove."

Simultaneously, one of Johnny's dachshunds appeared on The Circle from the side nearest the house; and its appearance was accompanied, not far behind, by a lilting voice, Miss Voysey's in all probability, calling: "Adolphus, Adolphus."

At this point, Kit was the only person unable to see the dog: it was right behind him. In any case he was holding forth for Mrs Merrill's benefit and she was hanging on every word. The dog waddled over and sniffed at the heel of Kit's shoe. Then it waddled alongside. Then it cocked a leg. And it peed. Copiously. Norah Kemp and Classen saw it. Jamie Waterbury saw it. And the nature of the act began dawning, too, on Mrs Merrill. But still, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, Kit was oblivious.

And then, with Mrs Merrill now about to act in his interest, a warmth must have penetrated through to his ankle.

He looked down.

And as he did so, he became enraged.

He didn't kick the dog. Not exactly. It was more that he pushed it away with his foot. But it was a vigorous push and the dog tumbled over and over. The whole business looked ugly; the dog squealed like a stuck pig, an alarming, harrowing sound.

Miss Voysey now appeared on the scene; and, having caught the last act in this little drama, she promptly screamed. This didn't exactly help, other than to galvanise Mrs Merrill – and she caught hold of Kit as if to prevent him visiting further violence on the dog.

Kit, perhaps understandably, tried to wrestle himself free of her.

Again, this looked ugly.

The greatest ugliness, however, was saved for last. Jamie Waterbury, covering the last few paces to The Circle now with great urgency, began roaring, calling Kit a *blackguard* and many other things besides, brandishing the golf club in a menacing fashion. At one stage, it looked as if he meant to deal Kit a punishing blow across the chins. Or worse.

Happily, however, Classen arrived in time to restrain him – and, indeed, to pull him away.

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It wasn't until after Jamie had stomped off, leaving Classen in possession of the golf club, that something approaching calm could be restored. Miss Voysey took charge of the sausage dog, cradling it (though it seemed to be suffering from no ill-effects) like a bird with a broken wing as she carried it back towards the house. And then, his pride still pricking, Kit consented to walk that way too, arm in arm with Mrs Merrill.

Classen carried the golf club back to Norah.

As he sat down again, she looked up from her book as if she'd been totally oblivious to any unfolding drama; and she spoke as though taking up a train of thought exactly where she'd left off some few minutes ago.

"And the thing of course is that he used to find it terribly dreary here. You know that, don't you? Before this summer he hardly came here at all."

"Who?" said Classen, clearly still distracted by the scene he'd just witnessed.

"Oh… You are quite right. Clearly you are. You must think me meddlesome."

"I'm not sure I…"

"And yet, if you'll permit me one observation, I can see that Jamie must be an added nuisance. A complication you weren't expecting."

"Jamie?"

"You don't think so? Good for you. It's all bluster. Or mostly bluster. He can't abide Kit, mainly I suspect because Kit can't abide horses. And for Jamie, who loves horses with an all-consuming passion, there can be no greater crime. That's probably what it all comes down to."

"I see," said Classen, not at all sure that he did.

The golf club was still propped against the side of the table – now he took it in his hands again.

"Perhaps," he said, "I should throw this into the bushes."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Mashie niblick."

"Idiotic man. The Long Walk is at the very least a full mashie."

Chapter eight

The whodunit Norah was reading was *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain* by John Christow. Of course it was. In many ways it's the archetype of the English country

house whodunit. It opens with a body in a pool. Not a swimming pool, you understand – it's more the generous basin to a fountain, deep enough that you might swim in it.

The body, that of a dashing young man, is floating almost in the middle, bobbing slightly, nudging against the pool's centrepiece – a compact little statuette of an intertwined dolphin and cherub, mounted on a Portland stone pediment.

The corpse is face down and it's clothed, though bare-footed. The clothes are clearly of poor quality. Coarse material. Workman's clothes. Now and then, spray from the fountain lands on the body's back, leaving a fleeting pattern of spatter marks, wet on wet cloth.

When they turn over the body, they note, with more than passing curiosity, that its face has turned a greenish colour.

A prominent man, a Member of Parliament, is then falsely accused of his murder.

Norah was given this book the day before by Johnny, who in turn had been given it by Mrs Raeburn. She said it was rather good. Just Johnny's sort of thing. And it was indeed his sort of thing, even if it was short, not even two hundred pages. The sort of book you might easily read in a morning or an afternoon.

And yet it was (and is) deceptively subtle. A family (almost all the characters are related to each other, however obscurely), some servants, a rambling house, a murder. An inspector is called.

It's a classic exercise in misdirection, a narrative pieced together from deceptive fragments, testimonies of people who've been looking the other way. It's also a surreal blizzard of incidental detail, a kaleidoscope of points of view, a story emerging almost magically from the periphery of a collective vision. The conversations are banal, absurd even; and sometimes it's as if a character's inner thoughts are from another book entirely. A light romantic comedy, perhaps.

And yet, improbably, miraculously, it all adds up.

Norah placed her embroidered bookmark between pages 128 and 129, closed the book and placed it delicately on the table. She pursed her lips. And she thought: "If you'd committed a murder, you'd want to plant it good and quick on someone else, wouldn't you? That would be a murderer's normal reaction."

Had she just read these exact words? Or was this a random thread of speculation that had occurred to her naturally?

And then her eyes fell on her daughter, now sulking in the distance; and it struck her (as it did every now and then: but always as if for the first time) how unlike her

long-dead father Nancy was. True, you could argue that she was volatile and unpredictable – as he had been. But that was surely a superficial analysis. Nancy's volatility was of a different type, a whole other order. And maybe this volatility was a tendency that Nancy actually cultivated; and then again, maybe it was not. Norah had no intuitive understanding of this sort of thing.

She closed her eyes. And, apropos of nothing, she thought about valerian.

Centranthus ruber to be scrupulously accurate. It was one of the plants she'd used for years, a failsafe that would bring colour to wild or awkward spots. The truth was, it was almost a weed. And she realised almost with a shudder that she no longer loved it. In fact, then and there, she pledged to herself that she would never plant it again.

This thought came from nowhere. It soon passed, as if it had never been.

From the woods beyond the garden to the northwest, there was a pop. Distant and muffled; just a single percussive sound, a staccato punctuation of the still air.

Chapter nine

With the best will in the world, Jamie Waterbury and Kit Duncannon were never really going to rub along. Not in this vale of tears; nor in any other parallel universe. Even Classen understood this. Kit was a snob and an aesthete; whatever Jamie was, he was not a snob and an aesthete.

That much was obvious. There was bad blood here; and indeed, maybe Classen should have been more wary of somehow involving himself, however peripherally. In short, he should have steered well clear.

But he did not.

It took him twenty minutes – and the intelligence-gathering expertise of three gardeners – for Classen to track him down. Waterbury was in a clearing in light woodland along the ridge to the northeast of Heaven's Gate. He'd laid his hands on another golf club and had clearly come here to try it out. However, to suggest he was hitting practice shots would be something of a stretch. There wasn't a golf ball in sight. True, he was swinging the club, but mainly, it seemed, in order to chuck up great divots of turf. He went at it with a silent fury; and even a gravedigger would have struggled to rival him for the amount of earth he was moving.

There was something faintly ridiculous about Waterbury, with his khaki jodhpurs and his open-necked shirt with its voluminous sleeves. It was as if he'd been to the

picture house to see the latest Errol Flynn feature, Captain Blood, and been rather taken with what he'd seen, particularly the sword-fighting scenes. He was not quite as dashing as Errol Flynn, however – and he certainly didn't have the dashing good looks. His nose was less-than-elegantly formed, his hair was of a shade of brown that hinted at red; his eyes were smaller and deeper-set than might be considered ideal; and the high colour of his cheeks made him look perpetually agitated. There was nothing about him that suggested that he might in any way be… well, sophisticated. He certainly never tried to fool anyone into thinking he had the subtlest of intellects; but yet, on the other hand, neither was he an utter clot. At his best, when his warmth was the warmth of genuinely hearty enthusiasm, he could be somewhat compelling. Compelling… but at the same time, yes, there was something faintly ridiculous about him, something immature and uncooked.

And here perhaps was the heart of the matter. Because, for all that, there was an indefinable air of menace about him, as if he might be eminently capable of doing something terrible, something whose implications he didn't really understand. For instance, it was said of him that he was utterly fearless on a polo field – and they weren't trying to convey the notion that he was brave. They were trying to tell you that, actually, that he had no real conception or understanding or experience of fear. Which, of course, is a somewhat less reassuring notion.

Jamie, a relative but hardly a close relative of Johnny's, had arrived at Elmcote in the spring, ostensibly to take part in a couple of polo tournaments in England; and then the plan was that he'd spend some time in Paris before travelling further afield. Nothing was set in stone. There was a notion that he might take the Orient Express to Constantinople – then explore the Levant and perhaps head further south into Egypt, where he had heard there was sport to be had. But maybe that was all just talk; because there was talk, too, of him hooking up with some friends from his college days. A group of them were planning on pottering around the Aegean and Mediterranean in a sailing boat.

And yet, soon after arriving at Elmcote, his focus had dissipated. True, he'd seemingly played polo as intended; but he'd failed to pursue his other plans. And the matter was further complicated by the interesting invitations he soon started to accumulate: not just to the run-of-the-mill events in the Season, glamorous though many of those may have been, but also propositions of a more exotic nature. He'd

been invited, for instance, to spend time as a houseguest of the Lindberghs down in Kent – and no-one ever turned down the Lindberghs.

He had also been invited by the German Equestrian Federation to be their guest during the forthcoming Olympic Games. He had (for reasons too tiresome to go into) declined to be a member of the US polo team at this year's games – but the Germans were keen to see him there; and it had also been put to him, by those in the US Olympic Federation with whom he was still on speaking terms, that he should take a lead role at the 1940 games in Helsinki.

So he'd told anyone who was interested (and a good few who were not) that a trip to Berlin in August might indeed prove amusing. Even this, though, remained an issue unresolved. Not that the uncertainty in any way irked his Uncle Johnny, who was very fond of Jamie and loved having him around. He had insisted that Jamie regard Elmcote as his own.

Which, indeed, he did. When he was absent from Elmcote he was, as far as anyone knew with any certainty, living the high life up in London with a group of rakish former college friends. But he was never gone for more than a few days.

He seemed directionless. In some senses he was like one of Tennyson's Lotos Eaters… but yet, in some other senses, the analogy failed. If his ship had become becalmed, he himself was anything but placid. Elmcote had not mellowed him. As we've already seen, he could be spectacularly irascible – and downright unreasonable.

Some were tempted to blame alcohol. Some mornings he quite blatantly had a terrible hangover – and this tended to impair his mood. And as for the evening, there would come a point during dinner, after he'd had no more than a couple of glasses of wine, when he could be the very epitome of charm. But he wasn't a particularly jolly character when he'd taken a few more glasses – as he tended to do. Drink didn't noticeably befuddle him: but it certainly made him more abrasive. It coarsened him. It reduced his ability to perceive the sensitivities of others.

This tended to lend weight to the stories (no more than vague scraps of gossip) that his temper had got him into trouble back home. There were hazy tales of a stand-up fight over a girl – and of him beating his rival to within an inch of his life. There was another (vaguely similar) story, in which he'd taken a whip to a stable boy for answering him back. That, said some, was why he was here in England. Furthermore, that was why he seemed, on the face of it, so directionless. He was actually just kicking his heels until the autumn.

Norah, for one, clearly took such stories with a pinch of salt – and she wasn't alone in believing Jamie to be a man whose bark was worse than his bite. But still. The truth, if the truth be told, was that you never really knew where you were with him. He had the arrogance of someone who knows for a fact he is indestructible – and maybe he was. Norah had it on good authority that, the previous year, he'd broken his collar bone, several ribs and his pelvis in a particularly nasty fall. His recovery, in double quick-time, had been almost miraculous.

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So there he was, hacking at a hillside, under the spreading branches of an oak; Classen watching, mesmerised.

And then Jamie became aware he was no longer alone.

He stopped hacking; but he held tight to the club, raised, not quite shouldered.

"Snap," said Classen holding up the one Jamie had discarded earlier.

Jamie stared at him as if he were mad.

"You've come all the way out here to bring me that blasted thing?"

"Sounds crazy, I know," admitted Classen.

Jamie turned away and began hacking again – but this time, clearly, with less venomous enthusiasm. His exertions ground to a halt – and he turned once more.

"Well?" he challenged Classen. "Throw it down there and have done with it."

When Classen made no move, a new anger seemed to infuse him; and it looked for the briefest of instants as if he might square up to Classen and that Classen might actually relish the challenge.

And then Classen smiled.

"Actually, you're right. I didn't come all the way out here just to give you this *blasted* thing. I came here to tell you… "

He was going to say, "that you're an idiot." But something made him pause for thought.

And clearly Jamie was thinking too. You knew Jamie had something on his mind when he began rubbing his knuckles along the line of his jaw.

He turned away. He looked skyward. He turned back again.

And then, as if conceding the struggle, he shrugged.

"You're leaving us before lunch, I understand."

"I don't know. I haven't talked to Johnny yet."

"Well, it's probably for the best." He hesitated, then began again in a different key: "The thing is… I guess I owe you an apology."

"What for?"

"I've been told I wasn't exactly on the best of form last night."

"Think nothing of it," said Classen, brightening too.

"I've also been told that our notion of a parlour game failed to amuse you."

"What? Your murder mystery?"

"That's it."

"No. I don't know who you've been talking to. Actually, I'm sorry I missed its final act."

"Oh, you missed nothing. Kit declined to play."

"Your victim will be relieved… What did you say his name was?"

"I don't think we gave him a name."

"Wilson wasn't it?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Yes you did. You drowned him in The Pool Garden."

"I did no such thing."

"Wilson. I'm almost certain."

Jamie's face was colouring once more. "Look Classen," he said, pointing a finger. "You have a weak hand. Don't overplay it."

Chapter ten

He walked briskly back to the house. It was mid-morning now – and he'd promised to meet Johnny after breakfast. So he felt guilty, of course he did. He'd sort of broken his word; he'd probably now missed his chance of an early opportunity to conclude business; and Johnny no doubt considered him frivolous or irresponsible or both. Or worse.

So, yes, he felt guilty; but, for some reason he couldn't quite fathom, disinclined to be apologetic.

As he drew close to the house, he heard a voicing hailing him.

It was Dorothy, dawdling on the path by the entrance to The Theatre Lawn. He was on the verge of waving, shouting "can't stop" and continuing on his way: but in fact

he ground to a halt. He stood there, as if waiting for her to catch him up; then, looking more than a little sheepish, he deigned to go to her.

"Nicholas," said she.

"Dorothy," said he.

"I'm so glad to have caught you before you left. I owe you an apology."

"Oh," he said. "You too? That sounds ominous. But I'm afraid I'm not leaving quite yet."

"No?" And then, when it became clear that Classen was lost for words, she added: "How did it go? Your interview with Johnny?"

"That's just it," he said. I haven't seen him yet. I was distracted. He's not going to be best pleased with me, I'm afraid. In fact I'm on my way to him now, to make my apologies."

"Oh," she said breezily. "Don't worry about Johnny. I think he's currently in the woods, shooting."

"Ah, I see." He remembered now the distant pop he had heard when talking to Jamie under the oak on the hillside. "I hadn't seen him as the hunting type."

"He's not. Not really. Target practice, mainly. But he's a crack shot. I'm sure he'd take you out if you're interested."

He nodded sagely.

"So," said he.

"So," said she.

And then, he: "You said you owed me an apology?"

"Oh, it's nothing really," she said. "It can wait. Come sit with us. We are in The Old Garden. Under the cedar tree."

He smiled wanly. And again he seemed at a loss. Did he find her daunting? She was unashamedly modern – but not in the confrontational way that someone like Nancy Kemp would choose to be modern. (Not that Nancy was. In any way modern, that is.) She stood before Classen now, for instance, in black slacks and a black blouse and flat moccasin-style shoes. She had her sunglasses, terribly chic things with heavy frames and round lenses, up on the top of her head like an Alice band.

So, yes, she looked uninhibited; and if that was refreshing it could also be unsettling too. She seemed to find him (as she found Jamie Waterbury, though surely in different ways) a subject of wry amusement. A curious case. And maybe that was just how she saw the world – as a place populated entirely by curious cases.

"Actually," he ventured, "I've just had an interesting little chat with Jamie."

"I'll bet," she replied.

"At one point, I started to doubt my own sanity."

"He does that to people."

"Do you remember last night at dinner, when there was all that stuff about a murder mystery game?"

"Of course."

"Did he say what his victim was called?"

"No, I don't think so. Does it matter?"

Chapter eleven

Mistaken identity. These things happen. This, after all, is the way the world turns. It's hard to blame anyone in particular – no matter how momentous the outcome. And yes, it's true, the whole business, the whole Elmcote Affair, boils down to this.

Johnny started the hare (or hares) running at dinner with his talk of Cliveden. Though she rarely talked about it, Norah knew a thing or two about Cliveden, having not so long ago redesigned part of the gardens there. When anyone mentioned the place, she thought not of the Astors but of South Africa… because so many of the guests there, particularly those attending the ultra-serious philosophical weekends that Nancy Astor was so fond of, hailed originally from South Africa. In turn, South Africa made her think of Johnny and Nancy, because a couple of years back he'd taken her there on a plant-hunting expedition.

And then Kit had said something about Classen's name sounding Dutch. So that, when it began dawning on Norah that she had met Classen somewhere before, she found herself thinking of the Boer War.

These things happen. These entanglements. And once entangled, such strands of thought are not easily unentangled. Not as such.

The previous evening, as we already know, Dorothy's theory, shared with everyone except Johnny, was that Classen was from a property auction house. Or (and this was even more pitiful to contemplate) the bank. And of course she said it with capital letters: The Bank.

Next in turn to add to the confusion was Jamie Waterbury. He'd somehow picked up the notion that there was something cloak and dagger about Classen. After all, the

man had freely admitted to being here under false pretences, having confessed to the fact that he was not, as advertised, Sir Herbert Smith. To muddle matters even more, Jamie had somehow got it into his head that Sir Herbert was one of the murky sorts of people that Kit associated with these days. One of those cashiered Indian Army types who channelled information into the Foreign Affairs Committee. Jamie, who read Bulldog Drummond books, also had a vague memory of someone, after dinner, asking Classen if he'd ever killed anyone.

As for Kit, he clearly wasn't such an idiot: but he strongly suspected that Classen wasn't an architect. The previous evening, before dinner, when he'd checked to see if the dinner jacket fitted, he'd held the man's hands in his. They were not the soft hands you'd expect an architect to have. Not at all. In fact, they were rough and callused. He'd have guessed that the man was a farmer. Or no – a rather more clever calling than that. A Sapper, say. A Royal Engineer. But clearly he was a fixer of some sort.

So… one way or another, when Norah had an epiphany that morning, while holding court in The Old Garden by the cypress tree, everyone was more than ready for it.

"I remember now," she said. "I *have* met him before. He is the son of one of Johnny's former comrades. I'm sure of it."

"A soldier?" asked Dorothy.

"Yes," she replied, amazed now at her powers of recall. "I do believe he used to be what is called a soldier of fortune."

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Norah was rather good at holding court. Even Mrs Merrill, who was often called upon to fulfil this role, felt there was no shame in conceding this laurel to her.

Norah sat at the white latticework table all morning and you could choose to sit with her or hover on the fringes or come and go as you pleased. But you'd always be drawn back because the thing about Norah was that she always managed to be the centre of bright chatter and laughter.

The only person who did not sit with her for long that morning was Kit. He couldn't settle, he paced and fretted, near and far – albeit mostly within sight. It was as if he were rehearsing. A difficult speech, say. Or a confession. Not of the religious sort, obviously. He was, so they said, a notoriously godless man.

Norah would catch glimpses of him now and then in the distance, crossing the garden's main avenue, a tiny figure, vaguely formed in the periphery of her vision. And when she did so, it was possible to imagine, if you were suitably sensitive or perceptive, that she became reflective. This was not quite a sadness; nor yet a sense of disappointment: but maybe a feeling pitched somewhere in between the two.

The truth was, she was only here this weekend became Kit had bullied her into it. Bullied? No – that was not too strong a word. She'd been here with him the previous Sunday in somewhat unfortunate circumstances; and, as a result, her appetite for the place had become quite blunted.

Or, if the truth be known, even more blunted. Because her relationship with Johnny had not been quite right for many weeks now. Maybe it was all Nancy's fault. Nancy had always had a room kept for her in perpetuity at Elmcote (as indeed had Norah); but back the Spring, Nancy had pretty much moved in here on a permanent basis. Perhaps as a result, Johnny had not visited the Kemp family seat at Millbrook this sumer. And somehow, as a further consequence, Norah had not visited Elmcote this year under her own steam. The drill now was the Kit would arrive at Millbrook often unannounced, and they would come on together to Elmcote.

She was distanced from the place. Semi-detached.

Maybe that's why Norah was making so much of an effort to play the hostess and was being so unashamedly generous to everyone. Even to Nicholas Classen, who had now been identified as a soldier of fortune.

Yet the fact remained that it was all wrong. The tennis tournament was usually the one event in Johnny's calendar where he took every pain to make things just so, right down to the last detail. And even last year he'd had a houseful of guests: a crowd of the usual suspect and at least a score of less-familiar faces plus the hangers-on and last minute additions that will inevitably swell the progress of such a cavalcade. In recent years almost all the decent guest rooms had been accounted for – and he'd had to draft in caterers and extra staff and all sorts of *ad hoc* help. Most years, for three or four days, the place felt wonderfully like one of the better hotels.

This year, the truth was that Norah hadn't actually been invited. Not even Norah. Not formally – though of course you could argue that she hardly needed a formal invitation to Elmcote. But the thing was, there had been no *informal* mention of it either.

And the whole business had been complicated by the fact that Johnny had offered to host Nancy's 40th birthday party. Which was a lovely gesture – except for the fact that and both he and Nancy had informed her (in rather undiplomatic terms) that they foresaw no role whatsoever for her in organising the event. Yet she knew for certain that, though the event was barely more than a week away, no invitations had actually been sent out.

Just thinking about the whole business was becoming terribly tiresome.

To teach Johnny a lesson, she'd decided to boycott his tennis weekend this year. In fact, she had gone so far as to accept an invitation to an amusing little musical gathering planned by the composer Gerald Tyrwhitt in Berkshire.

And yet… and yet… Here she was instead, at Elmcote.

An Elmcote devoid of energy or expectation. It was just the same old hard core, the usual faces, the people who pretty much lived here. Oh, except for this Dorothy Moore character and the enigmatic Nicholas Classen who was posing as an architect but who was clearly wasn't.

And the truth was, she found Miss Moore a profoundly unsettling phenomenon.

"Who is she? Who is she really?" she'd asked Kit.

And he'd laughed and said: "Oh, Norah, I do not think you need feel threatened by Miss Dorothy Moore."

Yet perhaps she did feel threatened. According to various sources, Miss Moore had been a guest at Elmcote three times already this year – and for longer stays each time. A week in March, a fortnight in April, three weeks in May. It was inexplicable.

The world – the sensible part of it at any rate – knew that Norah was Elmcote's tutelary deity. She was its true creative genius. In many ways the Elmcote gardens were hers, the culmination, the distillation, of a lifetime's theory and practice.

And now here was this Moore woman – a writer, no more than a mere critic, swanning about the place offering all manner of opinions on all manner of subjects. She was setting herself up as an *authority* – and Johnny was clearly blind to the fact that any who sets themselves up as an authority will soon be exposed in their true colours as a tyrant.

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So, yes, it was Norah's day. Or her morning at least. She held court, as she always tended to do when she was installed at Elmcote. She sat at the white latticework table by the Cedar of Lebanon in The Old Garden; people sat with her for a while, got up, drifted away, drifted back; and always, a constant, a given, there was bright conversation and laughter.

The irony is that she was fulsomely aided and abetted by Dorothy Moore and Nicholas Classen. The pair of them. The thing was, they lit each other up. Classen made Dorothy sparkle; and she somehow encouraged him to become the life and soul of the party. As a spectacle it was utterly compelling. It was like something from a Renaissance drama. People who just hit it off – well, they brightened everybody's day.

Her very presence seemed to loosen his tongue and made him wickedly funny. And of course this merely added to the fascination because he was at his funniest when he was talking about Sir Herbert Smith, his recent trials, tribulations and unwitting disasters. He was waspishly funny too about the follies of choice clients.

It was astonishing: the accomplished way he handled his role. The way he kept it up, protected his cover story, maintained the deception. It was like that newsreel film of the stunt man walking across the Niagara Falls on a high wire: you didn't really want him to fall, of course you didn't, but that's why you watched.

He was good. And Dorothy pitched in with stories of her own, the sorts of nuggets of gossip one might pick up if one were a writer for a magazine. Norah found herself contributing too. She had plenty of material. In the last couple of years, she'd had commissions from, among others, Edward Tennant, Kitty Lambton, Teeny Cazalet, Fitzroy Chapman, Bridget Guinness, Philip Kerr, Kitty Rothschild and Philip Sassoon.

She was not above dropping the odd name.

Chapter twelve

Every so often, Classen would slip away and go in search of his host. Or, if Johnny could not be found, Miss Voysey at least.

In truth, though, he was captivated by empty houses, especially houses as quirky as Elmcote. As you'd expect of a building that had evolved over centuries, it was a modest labyrinth of stairs and corridors and galleries; but the main hub, clearly, was

the generous chequer-board of its main hall. It was one of the unacknowledged triumphs of the house – solid and reassuring, like the wardroom of an old ship of the line.

As solid as its wood panelling and its parquet floor, its old long-case clock, its ornate barometer, its watercolours of Northumbrian scenes, its stuffed owl in a glass case, its alcove harbouring racks of coat-hooks, its boot chest and its big brass pot bristling with walking sticks. And, dominating all, above its side-table, a large mirror in an ornate gold-painted frame, all intertwined fig and acanthus leaves.

Past the dining room and the drawing room, the hall narrowed to a corridor leading past the little silver-and-blue sitting room to a door guarding the head of the stair down to the servants' hall.

Classen, exploring, pushed open this door and listened. Reassuringly, he could hear sounds of activity down in the depths; but he thought better of descending.

Instead, he retraced his steps.

Up above were Johnny's apartments (a bedroom and the room he called his studio) plus the better guest bedrooms. Miss Voysey's rooms too: the estate office, her bedroom and a modest private sitting room. This main first floor landing was the beating heat of Elmcote.

Classen climbed the stair; and on the landing he stopped and listened again. Perhaps it was merely a measure of the time and day; there was a thunderous oppressiveness, an ambiguous quality to the air, as if it were already thickening in anticipation of the evening. The scents of midsummer reached him through half open windows, their lightweight curtains, partially drawn, hanging utterly still and motionless. He was aware of a rich ambience from the house within – aromas of polish, of beeswax, of wardrobe lavender.

But not a sound. He crossed the landing and poked his head around the half-open door of Miss Voysey's office. At the very least he would have expected her to be on station.

But she was not.

Only silence.

It was the sort of silence in which your imagination might run riot.

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Classen's room was about as far as you could get from the main stair. A meandering first-floor corridor led through the Georgian wing and then he was up two further flights of rickety steps to the old servants' lofts of the original manor house.

When he got there, he lay down on the bed, his hands behind his head.

But he could not settle, so he rose again and went back out into the corridor. Mean and gloomy, with a primitive water closet at the far end (the nearest proper bathroom was off the landing on the floor below) this passageway featured three doors on each side. Looking from the stair head, his was second on the left.

With the meticulous detachment of a detective, he explored each of the other rooms in turn. And yet there was nothing for him here. They had no stories to tell; they were each as devoid of luxury as his own. Bare boards and sticks of furniture.

Save, that is, for the third door on the right. This one seemed to be locked.

He rattled its handle.

Then he turned it firmly one way and then the other as far as he was able, leaning his shoulder against it each time as he did so.

No. It was locked.

So he returned to his own room.

And that's when he noticed they were missing.

The cuff-links Kit had given him when he'd loaned him a suitable outfit yesterday. They were of gold, bossed with lustrous black enamel. In each boss, as if floating in a blob of ink, was a monogram formed of a golden letter K intimately entwined with a golden letter D.

Hardly beautiful; but clearly of some value.

Classen had left them on the nightstand.

Now they were gone.

It was unthinkable that they'd been stolen. On the other hand, Kit would hardly have asked a maid to retrieve them without telling him. One way or another… he made a mental note to bring this up with Mrs Merrill.

He lay down again on his bed.

He felt vacant, rather than tired.

The bed frame creaked slightly every time he moved.

And yes, it's true: when Elmcote became like a ghost ship, your imagination might run riot.

You could imagine all sorts of intrigues. Lovers meeting: of course. But other slightly more sinister intrigues. Mrs Merrill's beetle-browed husband (nominally Elmcote's butler; but truly an enigma) going through someone's modest luggage. Or Kit stealing into Miss Voysey's office to cast an expert eye over the correspondence in her in-tray. Or Nancy stealing into Kit's room to read a draft entry, still in pencil and not yet overwritten, destined for his notorious diary. Even more disreputably, you could imagine a snick as the lock on a display cabinet (there was at least one such in every reception room at Elmcote) was turned; and a hand reaching in to take up a Delft tile, say, or closing around an intricately-glazed, delicately-coloured porcelain figurine, pale mauve and dove-grey and baby blue in pastel yellow.

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He didn't doze. He was almost sure of that. Yet Miss Voysey gave him a start when she said his name. There she was, standing in the half-open doorway, ship-shape in a tweedy sort of a way, uncompromisingly business-like, yet also, Classen noted again with interest, somewhat nervous. Surprisingly so, given the overall impression of efficiency she so carefully cultivated. She was almost birdlike.

"Major Jenkinson is free if it suits you to have a chat now," she said, breezily – or as close to breezily as she was able.

Classen sprang to his feet, composed himself and followed her out along the dingy top corridor.

"Miss Voysey," he said, as they descended the stair.

"Yes," she said.

"Miss Voysey… I don't quite know how to put this. Mr Duncannon… that's to say, Kit… he kindly loaned me a pair of cuff-links to wear yesterday evening. As it happened, I didn't need them, so I left them on my night stand and forgot all about them. I've just noticed that they're no longer there. Might someone have retrieved them for him? If so, it's somewhat irregular for me not to have been told. Obviously, I feel responsible for the items in question."

"I understand," said Miss Voysey, who had now gained the landing below and was clearly in no mood for chit-chat; but when Classen hesitated and came to a halt on the second-to-last step, she must have realised how offhand she'd sounded. So she added, turning to face him now: "Please. Leave it with me."

She looked tired, Classen thought.

"One other thing," he added.

"Yes?"

"One of the doors opposite me is locked."

"Oh," she replied. "Does that bother you?"

"No. It's just…" He shaped once or twice to deliver on that "just"… but a fugitive thought (if it had ever existed at all) now eluded him entirely.

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Johnny's study was directly above the dining room; and as a consequence it boasted the same generous arrangement as regards windows: half a dozen tall casements of latticed glass. The lower half of the casement on the far left (looking from within) was double-hinged and could be opened almost in its entirely; and for at least some part of every single day he spent at Elmcote, you'd find Johnny at this open window.

He wintered at his villa on the Cote d'Azure, returning only when word reached him that Spring was unequivocally, irrevocably, in the Gloucestershire air. Most years, he arrived in mid- to late-March. It was strange to think that, though he'd seen photographs of his garden smothered in heavy snow, he'd never seen this for himself. He'd never experienced that reality, close at hand, never felt the squeak and crunch of deeply-drifted winter beneath his boots.

But from March to November, rare was the day when he couldn't throw open this window at some point, however briefly; and some days, one way or another, he spent many hours there, looking out.

It was hardly the most spectacular view in the world. Looking down, nearest the house, was a slender section of what was called The Terrace – the dull and conventional arrangements of borders and parterres that, aside from The Old Garden, had been just about the only decorative feature there was at Elmcote when Johnny had begun his life's work here all those years ago.

In some shape or form, The Terrace formed an irregular cordon around almost the entirely of the house: but under Johnny's windows it was at its narrowest, barely five yards deep. And that's because the house here was almost completely overshadowed by Elmcote's most spectacular specimen tree, its Cedar of Lebanon. By now, had they not been lopped regularly, the lowermost branches of this tree would have reached

right into Johnny's room. As it was, though, they had been artfully thinned to give Johnny a view out over the eastern end of his domain. In particular, there were alluring glimpses of The White Garden.

The White Garden. It almost deserves an exclamation mark: this was the first and most subtle of his artistic statements; this was where it all began. It was a perfect square, defined by tall yew hedging. A petite little square: small enough for it to feel like a room.

Each side of the square was cut with an entrance portal. And the whole room was slightly sunken, so that, within each portal, there were steps down. Two bisecting stone paths, portal to portal, formed a cross within the square; and the four corner beds created by this cross were walled – and thus raised. The stone used was beautiful in itself – dove-grey, lustrous, satin-textured.

But the planting more-than-matched the staging. Thanks to clever choices and even cleverer management, these four beds were a froth of white from February, when snowdrops first advertised themselves, to November: tulip, climbing rose, phlox, crambe, nicotiana, dahlia, osteospernum, all had their part to play.

It was Johnny's first majestic statement in his mature style; and he clearly cherished it dearly. And we know for sure that Johnny spent countless hours at this window, staring out at it through the branches of the immemorial Cedar of Lebanon, because, at least once a year for over two decades, he painted the view.

Johnny was a more-than-averagely-gifted painter. He had a stippled style heavily influenced by that subset of Impressionism known as Pointillism. And yet Johnny had an obsessive take on this style. So much so, in fact, that this allusion to Impressionism is actually wholly misleading. There was always a sense, in Johnny's pictures, that mere impressions were never good enough; there was always a feeling that he wanted the viewer to be aware of every leaf on every tree and every petal on every flower.

And of course the odd thing about these paintings, executed year after year, is the fact that, despite Johnny's obsessive attempts to render detail, they do The White Garden no justice whatsoever. They merely show what little you can see of it through a gap in a hedge and the black and dark green branches of a conifer. It's a glimpse from afar; it is an incidental detail. The white is as distant and conjectural as the snow Johnny never saw.

Classen was aware of none of this as he was ushered into Johnny's presence. He merely noted his host standing sidelong to the open window, facing a canvas on an

easel. He saw Johnny working intently at this canvas, his head turning now and then as he looked out.

Johnny acknowledged his presence with a nod but said nothing.

Classen stood patiently. His first thought was for the dogs. Where were they? Everywhere Johnny went, pretty much, a blur of smooth-haired dachshunds went with him, milling around his ankles or, more likely, getting under his feet. Generally, he spoke more to his dogs than to his fellow humans: they were nervy dogs and he was continually admonishing them and generally acting, unconvincingly, as if they were a great source of vexation to him.

Classen, were he being honest, would have admitted that he didn't much care for them. So he was glad to note that there were only three dogs in the room – and they were sleeping on a pile of cushions under the window not far from Johnny's heels.

This was a sparsely furnished room, devoid almost entirely of ornament, save for a parlour palm or two and a plaster-cast bust of Ivor Novello on a plinth. There was only one hint of luxury: a Persian carpet, taking up almost the entirety of the floorspace, that shimmered with in an exotic shade of pale blue.

So, yes, Classen stood patiently for a while, aware of the unstated rule that he must act, initially at least, as a supplicant.

Then his patience began to wear thin – and he found himself tempted to make a nuisance of himself. He toyed with the idea of sitting himself in the fan-backed chair that had been drawn up to face Johnny's desk in the deepest corner of the room. He might even pick up a paper or two from the desk and give the impression he was tidying them.

He toyed also with the notion of joining Johnny at the window, taking in the view and passing flattering comments on Johnny's talents.

But he did neither. Instead, he began reading Johnny's walls.

There weren't bookcases in this room. Intriguingly, no porcelain curios on display either. True, there was one tall, glass-fronted display case – but it contained rifles, stood to attention, maybe a dozen of them.

No – here in Johnny's inner sanctum, photographs were the thing. Hundreds of them, framed, in various sizes, from the smallest Box Brownie snap to the most fulsome professional print. Every available space, it seemed, had been utilised, creating a fantastic patchwork. No ordered chronology was apparent; but there was clearly a life story here.

His days at Cambridge, his service in South Africa and on the Western Front; pictorial records, too, of his endless hours upon tennis courts, including one photograph, given pride of place, of him returning serve with a doubles partner who looked suspiciously like Fred Perry. There were pictures of his expeditions to Africa and Asia as one of the great plant hunters of the era; and pictures of him, not quite relaxed, as the host of parties at his villa in the south of France. Of course there were countless images recording the evolution of his garden here at Elmcote; and, last but not least, pictures of the garden's many renowned visitors, come to bear witness and pay homage to the genius of its creator. One such photograph, gold framed and elegantly captioned in fine calligraphy, showed the Prince of Wales, as he then was, visiting not three years previously.

Classen circumnavigated the room, absorbing as much of this as he was able.

"Please," Johnny said at last, the tiniest hint of irritation in his voice. "Do take a seat. I'll be with you in a minute."

Classen didn't. Instead, he joined Johnny at the window. He didn't comment on the painting; in fact, he didn't really look at it at all. He looked outward.

And he was aware now of chatter and laughter below. From up here, you couldn't see the white latticework table where everyone was gathered – the angles were all wrong and the tree was in the way – but you could hear where it was. In fact, you could hear every word, with great clarity.

But Johnny was oblivious to this. He was pointing. "The White Garden," he said, helpfully.

"Through the tree?"

"Yes," said Johnny.

The slightly spooky thing was that there was someone there. In The White Garden. A man, framed, just within the yew portal, facing them. Was it Jamie? It was hard to tell from a distance. But no. It didn't look like Jamie.

"Who's that?"

"Who's what?"

Johnny turned to look into the garden. And of course there was no-one there.

"What nonsense is this?" said Johnny.

"Someone in the garden. He was looking up here. I didn't recognise him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes I am."

"There are all sorts of tricks of light through this tree," said Johnny. "It's one of the fascinations."

Classen turned now to look at the painting. It was still, clearly, very much a work in progress; but Classen half expected to see the shadowy figure depicted there.

It was not.

He turned again and stared out through the window. He seemed utterly absorbed; as if, by an act of silent will, he could conjure up a shadowy figure once more.

"It's a Dutch name, isn't it?" ventured Johnny at last, as if offering Classen a means of moving on.

"Dutch?"

"Classen, I mean. It's Dutch in origin, isn't it?"

"It's interesting you should say that. Mr Duncannon asked me that very same question yesterday."

"You must feel flattered by our interest."

"Yes. But I am not, as far as I am aware, a Dutchman."

"So. No South African connections? Boers, I mean."

"None that I know of, sir."

Johnny was, in all truth, a terribly hard man to gauge, even at the best of times. Your first impression – and this had certainly been Classen's experience – was that here was a naturally diffident man. Shy, even. And then, out of nowhere, he could be terribly direct. Almost formidable. Enough for you to be reminded of his record in two wars. And wasn't there that story Sir Herbert had told him? A tall tale. A story about how, once upon a time, in the long ago, Johnny had been abandoned and left for dead on a battlefield.

"I thought that, given Sir Herbert's South African background…"

"He employs me as an architect. As I hope to show here."

"Is he part of the whole Cliveden business? Sir Herbert, I mean?"

So that was it. Cliveden. That was what he was angling at once more. "No. Not as far as I'm aware," said Classen, wearily.

Johnny still seemed unconvinced; but he changed tack: "You intend leaving us before lunch, I understand."

"I wasn't aware that had been settled. I was waiting to see what you'd require of me."

"Good. Excellent. Stay. I've made some preliminary sketches. They're there on the desk. You'll have time to study them carefully, then you can examine the house top-to-bottom, maybe while the tennis tournament is taking place. You'll have the place to yourself. I take it you know about the tennis tournament?"

"I think so."

"You weren't hoping to attend?"

"I'm not… No."

"Good."

"Good."

And that might have been that; but for some reason, Classen seemed determined to prolong the conversation.

He gazed around the room.

"I envy you this," he said. "There is much to admire about this house."

"Thank you."

"Though sometimes the decor is a little unconventional," he added – and as he did so, he looked pointedly at the gun cabinet.

"You are fascinated by my guns. Everyone is. I'd keep them as conversation pieces even if I didn't use them."

"But you do use them?"

"Of course." At this, he smiled enigmatically. He crossed the room to the cabinet and (clearly they had not been locked) pulled wide its double doors. Without pausing he selected a rifle and brought it back over to Classen. In fact he presented it to him on level palms.

Classen clearly didn't know what to do.

"Go on. Take it. It's a point two-two target practice rifle."

Classen took it and held it just as Johnny had presented it, balanced across level palms. There was something almost ceremonial about this – and Classen clearly wasn't responding in the right way. Johnny seemed impatient as he made Classen grip the rifle properly; made him raise the stock to his shoulder and generally shaped him into a passable imitation of a man aiming a rifle.

"When I was at Trinity, I was President of the College Rifle Club. Did you know that?"

It was a stupid question, Of course it was. How could Classen have known that?

"No?" Johnny continued. "Well I was… Go on. Look down the barrel. Aim it through the branches of the tree, at the gap in the hedge."

He did. He aimed.

"Who am I aiming at? Wilson?" he said at last.

Johnny snorted. It might have been an ironic little laugh. Or it might have been a gasp of irritation. At any rate he snatched back the rifle.

Classen took a step back.

"Shame it's not loaded," he joked.

"Oh no," Johnny replied. "The gun is loaded."

Chapter thirteen

Classen went right down to The White Garden. Of course he did. Who wouldn't have?

He could hear the chatter centred around Norah at the table under the tree; but he made sure no-one saw him. He stood within the gap in the yew hedge. The gap he'd been aiming a gun at a few minutes before. Then he went down a modest set of steps and stood in the garden's dead centre: at the crossing point of its smooth-stoned paths.

There was no sign that anyone had just been here. But why should there be?

Then he went back up the steps and looked up, though the branches of the Cedar of Lebanon, at the open window of Johnny's room.

He wasn't entirely sure if he felt shaken or not.

The whole business seemed, so say the least, somewhat unsettling.

He looked up and he half expected to see Johnny standing there, aiming a rifle. But there was no-one at the window.

Classen stood there many minutes, stock still.

Then he saw Miss Voysey passing beneath the cedar, as if heading back to the house.

He hailed her. She stopped. He caught up with her.

"Well?" she said as he approached. "How was your meeting with Johnny?"

She glanced at the untidy sheaf of foolscap papers that Classen had in his hand – the notes and sketches Johnny had given him to study. Classen, too, now stared at these as if noticing them for the first time.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you. As well as could be expected."

And then, as Miss Voysey turned, as if to continue on her way, he added: “Have you been out here long? I mean to say, have you been sitting with the others?”

“No,” she replied. “I came out to pass a message to Miss Moore.”

“On your way out, did you see anyone? Standing in The White Garden, say?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

Classen gave a little laugh. The sort of little laugh you resort to when you wonder at your own stupidity. “It does not matter,” he said.

Chapter fourteen

It was often said, and there must have been at least some small grain of truth in this, that Kit Duncannon was at his most snobbish when it came to his relationships with women. He’d happily strike up familiar conversations with young men of all shapes and sizes: even servants. He could be devastatingly charming when chatting to the humblest labourer – and on his fact-finding missions to the poorer parts of London, he had been known to stand rounds of drinks in even the most shabby of saloon bars.

But most women were, it seemed, almost invisible to him, even eye-catching young women like Dorothy Moore. He clearly wasn’t sentimental in that sort of a way.

No fault here, of course; and, yes, it’s true, his coolness occasionally bordered on rudeness. But that was perhaps forgivable. Or if not forgivable, understandable. Unimpeachable. Because perhaps he truth was he’d determined that he would never give his wife cause for jealousy.

And clearly he was no misogynist; indeed it could be argued that the closest relationships in his life had always been with women. Sybil Colefax, Emerald Cunard, Wallace Simpson, to name but three. Fascinating women; women attractive because they were in their prime; women who’d come to occupy dazzling stations in life. Women of whom Kit’s wife, the daughter of an Earl, could hardly disapprove.

But yes, Kit didn’t normally talk to the likes of a Dorothy Moore: and, for her part, she clearly sensed his indifference and made all due allowance for it.

So she was thrown slightly when he cornered her. She’d found a quiet corner of the drawing room and was looking over some work she’d brought with her – the galley proofs of an amusing little article she was preparing on Syon House and its gardens.

And then there he was. He'd not only entered the room and had sat down in the Queen Anne chair nearest the little writing desk she was using… but was actually addressing her.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked.

A dark look passed fleetingly across her face: and it seemed in that instant that she was about to respond with something tart. But instead she smiled graciously. "Mr Duncannon, I am flattered."

"Don't be," he responded instantly – and to a dispassionate observer this might have sounded curt. But there was a spark of mischief in his eye as he said it; and if she hadn't known better, she'd have suspected he was flirting with her.

So, as if savouring the moment, he stared at her; and she stared at him.

Clearly, she'd never been exposed to his charm before, not full beam. It was, she had to admit to herself, an unexpected pleasure. He was somehow younger and more vital when he engaged with you directly. He sparkled. The high shine of his brilliantined, swept-back hair; the glint of the high-end ironmongery he displayed to his advantage: cuff-links, tie-pin, watch chain. The crisply-laundered cut of his clothes. Then there was the compelling blue-grey colour of his eyes and the smoothness of his complexion. It was almost as if he wore powder. And he was fragrant too: you just knew that the exotic cologne he wore was unwontedly expensive.

Previous to this current visit to Elmcote, Dorothy had met him very briefly once before – and her first impression had not entirely been favourable. Nothing in the last couple of days had tempted her to amend that impression. It wasn't that she disapproved of snobs. After all, she herself came from a notorious line of Long Island snobs; and her people, though considerably less wealthy than his people, almost certainly affected to look down on the Duncannon family, rooted as it was in the unpromising soil of Chicago.

She'd assumed, however, that he was the very worst kind of snob: superficial and affected and highly predictable.

But the thing that struck you most when you engaged directly with him like this was an intelligence. A quizzical, probing intelligence: motivated, clearly, by an innate sense of fun.

"You are wearing black today I see."

"What of it?" she countered.

"Oh, it suits you," he rallied. "But does it suit such a cheerful summer's day?"

"Perhaps, Mr Duncannon, I am in mourning for your lost innocence."

He grinned unashamedly at that. "Touché, Miss Moore. Touché."

But the grin quickly faded.

There was an undercurrent of tiredness, she could see that now. He hid it well, but it was there. No doubt about it. He had a heavy heart.

"I see you have found it," he said at last, gesturing with his eyes.

"What?"

And then she realised he meant her fountain pen. She was twirling it deftly in her fingers, as she tended to do. It was a Diamond Point in jade green, with a subtle Art Deco marbling effect.

"You told Johnny yesterday you thought you'd lost it."

"Oh, did I? Yes, perhaps I did. Well I have found it now. It's not valuable or anything. Aside from sentimental value."

"Good news," he said.

"Yes," she agreed.

And now the silence that followed might have tended towards awkwardness; but Kit was alive to this. He smiled, frowned, smiled again.

"But I haven't sought you out to inquire after your fountain pen. Not entirely at any rate. Merely to tell you that I've realised we have a friend in common."

"Oh?"

"Yes. When I say, friend, that's perhaps not scrupulously accurate. You must think me a bear of very little brain… but I have only just pieced it all together. I bumped into the daughter of a friend of Sibyl Colefax's a few days ago. Maud Anstruther. She'd only recently crossed the Atlantic on the Queen Mary. She was telling me about all the interesting fellow passengers whose company she'd enjoyed during the crossing. Including a fascinating lady journalist. Dorothy something. An American lady who writes about country houses and has some fascinating opinions about the contemporary political scene. Does that ring a bell?"

"I can't say, Mr Duncannon, that it does."

"Do you deny it was you?"

"I deny nothing. I never do."

"Quite wise."

"I often cross the Atlantic. I am an American. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"It's the timing that interests me, my dear Miss Moore. As I say, I've only just put it all together. You were on a mission, weren't you? Johnny sent you. He sent you to find something out. And that's why you came straight here when you disembarked."

He paused; and for the first time since sitting down, he seemed unsure of himself. But at last he continued: "May I ask what you discovered? And… and the implications for our most immediate prospects?"

She pursed her lips and frowned, as if racking her brains. Then a faraway look came into her eyes.

"Do you know what? I do believe you are right about one thing."

"And what might that be?"

"Black. It suits me. It's very much my colour."

Chapter fifteen

It was Norah's idea that they walk together, her and Johnny, down the lane towards Elmcote Bartrim. In fact, she had insisted. Her theory was that she'd make more headway if she could remove him from any hint of a distraction.

There was already a stickiness in the air – and the day was only going to get closer and warmer; but there was, as always, a freshness about the air in the lane. Its dry-stone walls were heavily mossed; and the grass verges, richly green from the heavy rains of a week past, were now laced with rampant froths of cow parsley. Birdsong seemed more open and unrestrained here; and they could also hear, almost comical in its incongruity, the distant sound of a gramophone record, probably from the drawing room of the house: the Fats Waller song that everyone had been playing all summer.

And now, at last, she said it: "You've had news from America."

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"But have you?"

"No I have not."

She was referring to the court case. Of course she was.

The court case. It really demanded capital letters. The Court Case. It had hung over Elmcote for months now. Years. In fact for as long as anyone really cared to remember. It was a matter of inheritance, a latter-day Jarndyce and Jarndyce, with the added wrinkle that it was playing out on both sides of the Atlantic. It had now reached the Supreme Court in Washington.

Johnny's mother had been married twice. When Johnny's father, a moderately rich man, had died, she had found herself an ever richer husband, another American, a man named Wilmot.

When he'd died, thanks to a Byzantine labyrinth of trusts and other financial instruments, she had inherited little in the way of capital – just the interest, in perpetuity, accruing from the Wilmot family funds. She'd died five years ago; but during her last year, in order to protect her interests, Johnny had had her certified and had acquired power of attorney over her affairs. And one way or another, during those last twelve months of her life, he'd succeeded in amending the terms of a number of the Wilmot trusts. So that, when she'd died, he found himself, somewhat fortunately, inheriting a vast chunk of the Wilmot capital.

The Wilmot family sued. But this was no simple matter because, although the trusts had originally been drawn up in the State of Delaware, they had been amended under English law, in London. The case dragged on. Months turned into years. Considerably more than a million dollars was at stake, money that Johnny had already lavished on the house and garden at Elmcote and on improvements to his villa on the Cote d'Azure.

Now, apparently, things were coming to a head.

Everyone always told Johnny that of course he'd win; but, no-one believed it.

Now it was possible to suspect that the whole business was killing him.

She sighed. "You used to trust me," she said. "You used to confide in me."

The *confide* was heavily emphasised, heart-rendingly plaintive. Yet it provoked no reaction.

Norah had known Johnny's mother, Mrs Wilmot as she then was, in the decade before her death. They were never more than civil to each other – in fact Mrs Wilmot disapproved wholeheartedly of Norah, suspecting as she did, probably quite rightly, that Norah was behind Johnny's growing obsession with his garden.

"And I understand," she continued, "That there may be another complication."

"Perhaps."

"So it's true?"

"It's all rather awkward."

"Meaning what?"

"Yes, it's true."

"And is it also true that Mr Merrill is… is unaccounted for?"

"That may also be true."

She stopped, sighed, folded her arms.

"Johnny," she said. He stopped. "Kit and Jamie are at each other's throats. You know that, don't you?"

There was just the merest hint of a smile before he replied: "I wouldn't worry about that," he said.

Often these days, there was something terribly hangdog about his expression. His will-o-the-wisp hair seemed even thinner, his voice reedier. He was fading away. And yet, from time to time, you could look into his eyes and feel reassured that he was still burning within. Evidence, for all to see, not of a dying ember, but of a real live coal. It was a thrilling, almost disturbing notion. You could sense that he was still capable of great things.

She rejoined him at his side and they walked on.

Of course she wasn't actually bound to him. She had her own house, a very beautiful house, on a backwater of the Thames in Oxfordshire. She was still in demand as a designer; and Kit could be relied upon to advance her ready cash if she needed it. But she loved Elmcote. It was her home away from home. And every year, come what may, she stayed with Johnny at his villa in the south of France, from Christmas to Candlemas. It would break her heart to give that up.

"Johnny?"

"Yes."

"Are we becoming estranged?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Should I be fearful?"

"Norah!"

"I have met him before, you know."

"Who?"

"Nicholas Classen. I know what you're up to."

"Where? Where have you met him?"

"I can't remember. I thought at first he was here to begin the sale of the house. But I realise the truth now."

They were nearing the cottages of Elmcote Bartrim now – and Johnny suddenly stopped and held Norah's arm as if alerting her to an imminent danger.

But none was apparent. Just birdsong and the distant sound of a gramophone record.

"We should turn back," he said.

Chapter sixteen

Famously, as we've already touched upon in passing, Kit Duncannon kept a diary. Strange to relate, though, there are no sausage dogs in it. Nor does Dorothy Moore figure.

That may or may not have surprised her. Most of Kit's contemporaries were aware of his journal. On the other hand, did they care? After all, everyone was at it. Anyone who was anyone kept a journal: it was in some respects, a supremely narcissistic era.

But, yes: Kit Duncannon more than most. When he was a houseguest, he'd often make a big thing about having to retire early so he could keep his blessed journal up to date. On hearing a piece of salacious gossip, he'd often say he'd make an effort to remember that one for the diary. So the whole business was very much part of his persona. And of course he loved dropping hints that it was hot stuff – and would fascinate generations to come.

Obviously, in a sense, he was right. But here's the paradox: though the Elmcote Affair was, in the fullness of time, to propel Kit's diaries into notoriety and the national consciousness, you won't find any references to Elmcote within its pages.

Though he visited Johnny at least once a summer for over a decade (the Elmcote visitors' book, now maintained on semi-public display by Gloucestershire public libraries, is testament to this) there is not one single mention of the house or its gardens.

Norah's name appears countless times, most often in the context of Kit's visits to her house at Millbrook, though their paths would often cross at other house parties and of course she was a frequent guest of the Duncannons, both in Essex and in Belgravia. Nancy flits inconsequently across the diary's pages, usually in the shadow of her mother; and Johnny is mentioned scores of times. But never in the context of Elmcote. Always in the abstract. Always dislocated. Take, for instance, this specimen entry, which appears almost as an after-thought to a footnote: "Johnny asked me if the rumours were true. I was happy to set his mind at rest."

There is nothing – nothing explicit – about any of his visits Elmcote. This, along with other seemingly perplexing omissions, has stimulated all manner of different modes of intricate speculation. They boil down to this: “Has material been suppressed? And if so, by whom?”

The issue is made more complex by the fact that Kit wrote paragraphs (and, indeed, whole entries) in code. It’s a unique code, a melding of Classical Greek transliteration, Pitman’s shorthand, alchemical symbols, Glagolitic script and the sort of impenetrable German slang heard only in Berlin brothels.

No-one has ever managed to crack this code; and in the more readily-accessible versions of the diary, these impervious passages tend to be missed out altogether, with absolutely no indication as to their existence. So some readers find it quite natural to assume that other passages have probably been suppressed too.

Because of course the diaries are chock-full of the most scurrilous gossip. There is, for instance, screeds of stuff on what he called “the royal racket.” Specifically, during the course of the spring, Kit heard, on a regular basis, the intimate confessions of both King Edward VIII and his mistress. He was particularly close to the latter.

Then there are his sexual exploits. There’s lots of truly shocking material unashamedly on view here – but, again, there are those who believe that even more shocking revelations have been deleted by his executors.

All we know for sure is that Kit Duncannon was phenomenally well-connected. He specialised in collecting people who were spectacularly indiscreet; and in the autumn of 1935, he was able to take his appetite for scandal to a new level when he was appointed to the Whips’ Office.

The diaries have chapter and verse (or we must assume so, because his account has never been publicly contradicted) on various transactions between the Barings and Rothschild banking dynasties. He was also party to rather shabby negotiations about new provisions for the Duke of York in the Civil List.

He hobnobbed for many weeks (the opera, supper, cocktails, The Derby) with the (soon-to-be) German ambassador Herr Von Ribbentrop and took great delight in flirting with his “spectacularly ugly” wife, recording with great glee the notion that Ribbentrop was a jumped-up wine merchant and arguing it was no wonder all Germans were homosexual given how unattractive their womenfolk were.

Coincidentally (and unconnectedly), Kit had also entered into surreal and often hilarious correspondence with the German Chancellor, in an attempt to persuade him to restore the Wittelsbachs to their rightful position as hereditary Kings of Bavaria.

Meanwhile, over the course of Spring 1936, he found time to do several pieces of dirty work on behalf of Lord Beaverbrook; and all the while he was complicit in the early stages of a conspiracy to topple Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and replace him with Neville Chamberlain (with whom, he confessed, he was "more than a little in love").

But not a single mention of Elmcote. It was as if, one might surmise, that he was never there.

Chapter seventeen

Johnny's dachshunds had been fed by Mrs Merrill in the servant's hall. Now, Miss Voysey had come down to let them out into the garden. Their claws skittered on the hard surface of the scullery corridor as they followed her excitedly to the side door.

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Walking alone on The Rose Walk, Miss Dorothy Moore leaned forward to appreciate the scent of the blossom of a damask rose. As she straightened again, she realised that she had become aware of a distant drone, like that of a lawn mower.

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Miss Voysey crossed the courtyard and headed toward The Theatre Lawn with her charges; but as she reached this point she stopped. Her expression clouded, then darkened. She began rounding up the dachshunds and marshalled them back along the path, shouting, as she did so: "Mrs Merrill! Mrs Merrill!"

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The long case clock at the foot of the main stair chimed lugubriously, in a minor key.

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Sunlight through the leaves of a tree played across a print of Primavera by Botticelli hung in a gilt frame on a half landing of the main stair. The flickering effect made it seem as if the figures in its garden scene were dancing.

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Aware now of a commotion, Mrs Merrill emerged from the scullery passage door and joined Miss Voysey and her mêlée of dachshunds in the courtyard. Merrill and Voysey conferred. As they did so, their faces became ever paler. Together, they succeeded in corralling the dogs back into the scullery passage. That done, Miss Voysey emerged again. She walked in haste back toward The Circle.

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A biplane, gaily painted in yellow, flew over the garden, heading south-southeast. It was low enough for you to be able to hear quite plainly that one cylinder of its engine was misfiring, but not so low that you could claim to see the pilot. When it had quite gone, you remained aware of small puffball clouds in a perfectly blue sky.

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Faint wisps of smoke, almost invisible in the sunlight, rose from the chimney of one of the cottages in Elmcote Bartrim.

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When Johnny returned to his study he found Mrs Merrill waiting for him. She looked anxious, drained. Her face was grey.

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At the very north-western corner of the gardens, where the hillside fell away toward The Spring Slope and The Lower Stream Garden, rocks had been arriving all morning. Now, head gardener Frank Adams, assisted by his head labourer, Ted Pearce, began lifting these rocks into place on a mammoth mound of earth, thus beginning the creation of what was already being referred to as The Rock Garden. "Plums in a pudding," said Pearce. Adams, an unlit pipe in the corner of his mouth, wondered at how so many rocks could amount to so little on the ground. Pearce nodded in reply but said nothing.

Chapter eighteen

Quite by chance, the first aerial photograph of Elmcote (or at any rate the oldest surviving aerial shot that anyone's yet discovered) was taken that weekend. It was taken by a flying club member, randomly, as he played with a specially-designed camera he'd acquired.

The quality of the photograph is astonishingly good. You can even see figures in the garden: and from the disposition of their shadows you can work out that it must have been taken around Noon. You can even make out that one of the figures, a woman, has a group of dogs around her.

Speculating about the individual stories of these tiny figures is fascinating; but more than anything, the photograph gives the garden a geographical context. You can see, for instance, that it's placed at the vanishing point of a great forest; an epic swathe of rolling woodland in the heart of England that begins attenuating as it puts out an arm to the south east. Elmcote is held, delicately, in the fingers of its outstretched hand.

From high up among the clouds, you can appreciate the Shakespearean magic of such a forest. Its other-worldliness. And it was renowned then, as it had been for centuries, for the richness of its flora and its fauna: not just its several species of deer – roe, red and fallow – but also more exotic mammals, like wild cats and martens and boars; and more delicate phenomena: shrews, dormice, several unusual species of bat, adders and grass-snakes in profusion, plus a cornucopia of moths and butterflies and rare birds. It shimmered with life.

And yet, in the days before guide books and tourist trails, it was virtually unexplored – and certainly unexploited. You could walk, under leafy canopy, almost all the way from Elmcote into Lincolnshire and meet not another soul.

The photograph is also useful from another standpoint. It tends to confirm contemporary accounts suggesting that the garden at Elmcote was a garden with few overt structures. There were no follies here: no temples or pagodas or essays in eccentric outhouse architecture.

This, for some, was counter-intuitive: in later years, garden archaeologists would wonder at the amount of structure that they kept uncovering. Walls and steps and terraces and paths: strip away the greenery, they implied, and you might be left with the sort of bare bones you'd be confronted with if you'd unearthed the skeleton of a city. An archetypally great city. A Byzantium or a Troy or a Persepolis.

But no: from the air it is merely a labyrinth of hedge and tree.

All of its low walls and steps were living affairs, every nook and crevice filled with creeping and colonising plants. Even in its hey-day, Elmcote was a garden whose hard structures were, for the most part, artfully hidden.

Chapter nineteen

Classen hadn't been looking for Kit. He hadn't really been looking for anyone. Aside, that is, from Dorothy Moore. He had a notion that she'd been seen a little earlier sitting on her own on a bench within the wisteria bower that served as The Rose Walk's crowing glory.

But he didn't quite get that far. At the eastern or "entrance" end of The Theatre Lawn, in other words the end nearest the house, he was brought to a halt.

Most of Elmcote's essays – its garden rooms – were intimate statements. In contrast, The Theatre Lawn was an arena on an epic scale. A hundred yards long, seventy-five wide, it was an expanse of lawn enclosed almost completely in a ten-foot-high wall of immaculately-shaven yew hedging. There was something almost austere about its conception – though it wasn't entirely devoid of features. At its far end (and this, indeed, was probably how The Theatre Lawn derived its name), there was a flat-topped grass plateau: in essence it was an elevated circular stage of ground, on which there grew a little copse of three smooth-limbed beech trees. This wooded island-stage (and its topography seemed to hint also at the sacred grove of a

prehistoric people) was fronted by a wide yet shallow flight of lichened stone steps in the Palladian style.

These steps, formal and balustered, were Elmcote's only nod in the direction of the 18th Century English landscape tradition – and yet this hint was undercut not just by suggestions of primitive pre-history in the grove behind but by hints also of yet another tradition. The entrance to this vast arena – in fact the only gap in its perimeter of hedging – was marked by a stand of maple trees whose five pale trunks, rising straight and pale as marble pillars, conveyed a sense that you were processing into a Greek amphitheatre.

When he'd passed this spot barely an hour previously, The Theatre Lawn had been empty; now, as if by magic, it was the scene of bustling activity. At its centre, half a dozen men or so were working with silent intensity to prepared the ground for (as far as Classen could work out) the erection of a large marquee. Two substantial post holes had already been dug and encased – and the men would soon be in a position to raise and secure the marquee's vast central poles, as big as ship's masts, that lay now upon the grass at the lawn's edge.

There was something compelling about this spectacle. Not just the nature of the work: though any sort of construction work will absorb the mind of an architect. And it was equally diverting to imagine how it would eventually look – imagining, in one's mind's eye, how elegantly and snugly and pleasingly a marquee, brilliant white against the clean darkness of its encasing green, would fit within this perfect space.

And yet this was not entirely why Classen found himself unable to pass by. The truth was, he was transfixed by a distant figure, a figure similarly absorbed by this spectacle.

He was on the flight of formal steps fronting the little plateau. Its neat grove of beech trees towered above: but yet, somehow, did not diminish him. Here he was: Kit Duncannon. Dead centre on the top step, seemingly rather imperious, his arms folded as he watched the men at work. He was motionless, absorbed yet somehow not *wholly* absorbed, distracted merely, detached and aloof – as if self-consciously aware of the absurdity of his situation. And it might also be true that he seemed melancholy too, solitary, his arms folded, surveying the expanse of lawn before him. Gazing upon the workmen and their vast expanse of unruly canvas, their posts and poles and coils of rope; gazing too upon the figure of Nicholas Classen, who was now crossing the lawn towards him.

When he was still a dozen paces from the foot of the steps, Classen hailed him cheerily: “Mr Duncannon! Good morning.”

No reply. Kit (now in a change of clothes following his earlier mishap) seemed distracted and tired and perhaps only vaguely aware of Classen’s presence. Classen took the remaining few paces, joined Kit on the stair, albeit on its lowest step, and turned once more to survey the scene on the lawn he had just crossed. A silence followed – a testing silence, Classen suspected.

And then, at long last, it was broken.

“I have been admiring your men,” said Kit. “I must confess, I have a wager with myself as to how long it will be before they take their shirts off. I like to see a muscular working man glistening with perspiration. Don’t you?”

“Mr Duncannon,” replied Classen, venturing now onto the flight’s second step. “You are growing on me. I could come to like you.”

“Quite. Of course. Where do you find them? Your men? Are they clean, generally?”

Classen laughed roundly at this, seemingly to Kit’s unacknowledged satisfaction – because, this time, the ensuing silence felt somehow less fraught.

And eventually Kit added: “You mustn’t mind me a bit, of course. Though I suspect it never pays to tease a man posing as an architect.”

“I know you don’t believe me… but it happens to be true.”

“Classen… Classen. Dutch South African name isn’t it?”

“You asked me that at dinner yesterday.”

“Oh, did I? Johnny’s practically a South African himself. Did he tell you that? No, of course he didn’t. One doesn’t blame him, naturally. It doesn’t bear thinking about, though, does it? Little South African chap running about as if he owned the place. Or created it on Day Three.”

“I thought he was an American.” Classen paused, as if suddenly unsure of himself, then added: “Like you, Mr Duncannon.”

Kit smirked as he shaped to make a reply… but in the end, he evidently restrained himself, for he kept his peace. His face quickly resumed its blank and rather melancholic expression.

But Classen was undaunted, venturing two more steps higher. “They will never surely have that thing ready in time for the tennis,” he said, gesturing rather unnecessarily towards the lawn once more.

"Oh, I'd say they have more than enough time," replied Kit after a short pause. "More than enough."

"I thought the whole business began at lunch."

"The marquee has, I believe, an even higher calling. It is for the fourth of July."

"The *fourth*," exclaimed Classen. "There's that American theme again."

"Possibly," said Kit, "were it not for the fact that on the fourth we are to celebrate the birthday of Miss Nancy Kemp, who, while yet a spinster, is to celebrate her forty years upon this earth."

"And will you be here to help her celebrate?"

"I expect so," he replied wearily, as if no longer amused by this exchange. "I'd need to check of course, but I feel certain I may have been invited."

"It's just… I can't help noting that you and Nancy don't exactly get on."

"That, my dear fellow, is unanswerable. In fact, you flatter me. And yet I can't help but confess that I'm slightly disappointed you think so. Indeed I sometimes feel as if I am a little bit in love with her."

Classen found himself suppressing a laugh. "But are you not already married?"

Kit frowned and made a show of racking his brains. "Oh, yes. I do believe you are right. Oh well. If she will not consent to run off with me, she must consent to become my mistress. You won't tell, I trust."

Classen had now gained the top step and stood shoulder to shoulder with Kit, close enough to be aware of his exotic cologne. The age difference between them was, in reality, not that great (an informed guess would have placed Kit in his later thirties); but appearances, deceptive as always, suggested otherwise. Classen looked more boyish than he had any right to look; while Kit seemed to have acquired more worldly substance than was his due. On the other hand, you could clearly see now that he, Classen, was in other respects a more formidable proposition – more heavily built, more cut out to be a pugilist – than the man he now stood beside.

Classen knew, or thought he knew, a bit about Kit Duncannon, most of it absorbed from the pages of the Society columns of Beaverbrook's newspapers. After all, who did not? His star had been in the ascendant for at least the past three or four years. Prior to that, he'd been no stranger to the diary columns; but he'd been a minor gadfly. Then he'd married the daughter of an Earl and had fallen heir, as a consequence, to a seat in Parliament. Now, to cap it all, he was a member of the inner circle at the court of the new King.

It was a matter of wonder that he could still be found slumming it at a place like Elmcote – though arguably it was creditable that he refused to cut his old friends.

So, yes, Classen knew a thing or two about Kit Duncannon. He was even aware, vaguely, of more salacious strands of gossip. Kit was, not to put too fine a point upon it, the sort of person who had acquired a *reputation*. The notion was that there was something sulphurous about him, that he was a dangerous man to know: the implication, never quite stated openly, was that he was a sexual predator with unnatural predilections. That he might be the sort of person who took photographs. That he persuaded people to pose for them. That he managed to get people to consent to be photographed doing the most shocking things.

Anyway, they stood together on the top step; but still they did not face each other.

"I have a question for you," said Classen.

"Fire away."

"Why are you here? Not, surely, for the tennis."

Kit pursed his lips. He could be a hard man to read. "In other words, why do I not trust Johnny?"

"I don't understand."

"Oh, come now, Mr Classen."

"I'm genuinely curious."

"Are you indeed. Well, let me answer your question by giving you a bit of advice."

"Yes?"

"A word of warning. That journalist. That Moore woman. I'd be careful if I were you."

This time it was Classen's turn to pretend that he had been distracted. A breeze, getting up out of nowhere, tugged at a shock of his sandy-coloured hair – and he raised a hand to sweep it back off his forehead.

And in any case there was someone hurrying toward them. It was a woman, picking her way through the tangled paraphernalia of the marquee's work in progress. It was Miss Voysey. She shouted to them and beckoned urgently.

Johnny, it seemed, was about to make an announcement.

Chapter twenty

Norah and Dorothy and Nancy and Mrs Merrill and Jamie were already there in the drawing room. They were not alone: the solemnity of the occasion was marked by the fact that head gardener Franks Adams was there too. Plus a couple of members of the gardening staff. And also two housemaids, standing shyly at the very back. No sign of Mrs Merrill's husband though. Perhaps the rumours were true. Perhaps he'd had enough of the good lady wife and had upped and left her.

When everyone was seated, Johnny, who'd been pacing nervously, turned to face them. He began shakily. They must all have heard by now that his favourite dachshund, Adolphus, was missing. He was, he confessed, terribly worried. And the worst of it was that, with the tennis tournament almost upon them, a missing dog was hardly going to be at the head of anyone's list of priorities. He was not organising a search party. Not as such. Just pleading with everyone, as they went about their business, to keep a look out."

He stopped here, as if exhausted by the ordeal – and smiled a wan smile. That was it, really, he added.

No-one really knew how to take this. There were frowns and conspiratorial glances between members of his audience. It all felt rather awkward.

And then Norah spoke up: "Surely, Johnny, it's rather too soon to panic. We all saw Adolphus just after breakfast, didn't we? Surely he has just wandered off."

"Adolphus never wanders off," snapped Johnny.

"So what are you saying Johnny? That he has been kidnapped? Or whatever the word is when dogs are involved."

This was Dorothy. Johnny didn't respond: he merely stared at her as if she had taken leave of her senses. But you could see he was slightly confused too.

This time it was Jamie who broke the silence.

"Johnny," he said, firmly yet gently. "Isn't there something more important you have to tell us?"

He began nodding. And he kept nodding, as if, having begun, he could not stop himself. A blank look had come into his eyes.

"Johnny?" This was Jamie again.

"Yes?" said Johnny, quizzically, his eyes searching the faces confronting him.

He clearly found nothing there to his satisfaction – and a recognition of this reality seemed to galvanise him. Without further ado, he made his exit. Walking with a

purpose that might have seemed unlikely even a matter of seconds previously, he covered the length of the room – and, without another word or even a look back, he left.

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And there was an ugly little coda to this scene. The gardeners and housemaids soon made themselves scarce; the rest of the gathering broke up in confusion and drifted outside, led by Mrs Merrill and Norah who, between them, were even now beginning a post mortem on what had just happened.

They stood, a forlorn little assembly, a half-dozen strong, gathered on the pathway just beyond the portico of the main door. No-one paid much attention to Jamie when he asked, more for himself than anyone else: "And just where did Kit get to?"

In any event, his rhetorical question was soon answered, because within minutes Kit had appeared at the door.

He seemed perplexed, then mildly amused, by the conclave facing him.

But Jamie was not amused. He advanced on Kit, much as he had advanced on him earlier. "Duncannon, you blackguard," he declared, adding: "What did you do with that damned dog?"

He made a grab for Kit's jacket lapel. Kit deflected him but was forced to take a step back. And there was a split second (though it seemed to last forever) when they faced each other in… well it seemed almost like recognition. A silent reckoning. Not of anything entirely visible. Of something more abstract and metaphysical and terrible. A mutual recognition of what might be.

And in all truth, the incident was soon concluded. Classen stepped forward and put a hand on Jamie's shoulder. And when Jamie did not relax his stance, he pulled him back. In fact, he did so with a forcefulness that surprised them both.

Jamie did not take kindly to this.

Before he marched off, he offered, for Classen's ears alone, a piece of thoroughly insightful analysis. He leant into him and said, in a hoarse whisper: "You will live to regret this."

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The ugly nature of this little set-to was soon forgotten: and actually, everyone was soon laughing about it. Kit was even hinting at a portrayal of the incident in which he was quite the hero.

So no-one was really aware that Norah had set off in pursuit of Jamie.

It did not take her long to track him down: still in a foul mood, agitated, he was pacing not far from the house, near the Theatre Lawn.

He turned when he heard her approach and smiled sardonically. His eyes still burned.

They had absolutely nothing in common; and neither pretended otherwise. They rarely talked. But perhaps that was because they understood each other perfectly.

She came right to the point. “This can’t go on, you know, Jamie.”

He reflected on this; but not for long. “I’m not sure that’s for you to say,” he said.

“It ends. Now,” she said.

“Does it? Maybe you should have thought on that a week ago.”

She might have answered that but she was now aware of a voice in the distance. A voice, raised forlornly, calling a name. Jamie was aware of this too. He raised an eyebrow as he gazed at Norah and cupped a hand to his ear; and then, as if determined that they both might get a fix on this faraway sound, he pointed a finger into the air.

It was as if he were saying “See?”

Chapter twenty-one

The more they all thought about it, the more absurd the whole scenario had been. The gathering in the drawing room. Johnny’s big scene. Then the anti-climax of it all.

Dorothy said it was a bit like Kit’s murder mystery game. Without the denouement. Or even a body.

That killed the laughter.

The thing is, games begun are not easily ended. Some games, most games: unless they become more than games.

And it was in fact at this point that everyone realised in their heart of hearts that this was no longer a game. Even Classen, still half-asleep, fumbling in the dark… even he was, at last, becoming aware of this.

All that remained was for each and every one of them to fulfil their allotted roles. And yet, surely, it was also true that none of these roles was quite set in stone. Not yet.

Take Nancy, for instance. While Kit and Dorothy and Mrs Merrill and (to a certain extent) Classen joked about Johnny's lamentable performance, Nancy had succeeded in drifting away from the group. And of course it's not our first instinct to follow her.

Perhaps we should have paid more attention when we were reading *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain*: the mystery story everyone was at least dipping into at Elmcote that June. It was (and is) a classic exercise in misdirection. It's also a master-class in what the genre's more sophisticated 1930s fans (chief among them the New Poets conjugated around a past participle of Spender and Auden) liked to refer to as the feminisation of violence.

For a brief period in the inter-war years, radical intellectuals delighted in irritating the literary establishment by theorising archly about many aspects of the classic country house mystery. For instance, they loved to mock critics who sneered at the genre's supposedly flimsy characters, its cardboard lovers and papier-mâché villains. No-one in mystery stories had any depth, ran the writ: they were all façade.

The New Poets responded that they loved façade. Facades plural. Facades seen from any angle, cut-up facades, facades as collage. Just like Cubism, they said.

A moot point. But they were definitely onto something when they talked about murder losing its sexual identity. Death had moved beyond the bayonet and the bullet, beyond muddy wasteland and high explosive. After The War, the ultimate war, the war that was the very model of the Apocalypse, those who declined to be numb determined instead to be shocking – and death became them.

Death, in short, became a parlour game. There was a craze for séances, this a cruel form of mockery not just of the living but also of the dead. Ouija pantomimes, table rapping, ectoplasm: drawing rooms became over-run with the half-dead. You endeavoured to channel revenants and lost souls and doppelgangers: your lost brothers or sisters. Or, for choice, your identical twins. Your mad twins, your broken-down angels.

Sometimes these dark angels told the truth, the whole truth; and sometimes they ended up dead.

But brute strength was no longer required to kill them. Poisoning was now the thing. And shootings too, courtesy of delicate little Art Deco handguns knocked up by acolytes of the House of Chanel.

And in turn, of course, this infection of the domestic by the malevolent opened up a whole new world of clues. Some of these could even be linguistic, mere slips of the tongue. It was even considered legitimate to hide them, like crossword puzzle clues, behind plays on words. *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain* is, as its title might suggest, is a vast compendium of clues: and infamously, of course, the book hides many fountains in its labyrinth of hints and feints and intimations – including, tellingly, a necklace of diamonds called The Fountain.

So clues could be worn blatantly as jewellery or smuggled teasingly within an abstract code: but they always resonated most powerfully when they were part of a more-or-less familiar domestic world, fragments of the everyday. In fact, the best place to hide a clue is in lists of humdrum objects. For instance, in the sort of shrapnel you might hope to find in an old tin that once contained Parma violets or boiled sweets: pins, needles, foreign coins, broken cuff-links, paper clips, nail scissors, pencil sharpeners and a myriad of unidentified and unidentifiable keys.

Things seen. Nor do they need to be hard metal: clues may be found in the turn of an ankle, a facial feature captured imperfectly in a mirror; indeed, in a vast multitude of gestures, responses, reactions, tones and timbres of voice.

Because the main lesson to be learned from the new game is that anyone now can be a killer. And the beauty of a book like *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain* is the way it makes you walk away from the least likely characters; yet, in doing so, invites you to look back at them over your shoulder.

Anyone, everyone. Not just the usual suspects. People at the periphery of your vision and in the nagging corners of your recollection. For instance, not now, but later, much later, you might remember Nancy’s happy knack of hanging on the fringes of a gathering and then slipping away unnoticed. She’d always been fascinated in the workings of the estate and its gardens and she’d easily find something to divert her. She liked to watch Frank Adams or his second-in-command, Ted Pearce, at work, particularly if they were engaged in anything intricate or technical.

As they were doing now, potting on a whole swathe of propagations, mainly dahlias and cannas. They tended to do this on a trestle table at The Summer House, a house principally for plants not for people, more greenhouse than teahouse. Its west

front featured a pitched roof of glass supported by a colonnade of stout wooden columns; under the glass, the structure's cross-beams were richly entangled with climbers of all sorts – and in this luxuriant humidity, the scent was rich and exotic.

Here they were: Adams and Pearce with their work cut out; and Nancy hovering as Nancy was wont to do.

The story was that she wasn't quite right. That she was not all there. Or was in some way *disturbed*. Sometimes, for instance she acted like a thirteen-year-old. She'd have temper tantrums or begin weeping quite spontaneously. And though they loved her dearly, garden staff like Pearce and Adams sometimes made crude jokes about her behind her back.

And, yes, of course it's true that she was difficult. Slightly odd. Eccentric maybe. But as her journals would prove much later, she was (though self-taught) a botanist of the highest order. In a different era, she might have been an accomplished academic.

She knew more about cell biology than Pearce or Adams could ever dream of.

So she'd watch them; and they'd work on in awkward silence. Now and then she'd break away to dawdle the length of the terrace and back again, taking in her fingers, here and there, the delicate blossom of a climber, bending toward it to absorb its scent.

But inevitably she would return to Adams and Pearce, as if overseeing them.

"What are you doing?" she'd ask.

She was only making conversation.

They rarely answered her.

Of course it goes without saying that Nancy Kemp was well-versed in plant pharmacology. She knew a thing or two about poisons.

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Oh yes, and by the time she arrived at The Summer House, she was wearing a hat. Her mother's hat, in fact. The wide-brimmed creation, the one festooned with lace and ribbons and a thousand silk flowers. She wore it the rest of the day and doffed it, ostentatiously, to all and sundry. That was the thing about Nancy. You never quite knew where you were with her.

Chapter twenty-two

Then there was the tennis.

They began arriving, by car mostly, in the late morning, some confident enough to nose their way into the entrance courtyard, but many more deciding to park along the verges of the lane. Major Jenkinson's Young Men's Tennis Tournament attracted people from as far afield as Evesham, apparently – not that anyone was really meant to take it terribly seriously. A single-set knock-out format, it was open to those under the age of twenty-one – and some years, so it was said, there had been as many as two dozen entrants. Not this year, however. This year there were only fifteen.

But the tournament itself was hardly the point. Over the years it had become something of a family day out for East Gloucestershire. Competitors had to have an interest in tennis, of course – and be in possession of a tennis racket. This, rather than any great claim to sporting prowess, was the primary entrance requirement. You also needed the wherewithal to turn out in the right attire – whites, or as close an approximation to whites as was humanly possible.

However, competitors and their families were easily outnumbered by general spectators and by those who had very little interest of any sort in tennis. Johnny was known to take a more or less liberal line where this notion was concerned: they came, he assumed, because they were understandably curious about Elmcote and wanted to experience something of the fabled gardens. He let them, up to a point: they were permitted to picnic if they chose, in The Orchard by The Rose Walk.

In exchange, they were invited to contribute sixpence per family. Because of course the whole *raison d'être* of the event was to raise money for charity. The tournament was, in part (a vitally important part, Johnny always emphasised), clearly designed to promote lawn tennis. Tennis for all; tennis as an activity that was not only highly enjoyable in its own right, the pursuit of which was likely to lead to an enhanced sense of physical well-being.

However, these benefits, though wholesome and proper to the individual, were subordinate always to a greater good. The picnic levy and tournament entrance fees (a shilling per player) added up to a tidy sum and Johnny undertook to match the grand total (or more than match it, some said) with a contribution of his own. The funds this year were pledged in honour of a local cottage hospital.

Johnny also provided a trophy in the form of a large silver goblet. The winner, while taking the applause of those who had stayed to witness the final, would be

photographed being presented with this by Johnny himself: but the victor was not, under any circumstances, permitted to take it away. It lived in the main display cabinet in the downstairs drawing room.

Traditionally, the tournament's final rubber was preceded by what many held to be the annual highlight of the event – a light-hearted celebrity doubles match usually featuring Johnny partnered by the Elmcote professional and a couple of noteworthy names (usually Association football players no-one had ever heard of from one of the Midlands clubs).

This year, the flyers had, as always, advertised this bill-topping act; the sad news was that it had been scratched. Because of course there was no Elmcote professional this year. Or rather, one had been hired and he had been very much in evidence up until a couple of weeks ago… but he was now, not to put too fine a point upon it, no longer in evidence.

There was a cheerfully malicious rumour going around that he had drunk himself to death.

The tennis court was situated within a generous enclosure: there was plenty of room for spectators along the length of one sideline; while the other of the court was dominated by a quaint pavilion – more a thatched shelter really. Johnny's guests (not just his houseguests but friends and neighbours and a sprinkling of the great and good from the County set) tended to take lunch, followed by early-afternoon cocktails, at tables within its shade.

The whole event, not to put too fine a point upon it, had become something of a local tradition. This year, there was also a thrilling innovation: the presence of a uniformed policeman. The management of a great crowd was surely not a worry; and petty crime of the sort commonly found at, say, a racecourse, was hardly likely to manifest itself: but there he was, indisputably – pounding a leisurely beat, so it seemed, between the entrance courtyard and the tennis court via The Lily Pool. And back again. Florid of complexion, perspiring slightly under that great dark blue helmet of his, he nodded politely to all those who had the manners (and the breeding, like as not) to acknowledge him as they passed in the opposite direction.

The speculation was that he had been hired by Johnny somehow to lend even more grandeur to the event. Thus it was assumed that the poor man would not be called upon to pound his beat for the whole afternoon; and that, having put in his

appearance, he would, by one o-clock, be sitting down to an agreeable luncheon prepared for him by Mrs Merrill in the cool of the servants' great hall.

And it was now terribly warm, especially when the sun succeeded, as it did fitfully, in burning its way through a veil of wispy cloud. But even when the sun was hidden (almost in fact, *because* it was hidden) the whole world seemed so terribly airless and humid. More thunderstorms were surely on their way – nor would it surprise anyone if they rivalled those of the previous weekend.

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And as it happens, there *were* noises off. One at any rate. A bang. One person screamed. And then, in a delayed reaction, everyone else in the crowd laughed.

It was more a pop than a bang. A hard sound, staccato, almost like a gunshot. It seemed to come from the woods beyond the tennis court. To the north-east. An uproar of black birds rose angrily above the tree line.

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Classen sat in at one of the least-well-appointed tables – expecting at any moment to be called away to undertake his inspection tour of the house. And then he'd be on his way back to London. He'd already said a couple of goodbyes.

So he waited; and he watched.

Cat and mouse: he imagined they were all watching one another. Or were they merely curious to see who was watching Kit's every move? Maybe they all just envied him – Kit's table was already the jolliest, the loudest, the most uproarious.

And then an opportunity presented itself.

A seat next to Norah became vacant.

Classen moved swiftly to fill it.

"Norah," he said.

"Oh!" she said, rather taken aback. "Where do you spring from?"

"Norah," he said too emphatically, too heartily… as if preparing her for bad news.

"Yes?" she prompted when it was clear he was having troubling finding his tongue.

"Norah," he began again. "I have a question to put to you."

Her eyes widened at this – as if she despaired sometimes at his lack of polish. And yet there was still time to beat him to the punch.

"A question? I am glad. Because I have one for you too."

He sighed. Or as good as. "Norah, you must believe me. I am who I say I am."

"Yes," she said, "I appreciate that. However the question I had in mind is rather more personal… and delicate."

As she said this, she (none too subtly) looked across at the next table, where a blameless Dorothy was blithely unaware she was being implicated.

Classen could have taken this hint and risen to the occasion. He did not. So, having sweetened him with an extra smile, Norah added: "I suppose I was wondering if there was a Mrs Classen?"

"You, Norah, were wondering?"

"Yes. I was."

"Whether or not I have a wife?"

"Indeed."

But nothing followed; and as the *longueur* lengthened, Norah suspected that he'd determined now to switch off altogether. To blank her utterly. So she was unprepared with the vehemence of what came next; but then it was almost as if it surprised him too.

"A wife?" he said bitterly. "Yes. I had one once. But I rather carelessly lost her."

Norah looked at him; and he looked at her… and then, perhaps rediscovering his sense of the ridiculous, he almost smiled.

It was an odd moment – and she felt another twinge of disappointment in him. She backed off, though. What else could she do?

She'd barely noticed the fact that Classen had a piece of paper in his hand; but now he laid it plainly on the table. He smoothed it out in what seemed a significant act. It was one of the flyers advertising the tennis tournament – and its broken promise of the appearance of an Elmcote tennis professional.

Then he seemed hesitant; almost agitated.

She turned away, and clearly registered her new-minted disapproval of Classen by casting around for more companionable options. Sadly, though, these options seemed limited. So it was with some considerable impatience that she eventually stated: "You had a question for me."

"It does not matter," he said.

She turned from him again.

"Anyway," he said at last. "I merely wanted to say my farewells. My work here will soon be done."

"It has been a pleasure to meet you," she said.

And now at last she succeeded in catching Johnny's eye. He was seated not far away and seemed to be enjoying himself; but he smiled and signalled for her to join him. Sometimes even Norah needed rescuing.

Chapter twenty-three

Classen had been allocated a housemaid, Violet, to help him with his survey of the house. There were locked rooms he might need access to, hidden staircases he should be aware of, trap doors to cellars that might be concealed beneath rugs. And of course she might also be called upon to hold the other end of his tape measure.

Having conferred with Mrs Merrill, they had decided that they should start in the basement and cellars of the Georgian structure, which could easily be accessed via the basement area steps that came out into the scullery courtyard.

But as they headed that way, who should they bump into but Dorothy.

It seemed odd that she should be round this side of the building, so far from civilisation, tennis and polite conversation.

"Are you spying on us?" challenged Classen.

"Oh dear!" she responded. "Have I been found out."

But she was horrified ten times over when she learned that Classen intended to brave the murkiness of Elmcote's underworld in his beige linen suit.

"You are a perfect idiot, she told him straightening his lapels and dusting off his shoulders. "You arrive here without a jacket for dinner. Now you have nothing appropriate for this task either."

She turned to Violet and pretended to admonish her, much to her evident embarrassment – and secret delight.

"I am ashamed of you Violet. Did you mean to say nothing to him?"

And then focusing on Classen once more: "Clearly you need saving from yourself. Go inside at once and ask Mrs Merrill to look you out some old working clothes."

He did as he was told.

Mrs Merrill said she had plenty of odds and ends about the place. She disappeared into the wash room and came out a couple of minutes later carrying a couple of garments. Her choice was almost comical: item one, a pair of high-waisted workman's trousers in khaki. They were the sort of trousers that Frank Adams's assistant Ted Pearce might wear, kept up by a broad black belt, though they had no belt loops. And item two: a fade blue collarless shirt with huge great repair patches at the elbows.

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He looked a picture when he rejoined Violet in the courtyard.

"Has Dorothy gone?"

"Yes," said Violet. "Mr Waterbury came looking for her."

"Good. I'm glad she's not here to see me dressed like this."

They made a fine team – and soon made short work of the cellars before moving up in the world. Violet, a tall, willowy girl, bright-as-you-like and breath-takingly confident for her age, walked ahead of him, talking all the while, carrying a huge bunch of keys. She knew every inch of the house; and as it turned out she knew, metaphorically, where all the bodies were buried.

The Georgian part of the house was largely unused and was now falling into a mild state of disrepair. A large state room dominated the ground floor (at a pinch it might be described as a ballroom): it was mildewed and a couple of patches of its gilded wallpaper were running to black mould.

And yet this mildewed ballroom represented the heart of the matter where Classen's mission was concerned: the most ambitious part of Johnny's new vision for Elmcote was an indoor tennis court. It would be sunk slightly below the level of the current ground floor. Above, along the length of one wall, like a long organ gallery in a Methodist church, there was to be a viewing balcony with tiered seating.

Classen stood there, looked down at the sketched Johnny had given him. Then he looked up at the high ceiling above him.

Then he stared at Violet and shook his head.

"What?" she asked, thinking she'd somehow stepped out of line.

"Nothing he said," shaking his head but smiling now. "Nothing."

Norah Kemp had clearly never been in this part of the house – or if she had, she'd forgotten there was a piano here. Backed into a corner, it was the room's only ornament. Classen opened up its cover and played a couple of chords, expecting to find it horribly (and comically) out of tune. But no. Its pitch was perfect, its timbre sublime. It had been cared for.

On the floor above this ballroom, there were half a dozen bedrooms kept in relatively shipshape condition for guests. They were fine rooms. It was a shame to contemplate their demolition.

And indeed, a lesser man than Classen might have reflected on the fact that he had been given a billet in a bare servant's room in an even older part of the house, rather than here, in one of these empty rooms.

Classen, though, thought nothing of it. Actually, Violet thought more of it than he did. And perhaps there was a reason for this: the wonder of it was that when she'd first started at Elmcote, she'd had one of the rooms in that top servant's corridor. One of the rooms opposite Classen's.

"That's interesting," he said. "One of the doors up there is locked. Might one of your keys fit?"

She didn't wonder at his asking this question. Why should she? "Of course," she said.

"Can we go that way later?" he asked.

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Violet, as we've already suggested, was spectacularly well informed. She knew every hidey-hole, every story. Chapter and verse. She knew more about some people than they knew about themselves.

Take Mr Merrill. He was an odd one. It was true, she confirmed, that he was currently unaccounted for. And no, he had never disappeared before. Not as such. But it was also true that he was sometimes called upon to run unusual errands for Johnny. Most people were wary of Mr Merrill because he could be morose and bad-tempered and unreasonable. He could take threatening turns. He had a slightly turned-in eye, which could be unsettling when he looked at you directly.

The story was that he'd been a bad sort when he was younger and had been put away more than once for affray and assault. Mrs Merrill had saved him. He wasn't

even trained as a butler, as he sometimes made out. Mrs Merrill had taken up with him when she was a cook and he was a handyman in a house near Gloucester. Then they'd moved on as an item. That's what the story was.

He wasn't exactly a tyrant below stairs but now and then he became aggressive when he felt he wasn't being paid enough respect. But it was his own fault. It wasn't always easy to take him seriously. For instance, he'd lined up the servants the other day and had told them there had been thefts recently from all over the house and it was a worry to Johnny and everyone had to keep a look-out. But the thing was, even though he was a great brute of a man, there was always something unconvincing about him.

And he suffered particularly in comparison with Mrs Merrill. Because she was the really scary one.

Just the other day, by one of the outhouses in the yard, she'd cornered a rat and dispatched it with a coal shovel. It was big, this rat, genuinely as big as one of Johnny's dachshunds. Her first blow caught it on the run and stunned it but it recovered just enough to limp on. So she raised the shovel high above her head and brought it down now with a truly terrible force – and the sickening crunch when she did so told its own story.

But the thing was, that didn't satisfy her. She raised the shovel even higher above her head and (if this could be possible) brought it down with even more force. Again and again, with maniacal energy she did this.

After half a dozen times or so, the blood stopped spattering; but on she went, until the carcass was so thinly spread that each blow of the shovel started to bring up sparks and fearsome clangs from the paving stones.

Then she just stopped and re-hung the shovel on its nail. As if her mind now was on other things. Her shins and ankles were spattered with rat blood. On the paving stones there was a smeared area of blood and fur and claw and tooth and bone: yet all that was really recognisable of the rat was its long tail, hooped, brown-on-brown like a gargantuan earthworm.

It was true: she'd put the shovel back up on its nail and, as cool as you like, she'd returned to the house.

That was Mrs Merrill for you.

Classen told her this was interesting, very interesting. And maybe there was another thing he could help her with. The tennis professional this year. He was called Wilson, wasn't he?

Oh yes. Wilson. He was a bad sort.

And what had happened to him?

She didn't answer that question. Not the first time at any rate. Because clearly now she could see him in her mind's eye. A tiny figure, perhaps, in the distance, on the tennis court. The funny thing was he couldn't play tennis. Not really. He was hilarious. He threw himself around the court like a maniac, a whirlwind of arms and legs but he couldn't hit the ball for toffee. Anyone could see that.

But the thing was, he got under everyone's skin. That's what he was good at.

Mr Duncannon was particularly friendly with him and started turning up regularly, unannounced, at all times of the week, to play tennis and to go swimming with him. In the normal course of a summer you'd hardly expect to see him Mr Duncannon two or three times at Elmcote. Now he was never away from the place.

But the person who really fell for him was Norah Kemp's daughter, Nancy. And maybe this was reciprocated, despite the age difference. Nancy was well past her thirtieth birthday and Wilson – Paul Wilson his name was – must have been about 24.

Nancy was sort of estranged from her mother these days and actually lived most of her life here at Elmcote, rather than at Millbrook, where her mother lived and she used to live too. These days, Johnny treated her like a daughter.

"Could she," Classen speculated mischievously, "actually be his daughter?"

She blushed at the thought. "Oh no sir," said she. "I don't think that's very likely, do you?"

Anyway, perhaps it was inevitable that it would all end in tears. The thing with Nancy and Wilson. Because of course everyone now knew what had happened last Sunday. During the storm.

The story was that Nancy had told her mother that she was set on running off with a man she'd met. She didn't say who this man was – and in any case the name Wilson might not have meant much to Norah because she'd been busy on commissions all over the country and hadn't really been to Elmcote in weeks.

So Norah had asked Kit to come to Millbrook to help her talk some sense into her daughter over Sunday lunch. And then of course it all came out that actually, the man she thought she was about to run off with, Wilson, was Kit's special friend.

Nancy takes off in her car and drives like a madwoman, so they say, all the way from Millbrook to Elmcote though the torrential rain, with a sky so black it's almost like night. It was a wonder she didn't kill herself, especially as Norah and Mr Duncannon were hot on her heels, driving after her like fury in that big old Rolls of his.

Well, they had a real set to under the portico at the front door. And then Nancy took off again into the garden and pitched up at the tennis court, as if she expected to find Wilson playing tennis there in a thunderstorm. The whole business was insane and there was talk that something terrible had happened out there. The story was that Nancy had in fact tried to kill Kit Duncannon.

Nancy. Wilson. Kit Duncannon. Classen listened to Violet's story. And when it ended, he asked:

But what has happened to Wilson?

Oh, she said. Yes. The thing was, he'd already been asked to leave. He'd already gone. The word was that he'd left on the Saturday. Or the Sunday. Or the Monday. No-one had seen him since.

"You're sure?" asked Classen.

She looked at him as if she did not understand the question.

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By now, they had reached the top corridor in the positively ancient part of the house, where Classen's room was. Violet, once upon a time, had had the room opposite. She'd loved that room because its window overlooked the lane. Not that there was ever very much to see on the lane.

"Out of interest, who tidied in here earlier?" he asked, indicating his room.

"Tidied? No-one as far as I know. I'm sorry sir. We're so far behind with everything. And what with the tennis and everything…"

Classen smiled. "It does not matter. Now, as to this other door."

She tried the handle. Odd, she said. This should not be locked.

Deftly, she selected one of her keys. It did not work.

She tried another. And another.

She looked crestfallen. Clearly, she had been doing all her in power to impress him. This was her first failure.

Almost obsessively now she continued to look for a key that might work, cursing under her breath.

"It's OK," he said. "It does not matter."

"Are you sure? I can look for more keys. Come back later if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary," he said.

Chapter twenty-four

She had it about right, of course. Violet.

And yes, obviously there were (and are) more hallucinatory versions of the story. Folklore, after all, has a way of fastening onto the poetic. But most tellings of the tale make much of the weather, as if its unprecedented severity proved something. Proved, for instance, that things in general were out of kilter and that the gods were angered.

Across the whole of the preceding week, temperatures across southern England had been climbing. At first people had merely called it a heatwave; but now they ran out of vocabulary just as they were running out of patience. And then the weather broke.

Accomplished recountings of this tale will also tend to make much of the fact that the house was unnaturally quiet that Sunday. Mrs Merrill was at her sisters' in Tewksbury. Jamie Waterbury was away for a few days in London; there were no other houseguests. And Johnny was out of action. On Saturday, as the temperature had risen remorselessly into the higher reaches of the 90s, he'd become absolutely debilitated. He retired to his room after lunch and reappeared again only briefly to take a light supper midway through the evening. He spent Sunday lying helpless on his bed. The house was Miss Voysey's alone. She wrote letters, played clock patience, walked, like a ghost, the house's deserted galleries and sat in her bedroom by the open window, listening to her wireless.

The Home Service interrupted its programmes regularly to chart the storm's northward progress. She heard the world's end approaching, not just in the severe weather warnings and news bulletins (golfers struck by lightning at Southfield, St Albans market square knee-deep in water, rivers breaking their banks, families marooned in their houses, trees split apart the length and breadth of the south-east) but also in the ominous cracklings of electrical static that threatened to overwhelm the wireless signal altogether.

She was terrified of electrical storms. Always had been.

She moved away from the window.

Some time after lunch, it became almost pitch black outside and then the rain (and, intermittently, rattling great gouts of hail too) came down, epic sheets of it; and the house was shaken by crack after deafening crack of thunder from directly overhead.

At which point, she moved downstairs to the drawing room. In her homespun reckoning, where storms were concerned, the larger the room the better.

Imagine her terror, alone there, praying for her salvation, when Norah and Kit burst in upon her. It was almost as if they had been rehearsing this for an eternity, Kit gaunt, Norah looking scared, wide-eyed, almost beside herself, demanding to know if Nancy was safe.

Miss Voysey was speechless.

Norah took her by the shoulders and shook her.

But still she was speechless.

Norah ran out again into the storm, Kit following.

So, yes, Violet had it about right: a week ago, Nancy and Kit and Norah had had an argument in the rain.

Chapter twenty-five

The Bartrim estate workers never really knew what they thought of Jamie. Not for sure. They generally took orders from Ted Pearce, who was beholden to Frank Adams, who was Johnny's right hand man.

Requests or suggestions from outside of this narrow hierarchy were never taken entirely seriously – and indeed they might be the occasion for facetiousness and banter and earthy good humour. Deference was not a universal currency on the estate. Down the years, for instance, the hamlet's finest had delighted in making monkeys out of Elmcote's tennis professionals; and they liked nothing better than letting the air out of anyone who took himself (or indeed herself) too seriously.

There was, not to put too fine a point upon it, a whiff of the barracks about the Elmcote Bartrim's take on the world.

And yet they were wary, more than wary, of Jamie. Maybe they recognised danger when the saw it. Maybe they felt in their water that this was not a man likely to be intimidated. There was that mad look in his eye more often than not; and they knew an unreconstructed member of the Berkshire Hunt when they saw one.

So when Jamie ambushed a group of them sitting on a pile of rocks, smoking, by the nascent Rock Garden, their first instinct wasn't to pull his leg or attempt to run rings round him. Especially as he was carrying a golf club in a manner that suggested he saw it more as an offensive weapon than a sporting accessory. No – they listened sullenly.

Jamie had a proposition to put to them. A little extra task. He'd pay them a shilling each if they'd consider it.

They elected to humour him.

"We're listening," they said.

He was, he explained, looking for something in the woods.

"Golf ball is it?" asked one of the men.

"Not exactly," came the reply.

The notion was that they form a cordon and execute a sweep to the northeast.

"Like beating?"

"Exactly like beating."

The deal was soon done – and they moved off, eight-abreast including Jamie, who held the centre of the line.

And they walked for ten, maybe fifteen minutes in good order, covering over half a mile. But it was too good to last. First there were muttered remarks out on the edge of the line. Then not just mutterings but sniggers; and someone contrived to fall over theatrically, diving his length into a sea of ferns.

There was uproarious laughter at this.

Jamie made every effort to rally his troops. Of course he did. But after another minute or two, one among them, a natural ring-leader by the look of him, started to hang back and then went down on his haunches, a signal that he'd go no farther.

Jamie, turning, knew immediately that the game was up, the line now grinding to a halt on either side – but again he did his best, remonstrating with them to go on.

Predictably, however, they asked for their shillings; and eventually, as was inevitable, he paid out.

He watched them trudge back in the direction they just come. He watched in silent fury, then began scything away at the ferns all around him with his golf club, until he'd created a little clearing.

And he might have gone on to make it a much bigger clearing… if not for the fact that he saw one of the men coming back toward him through the trees. It was one of the younger men, one of the unassuming ones.

He was slightly shame-faced; more than a little nervous.

He said he reckoned he knew what Jamie was looking for – and could help him if he was interested.

It would cost him though.

A fiver he reckoned would cover it.

A fiver! Jamie was outraged. What was he planning? To take passage on the Queen Mary?

But he agreed in the end.

Five pounds. One hundred shillings.

Chapter twenty-six

When Dorothy came upon him he was standing, dazed-looking, near The White Garden. Yet she had to smile because he was wearing the most ridiculous outfit: high-waisted labourer's trousers and a tatty shirt. She'd have laughed out loud if he hadn't looked so perplexed.

"Good heavens," she said. You look as if you've seen a ghost."

He nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes. That's it of course." And then he pointed up through the branches of the cedar tree at Johnny's window. "Except of course that he is not a ghost. Not at all. Not by any stretch of the imagination."

"What are you talking about?"

And clearly he was in a volatile sort of a mood, agitated and irritable because he as good as snapped at her: "Did you need me for anything?"

But he realised instantly that this was uncalled for. "I'm sorry," he added. "This place is driving me mad."

She sighed. Then smiled. "I only came to tell you they have been talking about you again."

"Have they nothing better to do?"

"No."

"I should leave."

"Yes. I came to tell you that too."

"Can I ask you though… I'm just curious…"

She put her finger to her lips. And then: "The first thing you must do is to change out of these ridiculous clothes."

"Yes, he said. "Of course. Then can we talk again?"

She now seemed less sure of herself. "It's difficult," she said. "I should be getting back. I know they've got the wrong end of the stick. They have, haven't they? But of course that's neither here nor there. You must leave while you can."

"Well… let's talk now then."

"No."

"No? You must tell me what's going on here."

Now she seemed positively nervous. She glanced over her shoulder.

"Alright. In ten, fifteen minutes. You know Mrs Wilmot's Garden? The one with all this sticky-up sword-leaved plants and the sun-dial."

"Yes I do."

"Well I'll see you there. Don't let anyone see you."

"I have a better idea."

"What?"

"We meet in The Pool Garden."

Chapter twenty-seven

There's always a ghost, of course there is; though these days we baulk, quite understandably, at calling a spade a spade. But in all these productions it's there, always there. Our need for the spectral goes way beyond convention, way beyond the call of that first Elsinore murder mystery; and (paradoxically perhaps) our spectral need has little to do with darkness – though it's also true to say that we all need reminding, from time to time, of how unlike angels we may be.

No – this isn't about glib reminders of the pit of imps swarming just below the boards of the stage.

It's more a reminder that all tales worth telling are driven by those who aren't really there. Or, coming at this from another sort of direction entirely, that there's a certain type of yearning in us all. Call it conscience if you like: that which keeps us awake at nights. It's about how the past may be relied upon to catch up with us.

Norah's husband, for instance, was always catching up with her. Had been for years. Decades. She'd run and run and run; and there he'd be, still at her shoulder. Her husband Georgie Kemp, the notorious Georgie Kemp, wealthy second son of an Earl. Georgie was a gambler and a heavy drinker, which was forgivable; but he ran off with a dancing girl, which was not. He blew his share of the family fortune, decamped to France with his inamorata and was attempting to drink himself to death when he was killed in an unfortunate shooting accident. The loaded pistol he was cleaning late at night, alone in a Dieppe hotel room, went off in his hands and took the top of his head off.

Society never forgave Norah for any of that.

So, yes, as one teller of tall tales has it, absence is the highest form of presence.

And while we are about it, we may also acknowledge that in rare (oh-so-rare and involuted) cases, spectres can end up haunting their own stories.

Maybe that was Johnny's problem – because now and then, with breath-taking candour, he could be relied upon to own up to the fact that he was really dead. Often, this was conveyed provocatively – to confound those (and they were legion) who tended to assume that, as a soldier, Johnny had been a dilettante. His mother, so the story ran, had pushed him into the army merely to add to his credentials as an English gentleman – and she'd been as horrified as he was when he'd found himself, soon after the outbreak of war in the autumn of 1899, on a boat to South Africa.

It was easy to assume that Johnny, at heart a sensitive aesthete who painted and played the piano when he was not playing tennis, was hardly a fighting man. But he acquitted himself well.

He had a cool head and he was a phenomenally good shot. Furthermore, he didn't at all mind the privations and discomforts of life under canvas on the veldt. In short, he flourished. He ended the war as a Lieutenant.

He was still a reservist with his Gloucestershire battalion when a new war announced itself in August 1914; and though he was in his early 40s, he was promoted to Captain and sent immediately to France.

And he was wounded almost immediately too, at Hellfire Corner near Ypres in October 1914. The damage, concussion and shrapnel wounds to an arm, shoulder, neck and one side of his face, wasn't exactly critical; but following a week or more in a base hospital, he found himself back home for Christmas.

He wasn't quite so lucky six months later, though, when he was caught up in the notoriously desperate battle for Hooge Chateau. In fact, they laid him out for dead at a field dressing station. And they might have laid him out for good if one of his subalterns, called in ostensibly to identify what remained of another officer, hadn't noticed Johnny among the corpses laid out in their rows.

He gasped and let out a despairing cry.

At which point, apparently, Johnny twitched.

He spent the rest of the war at Elmcote; and, indeed, it is generally assumed that he plotted the most ambitious phase of the garden's development during his convalescence. This was when he first took up station at his window, initially in a wicker chair, wrapped in a travelling rug.

It's not entirely clear what he saw when he sat there: for of course The White Garden did not exist at that point.

He didn't much talk about the war. Not in it's immediately aftermath; not later; not ever. But he was not beyond telling people, with grim humour, that he'd once been a dead man.

The implication was surely that he was in some way marked out. Or that he was beyond certain sorts of fear. He'd been down to Hades, stared into the River Styx, and had come back again; and perhaps, as a consequence, there was at the core of his being a darkness, an agitation, a violence even. That's why, though he was a mild man, increasingly reclusive, sentimental, delicately creative, soft, there were also times when you could look into his eyes and believe him capable of almost anything.

Chapter twenty-eight

Miss Voysey, as was wholly appropriate to her role as Elmcote's most significant employee, had her own suite of rooms, located just past Johnny's rooms on the first floor corridor off the main landing. The largest of these was her sitting room, with its sofa and chairs (though she'd never, in all her years at Elmcote, entertained) and the huge walnut cabinet that contained her pride and joy, her four-valve dual-band wireless set.

Off this living room could be found, to the right, a smaller room, her bedroom; and, to the left, an even smaller room, the estate office. This not only had a connecting door to her sitting room but a door that gave out onto the corridor; and on most days

this remained open so that you could see her there behind her desk, writing usually, head down; and anyone might pop their head in and ask a question or a favour. It made her, she felt, more accessible.

Having changed out of his borrowed work clothes, Classen headed this way and knocked on the door.

This was entirely unnecessary because the door was open, Miss Voysey was there behind her desk; and she didn't have her head down. She was staring right out, vacantly, as if the doorframe was a window on another world.

"Tennis is clearly not your thing," offered Classen.

"Come in," she said, smiling wanly, no longer, it seemed, determined to project herself as the very model of hyper-efficient administration. "Please. Sit," she added, indicating a chair by her desk.

"You look all-in," said Classen

"Yes," she admitted. "I am. And no. Tennis is not my thing."

"Nor mine," he said.

He smiled; so did she. They basked, for the smallest imaginable subdivision of a second, in a complicity.

And then she: "How may I help?"

"I merely wanted to tell someone I was leaving. To sign myself out, as it were. I know Johnny is busy with the tennis. Can you convey my apologies for slinking off? And thank him for his hospitality."

"You may count on it, Mr Classen."

"Good."

"Good."

He stood.

He did not get far. "Oh!" she said, another thought striking her. "I almost forgot." She rummaged now in a drawer and produced a matchbox, which she placed on the desk top. Classen seated himself again.

"Go on," she said.

He picked up the matchbox. Its sleeve featured a rather odd design; and it was far heavier than your average box of matches. It rattled heavily too.

He pushed it open.

Inside, a pair of cuff-links. Black enamel with a gold monogram.

"Oh," he said, taken aback. "Where do you find them?"

"Johnny had them," she stated. "I think Jamie had given them to him. I believe he wanted them for a practical joke. I assume he planned to use them as a clue in a murder mystery game. Or some such."

This begged a question of course: Had Jamie taken them from his room? It seemed an unusual length to go to for a game. But Classen hadn't any appetite for further intrigue. He slid shut the box's drawer, the cuff-links still inside.

"But of course I must entrust them to you," he said, putting the box on the desk in front of her. "Give them to Kit with my apologies, the next time you see him."

But she pushed it back across the desk toward him.

"No," she said. "Absolutely not. You must take them."

Chapter twenty-seven

You could see it from the tennis court. The marquee: one minute it was not there; the next, the pavilion peaks and troughs of its canopy roofline had topped the enclosing greenery. It was there, manifest, miraculous in its whiteness.

A few spectators, tiring of the tennis, drifted in that general direction, curious, selflessly prepared to bear witness to the arrival of this latest wonder.

The police constable eventually tended that way too, aware, perhaps, of a vaguely expressed notion that it was his duty to deter the general public from straying too far into Elmcote's deeper domain.

He need not have worried. None of those who'd made it to The Theatre Lawn's entrance had ventured in. They seemed to sense the magnitude of the trespass this might involve – and declined the challenge. Instead they stood in a little knot under the maple trees, looking in.

The police constable, however, took it upon himself to investigate further. There might be valuables, for instance, within the marquee. Things left behind by the contractors, say. Things it might be his duty to guard. Or food and drink – for this surely was the venue for a later party.

He crossed the lawn and entered.

And was mildly surprised to find it utterly empty. Not even a groundsheet. Surprised, too, to feel how warm and stuffy the air had already become. It was an oven, this place. It would soon be stifling. He had assumed – hoped – that there might be cool refuge to be had beneath this canvas.

Strangest of all was the strong smell of tobacco smoke. Barely minutes or seconds before, someone had clearly stood here and had enjoyed a sly cigarette.

Chapter twenty-eight

The Pool Garden. Classen had heard this often now; but as yet these were just words. He'd not yet had the pleasure of its acquaintance. But it didn't take him long to find it.

Elmcote's main axis – its showcase enfilade of garden rooms – defined the southern edge of "upper" Elmcote: the perfectly flat plateau of land dominated by the house, The Old Garden, the orchard and the productive borders of The Kitchen Garden. The Tennis Court and its surrounds were to be found here too. This is not to imply that the upper area of Elmcote was totally devoid of decorative elements: there was a Rose Walk, for instance, a Pine Garden, a Lily Pond, plus The Theatre Garden, which lay to the north of the enfilade, stretching its whole length.

But the artistic essence of the garden lay to the south. To the north and west, from the enfilade's farthest end at Heaven's Gate, the land fell away dramatically into the Vale of Evesham; but round towards the south, the terrain sloped away far more gently. Here, artfully carved into this unassuming hillside, was the labyrinth of garden rooms that, combined with the rooms of the enfilade, defined Elmcote's genius.

The Pool Garden was the largest room in this labyrinth.

The pool in question had originally been a modest pond in which, in its earliest incarnation, there had been a modest fountain. But over the years the diameter of the pond had steadily increased – and the water level raised by enclosing it within a retaining wall, like the basin of a fountain in the large public square of a great city.

And then, in the mid 1920s, while the retaining wall had been maintained at a height of 18 inches or so, the basin (or a good hemi-circle of it at any rate) had been excavated so that the water in this "deep end" was four feet deep. In other words, you could comfortably swim in it. The pond became, de jure as well as de facto, a swimming pool. Its inner surfaces were tiled a glorious pale blue colour: a pastel take on kingfisher or lapis lazuli, an azure made all the more glorious in time as it became sun-faded and water-smoothed. It dazzled in strong sunshine. It made the pool feel very much like a Lido. And yet, rather surreally, the fountain statuary was retained as its centrepiece – a plump cherub in lead-grey attempting to straddle a frisky dolphin.

The circular pool was surrounded by a circumference of paving stones; and, set back into each of the four corners of the room (defined, as elsewhere at Elmcote, by high yew hedging), were stone-enclosed raised beds planted with exotics. Sumptuous plants, large leaved plants, fleshy plants, plants that hinted at the tropical and the sensuous – banana plants, castor oil plants, canna lilies.

The whole space felt beautifully contrived, like a fantasy vision of a jungle clearing.

A decade previously, during the era of the Bright Young People, some of Johnny's younger guests at his racier High Summer parties had flirted with scandal here late at night. There had been swimming parties; there had been nudity; there had been mixed bathing; and indeed, there had been all-male bathing of a morally-ambiguous nature. And of course the rumour now was that Kit Duncannon had been all too keen to revive these traditions.

Just off The Pool Garden, in an antechamber, was The Tuscan Shelter, a modest little paved enclosure covered by a thatched roof on carved wooden pillars. The shelter was, in effect, a changing area for bathers, though you could also imagine it could be a charming little nook for intimate conversations too.

It felt secretive, as if this was the true heart of Elmcote's elaborate Chinese puzzle. And yet it was like a little chapel too. A shrine even: the shelter, though it was open on three sides, was backed onto a rough stone wall; and this inner wall was decorated with brightly coloured enamelled panels that hinted at the effects of stained glass.

Classen waited here, within the shelter, sitting on one of its high-backed barrel chairs drawn up around a petite rustic table.

He did not have long to wait.

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He heard the soft kiss of moccasins on the steps down; and he sensed a hint of the scent she wore, long before he was truly sure it was her. There was a stillness in the air. Not quite a silence – for the fountain murmured in the background; and, more distantly, as if from another world entirely, there were intermittent cheers and applause from the tennis tournament.

And then her voice. "Are you here?"

"In the shelter," he replied.

And then there she was, framed in the gap in the hedge.

"There you are."

"Here I am."

But she came no farther; instead, she turned and walked away. He followed – far enough to see that she was walking slowly around the perimeter of the pool, as if lost in thought. The sun tried once more, with better success, to break through; and as it did so, she trailed a hand across the surface of the pool then let the water drip, sparkling, from her fingers.

He was in no mood for small talk. "I just want to understand what's happening here," he said.

"Happening?"

"You know what I mean."

"Perhaps."

"Well then."

"What's it to you anyway? It's really none of your business."

"Am I right in thinking that everyone here is playing cat and mouse with a former employee? A man named Paul Wilson? What happens when they find him? Something unpleasant? Is that the sordid little story here? Do they mean to thrash him? Or is it all just a terrifically exciting game?"

"You must talk to Kit."

"Why Kit? Why not Johnny?"

"He is involved with the tennis."

"So?"

"It is complicated."

"Why not Jamie then? Is he not more of a prime mover in all this than Kit?"

"Not Jamie." There was a pleading sort of look in her eyes.

"Why? What's Jamie to you?"

"Jamie believes Wilson wants to kill him. And he now believes you are here to help him do it."

"Is he insane?"

"He feels he has good reason."

"And Kit?"

"Kit believes you have been hired by Johnny to help spirit Wilson away."

"Spirit him away? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. You must ask him."

"And if I do, will he answer me?"

She was about to reply when she started and looked beyond Classen. He span round. There on the little flight of rustic steps was Kit.

"I'll answer you," he said.

In a concession to the afternoon heat, he'd dispensed with his jacket, but there was nothing relaxed or informal about him; he looked alert, business-like, rather angry.

"Miss Moore," he said, coldly.

"Mr Duncannon," said she.

"I do believe you are needed back at the tennis," he added, coming down the last of the steps.

Initially, she stood her ground. But then with a shrug and a shamed little glance at Classen, she walked.

When she'd quite gone, Kit indicated with a sweep of his hand that they might both care to go through to the Tuscan shelter. "Shall we take the weight off our feet?"

So they went in under the shelter and they sat in the barrel chairs.

And now that they were settled, Kit seemed at a loss. He blinked a couple of times. More of a twitch than a blink. He looked down at the mosaic-tiled top of the table; then he smiled distractedly at something he could see in his mind's eye.

"He used to sit in here, drinking cognac, you know."

"Wilson, you mean?"

"Wilson? Yes. Once or twice we actually managed to set the world to rights. Do you know… when I heard you were here, I assumed you would be waiting with him." Then a calculating look returned. "The irony is that I'm the one who's paying you. That's reality. I'm paymaster. Not Johnny. I give the money to Johnny. He, poor deluded man that he is, gives it to you… Don't worry, this won't take long. I can't be seen talking to you. Things are complicated enough as it is… Yes, I pay Johnny, Johnny pays you and so we pour good money after bad."

He paused, thinking. It was as he were reviewing all he had just said, checking it for grammar and inaccuracies. Checking to see if he'd missed anything out.

And then he continued: "I'll tell you what we're going to do now. You'll tell me all you know. And I'll tell you what we do next. You could be away from here, off the premises, within the hour. What do you say?"

"Quite frankly I say that I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Well of course that's your opening gambit. I assume you have him secure. Under lock and key."

"Then you're making a very big mistake, aren't you Kit?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that, clearly, along the way, everyone has managed to get their wires crossed. All I've done is pick up on a couple of veiled references to this Wilson character and asked a couple of questions. Now, of course, I'm more curious than ever. It's hardly my business, of course. And you're right. I will be off the premises in half an hour."

"You're telling me… all that stuff about surveying the house. All that nonsense about Sir Herbert Smith. You're expecting me to believe that it's true?"

"I expect nothing, Kit. But, yes, it's all true. Ask Johnny."

"I have."

"Ask him again. If he's told you and different, he's the one playing childish games."

At this, Kit stood. He had that calculating look again. He put his hands in his packets; he took a couple of paces, first this way and then that. He stepped out from under the thatched roof of the shelter and stood in the brighter light beyond.

And then, resolved, he turned once more to face Classen.

"It goes without saying that I don't believe a word of what you've told me. But I must consult. We must talk further. Not here. Too exposed. You know the little blue-and-silver sitting room? Can you wait there for me?"

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The sitting room smelled musty: the mustiness of old horsehair furniture mouldering on a hot and humid afternoon. Classen crossed to the French windows and pushed them open a fraction. A bee droned in on the heavy air and wobbled there just within the threshold of the room before turning and flying off again – as if it had been tugged on an elastic string.

He sat in one of the lumpy chintz armchairs and picked up a book that had been left there on its arm. It was the book everyone had been reading. The cheap mystery story. Clearly, you couldn't avoid it. It got everywhere.

He sat and waited. He stared at the ceiling. He read. He leaned forward and stared at his feet. He read again.

In the morning, he thought, the room felt more silver than blue. Now it was definitely more blue than silver.

It was half and hour at least before Kit appeared.

He looked rather more relaxed now – but he still had a happy knack, though he was plainly dressed, of looking polished and opulent.

There was no preamble. He merely sat in one of the other armchairs and drew it closer until they were almost knee-to-knee.

"Can I just start by saying that I am privileged to own several gorgeous houses – and furthermore that I have at least some influence, courtesy of my wife, over the running of several more. You may have heard, for instance, about the improvements we are undertaking to our house in Belgrave Square? We have plans to create a sumptuous dining room in the baroque German style. It will be the envy of all of London. I need someone I can trust to advise me. To finesse those plans. And, indeed, to suggest other improvements to the house."

"I am an architect, Mr Duncannon. Not an interior decorator."

Kit's eyes twinkled at this. He pursed his lips, in that transparently bittersweet way he had of registering approval. "I appreciate that, my dear fellow. But there is also my house in Essex to be considered. Perhaps you could look at that… and make some suggestions."

"Perhaps."

"Not challenging enough? If royal palaces are your thing, I have influence over the relevant committee. There are several highly interesting projects in the pipeline. And, one way or another, I envisage you forming a partnership with Norah Kemp. You might be a latter day Lutyens and Jekyll. Think about that! I have already raised the matter briefly with her, and she is more than open to the suggestion. More than open. And of course, I am relatively well provided for. More so, if I may be so bold, than Johnny. As I think I've already indicated, Johnny is currently rather less than self-sufficient. So… What I think I am trying to tell you is that, no matter what sort of a next step you may be considering in your career, I could always, for instance, put you on a retainer. As a sign of good faith."

Classen said nothing. Maybe he sensed he didn't have to.

Kit pursed his lips again, as if savouring unimaginable new frontiers in the sublime and the bittersweet and the ironic. Then he continued: “I still don’t believe a word you’ve been telling me of course. But that, too, is your prerogative. In my world, the only crime is dullness. And you, I can see, are anything but dull.

“I am assuming you have been misled about Wilmot. Or have been told very little about him. You are here to help persuade him to be reasonable. An honest broker, say. And you are to drive him to… where? Not London. Somewhere out of the way. Northward. Yorkshire, say. A little cottage by Robin Hood’s Bay. Where he can be kept quiet for a few weeks. Until all sorts of things are untangled. Resolved. Scotland, perhaps. The Lake District. Miles from nowhere. A mossy hovel overlooking a lake. Provisioned with enough cognac to float a battleship. And of course, you’d have to babysit him. He has a terrible tendency to slip his leash.”

Here Kit paused again. And it was apparent that this time, some sort of a response was required.

When none was forthcoming, Kit prompted: “How does all of that sound?”

And yet Classen, frowning, was clearly confused. “Wilmot? Why do you call him Wilmot? I thought were talking about a man named Wilson?”

“You know nothing? You genuinely know nothing?”

“I keep telling you. I know nothing.”

Noting; or even less than nothing. And of course the sticking point here (rather ironically, perhaps) was yet another instance of mistaken identity. Mistaken, or confused. Just as Classen may or may not have been an architect, Wilson may or may not have been Wilmot… and the terrible the truth is that no-one would ever really get to the bottom of it.

Suffice it to say that, in April 1936, a man calling himself Paul Wilson had arrived at Elmcote, having been proposed as a suitable candidate for preferment by Kit; and soon after, having been hired as a tennis professional, Wilson had confessed to Johnny that Wilson was not his real name at all and that he was, in actual fact, Paul Wilmot. He was, he added, distantly related to Johnny’s mother’s second husband.

In other words, he claimed that he was a member of the Wilmot family whose action against Johnny in the States was soon to be heard by the Supreme Court.

This would have been devastating if was true. And clearly Johnny tended to assume that it was. Why would anyone make that up?

He became thoroughly disorientated. Why was this man here? To spy on him? To dig up dirt on him that might impact on the US court case? Was that possible? Did the world work that way?

In any event, the long and the short of it was that Wilson-Wilmot asked Johnny for money. To tide him over, as it were. Actually, it was quite a lot of money. On more than one occasion. And in fact, Johnny had had to ask Kit to help him out in this respect.

Jamie was aware of some of these goings-on. Enough to feel less-than-charitably toward Wilson. And Jamie wasn't the only enemy he succeeded in making at Elmcote. It was common knowledge that he'd "toyed" with Nancy's affections – and unfortunate development this, all told, given the age difference.

But arguably, these were hardly his worst crimes. No – the thing that put him beyond the pale, that made him irredeemable, beyond salvation, was the fact that he delighted in spreading vile gossip about the new King. King Edward VIII. It's hard now to appreciate the incendiary nature of this… but Wilson was putting it about that the King consorted with prostitutes; and one in particular had become his courtesan. There was more: the King was fundamentally a sodomite, a man who revelled in the company of transvestites and sexually ambiguous creatures of that ilk.

And if pushed, Wilson could give you the specifics as well as the generalities. He could paint pictures in intensely imagined detail. When drunk, which was increasingly often, this became his party piece. He'd acquired a taste for shocking and embarrassing and intimidating an audience, any audience – and indeed he was cheerfully indiscriminate in this regard. Johnny's friends and guests, the estate workers, the staff and clientele of the pubic house in the next village but one: all were fair game.

Wilson, charming man though he may once have been, had become a festering sore.

"Is it true that he assaulted Nancy?" asked Classen.

"Assaulted? Oh, what nonsense. Is that what the backstairs gossip says? No, I do not think he *assaulted* Nancy."

"I have heard tell of rather melodramatic events during last Sunday's thunderstorm."

Kit raised his eyebrows and said he'd rather not go into that. It was all rather beside the point. The real nub of the matter was that Wilson had effectively been

trying to extort even more money from Johnny and when Johnny let slip about this to Jamie, Jamie flew into a terrifying rage. This was just a few days ago. Monday, in fact. Monday evening. Jamie on the rampage. Though it was getting dark, he searched high and low for Wilson and eventually found him. He was in the pool, naked, and someone… well, someone else was in the pool with him. That little detail probably enraged Jamie still further. The long and the short of it was that he jumped into the pool and tried to drown Wilson. Actually tried to drown him. Hands round the throat. Holding his head under the water. The scene had elements of slapstick really – they were both very drunk. But he almost succeeded.

Wilson, however, managed to tear himself free, escape back to the house and seek Johnny's protection. Which, predictably, was granted. To cut a long story short, there was a summit meeting and at this meeting it was agreed that Wilson would be paid a sum of money and that Kit would drive him to London there and then.

All of which came to pass.

Kit had dropped him off in the early hours of Tuesday morning, outside the Connaught.

They'd said their goodbyes. It was over. And yet, perhaps it wasn't… because the thing was that Wilson stopped on the hotel steps and came back to the car.

It was chilling really. Because of course he was quite mad. He told Kit that, actually, he didn't care about the money. It meant nothing to him. Oh, and he was going to return to Elmcote and take his revenge.

"Quite mad," said Kit. "Quite, quite mad."

He paused here, as if reliving the scene for the umpteenth time.

"And now he's back?" asked Classen.

"Well, you tell me," said Kit.

"I've told you. None of this means anything to me."

"Then why do you ask so many questions? Why do you… persist?"

Classen frowned at this: Kit seemingly had him there.

Kit continued: "Yes, of course. We have every reason to believe that he is here, somewhere. My assumption was that he'd make contact with Johnny again and that Johnny would want to find a way of managing the situation. Which was, I presumed, where you'd come it. For my part, I made it my business to be here at Elmcote this weekend because I wanted to make sure that, if Wilson did show up, I might venture to be useful in some way. I believe I may have some hold over him. And it goes

without saying that this must be handled delicately… Which is why I must ask you again to tell me all that you know. Has Johnny found an effective way of restraining him? We really do need to know where he is."

"I've told you – I have no knowledge of any of this."

"You're saying you have not seen him?"

Classen hesitated, pondered, cleared his throat. "I may have seen him. Inadvertently."

"Inadvertently! Where?"

"I think he came into my room last night."

"And?"

"And nothing. You said earlier he'd told you he planned to take his revenge. What do you think he meant by that?"

"That he means to do a mischief to Jamie. Or me. Or Johnny. Or, at a push, Nancy. Or all of us. Maybe even you."

"Me!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, Kit. You've overplayed your hand now, haven't you? I was willing to go with you up to that point. But the thing is, I don't actually believe a word. This is another one of your parlour games, one of your party pieces. Isn't it?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Classen stood.

"I'm so sorry, Kit. Really I am."

He'd made it to the door before Kit could gather himself; then he rallied: "But my offer?"

"I'm sorry, Kit," he repeated.

But Kit followed him out into the corridor. "Do you not see? You are in great danger here." And when this failed to provoke a response he added, in his most commanding tone: "Come back here."

But Classen kept walking.

There was time for only one more parting shot. "You'll live to regret this, Classen," Kit shouted. But it was a hollow gesture: the passageway was empty now.

Chapter twenty-nine

London? Belgrave Square? The Connaught? Well, obviously. The classic English country house whodunit actually begins and ends in London – it's almost a given. It's certainly true of *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain*, book *du jour* in June 1936 at Elmcote. There are good solid reasons for the London requirement, relating largely to tradecraft. It was not always thus, clearly, but over the last two centuries, few English writers of any note have been able to conceive of the possibility of life outside of the Metropolis. London is the mother lode, the reality engine, the ultimate prime mover – and it tends to follow from this proposition that all things, including evil, must originate there. Thus, quite naturally, the back-story to a murder is often sourced in London: as is the solution.

And this solution should, for choice, come complete with glimpses of an urban paraphernalia of the rich and strange; mildly unsettling archetypes from TS Eliot's wasteland theatre of the grotesque: flower girls, costermongers, organ grinders, blousy whores, one-legged beggars, newspaper sellers in cloth caps, gap-toothed port-and-lemon ladies on omnibuses.

For instance, it always pays to take a character, a vulnerable character for choice… and make them, walking alone at fall of evening, buy a box of matches from a blind match seller on a street corner.

There's something unsettling about this. Not because we suspect that blind match sellers are unlucky, in the way that chimney sweeps were once held to be the opposite. Not entirely at any rate. Our sense of unease is almost entirely down to the fact that we've just witnessed an unequal transaction. It is, in the confused logic of metaphysical puzzles, a category error.

But of course London in the 1930s was seemingly riddled with category errors. That's what makes it such a compelling cityscape. It's a million miles from the London of The Baker Street Irregulars or even the London of The Great War. 1930s London is modern London before the Blitz – modern in the sense of mass media, the internal combustion engine and the electric light bulb. London has always been murky; but in the 1930s its murk gains a slightly oily quality: it is, to borrow one description, a London of yellow and black "overprinted in grey and lightened by occasional slivers of bright fish colour" – this last being the ambivalent sort of colour you'd glimpse as a policemen, sighted through the murk, turns in his wet cape to glance in your direction.

The London of the 1930s is, not to put too fine a point upon it, the London of Battersea Power Station: Deco but dirty, throbbing, unsentimental, go-ahead.

So, yes, you can achieve all sorts of resonant effects if you follow your country house characters back to London. For instance, we could allow ourselves to be dazzled by Kit Duncannon's world, defined as it was in 1936 by The Houses of Parliament, Belgravia and Fort Belvedere in Windsor Great Park.

There might be an anecdote here and there to show how well connected he was – and what a nuanced operator he was when it came to maintaining his network of High Society relationships. We might dip into his astonishingly accurate and extensive memory of who'd said what to whom at which dinner party; we might also share in his disasters too. We might eavesdrop, for instance, on one of his favourite anecdotes. A tale, told ostensibly against himself, of his encounter with a former ally in a Bond Street jewellers; a woman twenty years his senior, a woman, once a great beauty, with whom, in Paris in the late Teens, he had been thick as thieves; a woman who, though now down on her luck, had "cut" him completely when he'd bowed to her; and who, when he persisted, had confessed she knew not who he was, before bolting from the shop.

The danger, of course, is that a Jamie Westbury seems to shrivel in the face of such anecdotes. He has nothing comparable to offer. At Elmcote, Jamie and Kit are equals, or near equals; in London they are not. Of course, we can take Kit down a peg or two, by showing his darker or more absurd sides. We could join him for lunch, for instance, at the Savoy Grill, in the company of a young man. A mere teenager, he is wearing a Prince of Wales check suit, bought that morning off-the-peg – and, as such, ever so slightly too large for him across the shoulders. He's chain-smoking his way through the cigarettes Kit's supplying for him and two of the fingers on his right hand are stained yellowy-brown with nicotine.

Or we can force Kit and Jamie into unlikely contact. Say, in a louche basement nightclub just off Coventry Street in the wee small hours of the morning. Jamie will be dishevelled, tired, emotional even… and Kit will tolerate the undercurrent of sarcasm in his bonhomie as he claps an arm across his shoulders and tells him repeatedly what a damned fine fellow he is.

Then he'll whisper something in Kit's ear. We'll not overhear. Obviously not: this is clearly something private between them. But Kit's eyes will narrow and he'll leave soon after.

Dorothy might be an even harder proposition. In 1936 she had a mews apartment somewhere in the Lancaster Gate area off Bayswater, rented bijou, ever-so-slightly shabby and Bohemian: a sitting room and galley kitchen downstairs, a bedroom and a damp-smelling bathroom above, up a narrow and uneven stair. When at home, she lived a quiet life, a modest life; and if she ever entertained visitors she managed to keep quiet about it. She dabbled a bit: the odd oil painting, some sculpting in clay, studies of the human form in more-or-less balletic poses.

But she lived mostly for professional assignments and fortuitous invitations. So we'd have to cheat a little. For instance, we could watch her, once upon a time, opening a tin of condensed soup. She pours the soup into an enamelled saucepan, puts the saucepan on the hob… and then realises she doesn't have the wherewithal to light the gas.

We could have her putting on a raincoat and a headscarf and then we'd send her out at dusk on a foggy evening, pointing her towards Praed Street, where she'd buy matches from a blind match seller.

All nonsense of course: there never was a blind match seller on Praed Street.

Chapter thirty

And as for Classen, he walked. Not as far as London, obviously. But a good long way. He walked round in circles. He walked across the fields to neighbouring Nineveh Court. And beyond.

He walked to clear his head. He'd have been hard pressed to explain why he was feeling so depressed and angry; but be in no doubt – he was both. The exchange with Kit had left him shaken.

And yet his decision to light out into the wilderness did not exactly help. Isn't that often the way when we walk to calm ourselves down? When we determine to exhaust ourselves, to burn off resentment or other forms of festering anger?

We don't always find sweetness and light. Instead, we may begin hearing a voice closer to home telling us we have just cause. More than just cause.

The conversation with Kit was nothing in itself. Or almost nothing. It would also be true to say that a weekend at Elmcote, always likely to be a disorientating experience at the best of times, had fallen awkwardly for Classen, as regards both his private and professional lives.

The former is easily glossed over – and Classen did not much care to meditate on this. The worst of it was not that his marriage had failed and that he was now separated from his wife, but that people were now talking about it openly. His modest social circle had never seemed so straightened.

No. That was not the only factor contributing to emotional fragility. His crisis (if crisis it was) ran far deeper. It was a crisis of identity. On the day that he'd arrived at Elmcote, the Friday afternoon, if you'd asked Classen to define himself, he'd have replied without hesitation.

He'd have described himself as one of the new men. True, if you'd asked him to expand on that, he might have struggled – but the tag was widely used and broadly understood. New men weren't modernists. Not as such; and they were hardly radicals. They were (if we're being scrupulously accurate about this) progressive conservatives. No empty paradox this: progressive conservatism was, indeed, the tacitly-assumed mantra of the age. It was the philosophy of Beaverbrook's Daily Express newspaper, it was a philosophy dissected (not always approvingly) in J B Priestley's account of the "third England," it was the philosophy of a good many members (though not, admittedly, Kit Duncannon) of the National Government; and of course, doubly pertinent where Classen was concerned, it was the philosophy of the 1930s Building Boom.

And indeed, Classen had originally been hired by Sir Herbert to use this philosophy in the building of bridges. Bridges between eras old and new; between landed money and that which was more recently minted. Sir Herbert had made his name (in domestic architecture at any rate) in the age of the Plutocrats; and when the age of Plutocrat grandeur was ended at a stroke by the Budget of 1908, he re-geared his business on a more suburban basis, *a la* Norman Shaw and Edwin Lutyens, building cut-down versions of Waddeston Manor for jumped-up stockbrokers.

But when this era also ended (The War, in this respect, had been terribly inconvenient), there was a decade characterised for the Sir Herberts of this world, by make-do-and-mend. An era of superior forms of improvisation, renovation, refurbishment; the architecture of accretion, of evolution.

This was the decade in which Classen had cut his teeth.

But to what end? Because the truth is that this was not a business with much of a future. The country house era, in all its manifestations, was surely done. And by now, Sir Herbert might have shut up shop completely and might have relocated his business

to Pretoria or New Delhi (and Classen might have shipped out with him) but for the Building Boom.

Here was a new, if slightly tawdry opportunity: and the notion was that you might be able to shoehorn the better sorts of suburban villa (pale imitations, say of Lutyens' Marsh Court) into Building Boom developments.

This, in short, had been Classen's most recent role in life.

And yet he still *believed*. That was his tragedy.

He more-than-believed: he just knew here could be life yet in domestic English architecture. Life: and a living.

Elmcote, so he thought, might be the proving ground for his vision. He'd show what could be done. True, he'd synthesised this fantasy from the flimsiest understanding of what was required here. He had no knowledge of what Johnny might actually want. But still – his innate optimism was surely admirable.

How could he have foreseen that Elmcote was the wrong sort place at the wrong sort of time? For a start it wasn't a house, it was a magnificent garden with an eccentric-looking house attached. And worse still it was a mad house.

He'd arrived a talented architect set on one last tilt at fulfilling his promise. Little by little, he'd been made to look plain absurd. Then he'd been offered a job as an interior designer by one of the most disreputable men in Society. A man who had topped off this absurd offer by issuing a risible sort of threat.

To cap it all, he'd become entangled in the arcane mechanisms of a petty feud.

He'd come to Elmcote in a vain (though barely acknowledged) hope that he could forestall the end of a tradition. Instead, he had been visited by a Vision of the Apocalypse.

It would be too glib to suggest that something in him snapped. Or, indeed, to reach for all sorts of metaphysical analogies for his state of mind as he returned from his sojourn in the wilderness, climbing the hill through light woodland to Heaven's Gate.

He wasn't exactly brandishing a golf club.

But was he in a murderous mood?

Broadly, it has to be said, yes.

Chapter thirty-one

And what of Dorothy? What was she doing in The Old Garden at this point? Was she waiting for someone? And if so, who?

It was hard to tell for sure – she was wearing sunglasses – but she looked ill. Dopey. Punch-drunk. Not at all herself. Perhaps she'd had one of Kit's legendary cocktails.

Not far from the house, in an obscure corner, still within sight of the immemorial cedar of Lebanon, a shower of soft summer rain took her by surprise. So she found shelter under an ornamental maple tree.

From the general direction of the tennis court she could hear the screams of excitable young women among the spectators as they too sought shelter.

There were hoverflies with her there under the branches. Like tiny airborne fish, they darted sideways then seemed fixed in an utter eternity, as if pinned to the very substance of the air. They were fixed in silence too – and beyond, there was something softer than silence, the infinitesimally delicate pattering of rain upon leaves.

For many minutes the world was transformed. And yet she felt tired. The strength was draining from her limbs and, as if she had been drugged, with monkshood perhaps or foxglove, she felt her vision contracting and darkening.

Could she not now cut and run? It was almost as if that option had, in some perverse manner, been expressly denied her.

She had become more aware than ever of shadows; and she almost lost consciousness now, the world closing in, black, around her. But she took one staggering step forward and held fast. The world swam; and she fancied she could feel the presence, in the undergrowth, of all manner of creatures: of ladybirds and millipedes and stag beetles and jewelled snails; toads and frogs and adders too, exotic in vivid green and black and grey, with pinprick hints of more exotic colours, of aquamarines and crimsons and peacock eyes and tiger stripes.

She crouched down, her back to the trunk of the maple tree. She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose.

By and by, the rain eased. Then stopped altogether.

And for a while, she could sense that the world had been washed clean. Water droplets dripped from the pointed ends of leaves and from trembling and nodding petals. There was the merest watery hint of flower fragrance in the air.

It seemed cooler for a while. But not for long.

The sun, showing in its veiled form once again, looked as blank as a clouded moon and seemed to shed an enfeebled rust-coloured light on everything – but somehow its heat became ever more intense. Soon there was vapour arising from the ground all around, adding to the haze; and a renewed drift of fetid southerly air carried a tang of corruption, the rankness of mouldering humus and the overbearing stink of lilies.

She stood.

The world was no longer quite as silent as it had been. There was distant birdsong; and bees had resumed their industry.

And then she realised she was not entirely alone.

Laced now through the odour of lilies and rich earth, she could perceive the faintest hint of cigarette smoke. And yet it was absurd – the very height of absurdity – to believe that someone was spying on her, watching her every move.

She called out: “Is there anybody there?”

No response. Nothing.

She called out again: “I can help you, you know.”

Cigarette smoke. Sophisticated tobacco. Turkish or Egyptian.

II

I BECAME DUMB and opened not my mouth: for it was thy doing… For I am a stranger with thee: and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is passed as a watch in the night. As soon as thou scatterest them, they are even as a sleep: and fade away suddenly like the grass. In the morning it is green and groweth up: but in the evening it is cut down, dried up and withered.

from The Book of Common Prayer

ACCORDING TO A RETURN published by the Registrar General, the birth-rate in England and Wales during the year 1936 is provisionally estimated at 14.8 live births per thousand of the population, and the crude death-rate at 12.1 deaths per thousand of the population. The number of deaths of children under one year, per thousand live births, was 59. The birth-rate for 1936 is 0.1 [per thousand] above that for 1935, and 0.4 above that of 1933, the lowest on record. The crude death-rate is 0.4 above that of 1935 and 0.7 above that of 1930, the lowest on record. The infant mortality is 2 above that of 1935, which was the lowest on record, and is the same as that of 1934, the previous lowest on record. In 122 county boroughs and great towns of England and Wales, including London, the birth rate during 1936 is provisionally estimated at 14.9 live births per thousand of the population, the crude death-rate at 12.3 deaths per

thousand, and the deaths of children under one year at 63 per thousand registered live births. The corresponding figures for the 143 smaller towns with estimated resident populations of from 25,000 to 50,000 at the 1931 census are estimated as follows: birth-rate, 15.3, crude death-rate 11.7 and infant mortality 55. In the Administrative County of London the corresponding figures are estimated at: birth-rate, 13.7, crude death-rate, 12.5, infant mortality, 66. These figures are provisional, and may be subject to readjustment before the publication of the Registrar-General's Statistical Review in July.

from "Birth and death rates for 1936 in England," in Nature Magazine, January 1937

PUTREFACTION FOLLOWS A PREDETERMINED TIMETABLE in nature and after the first 36 hours the neck, the abdomen, the shoulders and the head begin to turn a discoloured green. This is then followed by bloating – an accumulation of gas that is produced by bacteria toiling away within the deceased. This bloating is most visible around the face where the eyes and the tongue protrude as the gas inside pushes them forward.

As the body continues to putrefy, the skin blisters, hair falls out and the fingernails of the deceased begin to sink back into the fingers. These skin blisters are also filled with large amounts of liquid just as in [the sort of] blister you might get from running or walking too far.

The body's skin tone then becomes what is known as "marbled"; an intricate pattern of blood vessels in the face, abdomen, chest and other extremities becomes visible. This is the result of the body's red blood vessels breaking down, which in turn release Haemoglobin.

As the process reaches its conclusion, the body will now be almost black-green and fluids – known as purge fluid – will drain from the corpse. This happens normally from the mouth and nose but can also occur from other orifices. The body's tissues then begin to break open and will release gas and other fluids in the same way as a fruit that has been left too long in the sun.

It is also important to note that the internal organs of the deceased will begin to decay in a particular order; beginning with the intestines, which as well as holding bacteria also hold various levels of acidic fluid which – when unable to circulate – begin to eat through their surrounding tissues. As the intestinal organs decay so too do

the liver, kidneys, lungs and brain. The contents of the stomach may also slow down the rate of decay if there is undigested food in and around that area.

The last organs to give way to decay are the prostate and/or the uterus. Be aware also that hot temperatures will speed up this process, while cooler temperatures will slow it down. Also, a person who has died with a septic wound will suffer the effects of putrefaction faster, as the bacteria from sepsis spreads quickly and does damage on a larger and faster scale.

from The Rate of Decay in a Corpse by Jack Claridge

IT IS ALWAYS VITAL TO ESTABLISH [the cadaver's] identity. This [may be verified] by the coroner, a coroner's officer or a representative of the police. Rarely, it may be necessary to employ forensic dental examination practices or other means to identify an unidentified body. As the cadaver is approached on the dissection table, the prosector should begin to note the external appearance, paying particular attention to the ethnicity, gender, build, state of cleanliness, skin colour and the presence of any distinguishing features such as scars, tattoos or malformations/deformities. The examiner should make note of any cachexia. A careful inspection of the nails and skin is then made and the abdomen palpated to identify ascites or any intraabdominal masses or organomegaly such as an enlarged spleen or liver. This may be more difficult than in [a live patient] but in most cases any such findings are frequently recorded in the notes. In males the testes could be palpated [at this stage] but are usually examined after removal.

from The Post Mortem Technique Handbook by Michael Sheaff and Deborah Hopster

1936 WAS A NOTABLE YEAR for suspicious deaths. On 3 February, on the 5.42 from Aylesbury to Paddington, a loud crack was heard on board just after the train left Risborough; and when the train reached High Wycombe, a man was found slumped in the corner of one of the second-class compartments. He was bleeding, apparently from a gunshot wound.

He was removed from the train at Beaconsfield, carried to the waiting room and medical help was sent for. When the doctor arrived, the man, now identified as 39-year-old Arthur Mead, was in a critical condition: the doctor's cursory examination

showed that he had been shot just below the heart at close range and that the bullet had exited through his back. Just before he died, he made a statement to a police officer now in attendance.

He had been shot, he said, by a man who'd got on the train at Risborough. He did not know the man, had never seen him before and there was seemingly no motivation for the attack. He was able to describe his assailant, thus: "Dark, about 24 or 25, short and thick, grey trilby hat, grey suit, no overcoat.

The coroner's inquest returned a verdict of death by suicide: the murder weapon, which was found following a search of the relevant section of the railway line, was identified as a weapon belonging to Mead himself.

On 14 March, 70-year-old Oswald Walker was found bludgeoned to death in his hardware shop in Kingston-upon-Hull, the murder clearly having taken place just before he'd had the chance to close up the previous evening. Suspicion initially fell on Walker's son: the two were widely reported to have fallen out.

However, when questioned at the inquest, the son denied this to be the case; and no other lines of inquiry were successfully pursued by the police. The inquest verdict was: "murder by person or persons unknown."

On 5 April, 48-year-old Beatrice Sutton was found dead in the bedroom of her flat in north-west London. Although there were pillows covering her head, there were no signs of a struggle and it was initially assumed that she had died from natural causes; but closer examination revealed that she had been strangled.

Two weeks later, police arrested Frederick Field, a labourer recently enlisted in the Royal Air Force but deemed absent-without-leave since the beginning of the month. Field was of interest to the police because he had been living near the victim; and because five years previously he had surrendered himself to the editor of a newspaper, confessing to the unsolved murder of a prostitute found strangled in an alleyway off Shaftesbury Avenue.

He subsequently repeated this attestation of guilt to police officers and was sent for trial at the Old Bailey. Yet his trail collapsed in controversial circumstances when he retracted his confession.

In 1936, as in 1931, he again showed a cheerful willingness to own up: but this time, at his trial, he did not retract. When asked about his motivation, he said he had committed a capital crime because he lacked the courage to commit suicide. He was hanged in June.

On 16 May, 35-year-old Dorothy Vaughan was found on the floor of the bedroom in her bungalow in Canterbury. She had died as the result of head wounds. In the early hours of the morning of the next day, her 38-year-old husband Leonard presented himself at the local police station and he was charged immediately with his wife's murder. At committal proceedings, he seemed dazed and sat bent forward with his head in his hands. Police stated that when he was arrested he had been soaked to the skin and was covered in pond weed. The court was also told that he was hard-of-hearing; and when the Clerk asked if he could hear what was being said, he replied: "I can only hear when you speak loud."

It was also put on record that Vaughan had served in the Buffs during the Great War and had been gassed. At his subsequent trial, he was judged not fit to plead by reason of insanity and was ordered to be detained at His Majesty's Pleasure.

On 19 June, 74-year-old Ruth Clarkson was found battered to death in the parlour of her house in Nelson. Her dog was also dead, found upstairs hanging from a bedpost. Within days, Max Haslam, an achondroplasiac (he was, in the blunt language of the times, a dwarf), was arrested trying to pawn items of Clarkson's jewellery. Subsequent to his arrest he was found to be in possession of her back door key and other items of her jewellery. Also, his hand was a match for a bloody palm print in the house and his boots were covered in bloodstains.

Also in June, the case most in need of a more-than-competent detective: the murder of Stephen Gilbert, a 43-year-old greengrocer found battered to death in the back-room of his shop in the Roath area of Cardiff. It was, for newspapers the length and breadth of Britain, a perfectly gruesome murder mystery.

For a start, the crime scene offered up a wealth of lurid detail. There was evidence that there had been a prolonged struggle both in the front and back shops. Having lost this struggle, Gilbert had been subjected to a "frenzied" beating. The initial theory was that a metal poker found at the scene had been a defensive weapon and that Gilbert had been killed by a man wielding a knuckle-duster. A modified theory was that, yes, he'd suffered a good many injuries from the knuckle duster (though none was ever found) during the struggle; but it wasn't actually the murder weapon. More likely was the notion that the murderer, having dispossessed Gilbert of the poker, had then used it to dispatch him.

Either way, he made for a messy corpse. He'd suffered more than 40 severe injuries to his head and face. He'd died in a pool of blood. So much blood, in fact, that it had dripped through the floorboards.

Then there was scope for colourful speculation as to a motive. It soon became apparent that Gilbert, a bachelor, was an accomplished ladies' man and had prodigious sexual appetites. He had only recently confessed to a friend that he was being threatened by a jealous husband. Could this jealous man perhaps have been married to one woman in particular: the mysterious red-headed lady in whose company Gilbert had been seen on several occasions? There were calls for this woman to come forward. She never did.

But then she was hardly his only female friend: it began to emerge that Gilbert was a regular patron of prostitutes working in the Tiger Bay area of the City – and there was added spice here for a contemporary audience, as it emerged that many of the women he frequented were of Afro-Caribbean origin or were of mixed race.

And if sex wasn't a motivating factor, then there were Gilbert's gambling problems to explore. Though his greengrocer's shop was barely paying its way, he was losing huge amounts of money each week (huge for a man of Gilbert's straightened circumstances at any rate) to bookmakers. He undoubtedly owed a considerable amount of money around town.

Weave gambling debts into a story already containing a knuckle-duster and you may very soon have a gangland killing to write about.

But those who found gangland killings not entirely to their taste had at least one other avenue to explore: Gilbert's family squabbles. He owned money to brothers and other relatives – and these debts was at the heart of a simmering family feud, a feud complicated by the fact that Gilbert had always insisted that his brothers actually owed him money. He claimed they had tricked him out of his inheritance following the death of their mother – and there had been rumours of violent family arguments.

Locals, though, looked for a culprit in an entirely different direction, pointing out that a semi-vagrant labourer who frequented the area had, on more than one occasion, broken into Gilbert's shop, and was known to be a violent drunk.

And if that wasn't enough to keep the newspapers agog with speculation, they were then treated to the sensation of a false confession, by 26-year-old Euan Jones. This was followed, the police having rejected his overtures out of hand, by the bathos of Jones's attempted suicide when he tried to throw himself out of the window (the

window, mind, not the door) of a Great Western express from Cardiff to London. This comic subplot was finally concluded in court when he was convicted, later in the summer, of wasting police time.

Meanwhile, the main investigation got precisely nowhere, though it was one of the most extensive ever undertaken on Welsh soil. Seasoned detectives maintained that, thanks to the intricate nature of Gilbert's various entanglements, it was the most complicated case they'd ever worked on. The team interviewed more than 3000 people who either knew Gilbert or had some sort of relationship with him.

The case remains unsolved.

MEANWHILE, 1936 WAS ALSO NOTABLE for the execution of Buck Ruxton, also known as Buktyar Rustomji Ratanji Hakim. An Indian-born doctor who was a practising Zoroastrian, Ruxton was an upstanding member of the community in Lancaster and was renowned for waiving his fees in cases where patients faced financial hardship.

And yet he murdered his wife and the maid, dismembered their bodies and wrapped the pieces up in sheets of newspaper and disposed of them in and around a stream near Moffat in Dumfriesshire. He was in arrested in October 1935 and at the conclusion of an 11-day trial was found guilty as charged and sentenced to death. Such was his popularity that a petition pleading for clemency almost immediately appeared – and many thousands signed. A formal appeal was also lodged with the courts. This appeal was finally dismissed in late April and Ruxton was hanged at Strangeways prison on 12 May 1936.

III

Monday 1 June, 1936

HN calls first thing. His son was arrested over the weekend along with three others with whom he shares lodgings opposite the Ashmolean. They had been hanging out of a window shooting at passers-by with an air pistol and when a policeman was called they shot at him too. He retreated and summoned assistance: and the upshot was that at 1am, two armoured cars arrived in the vanguard of the entire Oxford police force and Beaumont Street was sealed off. By now, the boys had gone to bed and were rudely awoken when the police "effected entry" and dragged them, in their pyjamas, from their slumbers. They are to appear in court this week.

Would it be possible, HN wonders, to ensure the story does not appear in the newspapers? By which he means the Daily Express. Or if a story does appear, that it manages to forego naming his son. After all, he took no active part in the incident and is guilty only by implication.

I make him very uncomfortable by asking if his son is some sort of a sissy. Why on earth would he decline to take part in what seems to me to be no more than spirited student high-jinks? And even so, should he not now stand shoulder to shoulder with his fellows? Has he turned informant?

No, no, of course not, insists HN. It is almost painful to watch him squirm and it reminds me that I am not cut out for this sort of thing.

But we proceed along the path we both know we must take and I ask him how Winston is these days.

The House has been particularly bad tempered recently. Veterans will tell you that it almost always happens as we head into June. They call it Midsummer Madness – and the weather never helps. Offices to the south of the Palace become stuffy the moment the thermometer claws its way above 60 – and it has already achieved a good deal more than that. But of course there are other factors contributing to make the Madness worse this year. No-one can quite get the tang of the Rhineland business out of their mouths and now we have the imminent collapse of Sanctions against Italy. We've been drinking a strange cocktail of fear and excitement for many weeks and in recent days it has been shot through with melancholy at the fallout from the Budget Leak and the emotional resignation of Mr Thomas.

Against this backdrop the "naughty boys" are quivering with anticipation. It's an odd little faction clustered around Winston: I suppose his principle lieutenants are Sir Henry Page-Croft and that overly fastidious old nanny-goat, Winterton. They meet now and then at Winterton's Shillinglee seat, earning them the nickname, among the inner circle of Baldwinites, of The House Party.

The naughty boys sense blood and of course in some senses they are right – but they appear oblivious to the reality that they will be beaten to the punch when it comes to the mounting of a coup. Baldwin doesn't look as if he should be a formidable operator… though a moment's reflection will tell you that he must be. After all, he's only been leader of the party for 13 years and in Government for much of that time. But those who underestimate him apparently find it easy to believe that he has no real taste for (or understanding of) power. They like to think he has been sleep-walking through life or that he feels his whole career has been a terrible imposition, something that has been thrust upon him – and that he'd give it all up in a heartbeat if only a way could be found.

I suppose in some respects you can understand how people are taken in. For instance, he's a terrible flirt. Those ridiculously long eyelashes that he flutters at everybody. Those demure little glancing looks he gives you.

The thing is, I'm not entirely sure Churchill really does underestimate him.

True, Winston has always talked of him with contempt. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard him tell his Harrow squib. (It's the week after the last General Election and Baldwin is travelling up to London on a train when a fellow

passenger joins him in his first class railway carriage compartment and sits down opposite. A flash of mutual recognition passes between them. “Weren’t we at Harrow together?” says the newcomer. “Why yes,” replies Baldwin, memory now stirring, “I do believe we were.” Comes the reply: “I thought I recognised you… so, what are you doing these days?”) But the truth also is that Winston is absolutely intimidated by him. At some level, he knows Baldwin operates at a level of sophistication well beyond his ken. So, although it plays well to a relatively wide audience, the contemptuous posturing reflects badly on Winston. It’s yet more evidence that his judgement is fundamentally flawed.

And yet he is surely right in assuming that we are soon to arrive at a pretty pass. It was a terrible mistake for Baldwin’s innermost circle to get *The Spectator* to write that piece last month mocking those who say that he is becoming deaf. This has only served to make everyone doubly aware of the fact that, yes, as it happens, he is becoming deaf. In turn, all his little acts of subterfuge are made all the more transparent.

These are exasperating enough for his inner circle. Because of course you can’t win. He’s impatient when he asks you to repeat yourself, as if it’s your fault for not speaking clearly. And then when you repeat whatever it was you were saying he interrupts when he’s got the gist and goes through that whole “yes, yes, yes, there’s no need to shout, I’m not deaf you know” palaver.

The *Spectator* piece has not only drawn everyone’s attention to deafness as an issue per se; but more subtly it lends credence to the feeling that Baldwin acknowledges this as a potentially catastrophic weakness. Which in turn will further embolden his political enemies. I foresaw the dangers. I said so at the time. But of course no-one listened.

Almost coincidently, it has been emerging that he has told Neville there is no way he will stand aside before 1938. The naughty boys assume this means that, though Baldwin is weak, Chamberlain is weaker still.

Destiny, they assume, is theirs and opportunities will soon present themselves.

They could not be more wrong. They are in for a rude awakening.

HN isn’t directly implicated in any of this. And yet he is close to Winston, who often sounds him out on the minutiae of foreign affairs.

In short, it is always worth asking HN how Winston is these days.

Oh, he replies, tolerably well by all accounts. Tolerably well.

And then he shares with me the notion that Winston has a new source in aircraft production. (I assume he means over and above Sir Desmond Morton, whose indiscretions are already known to us.) This new source may well be furnishing him with figures that might, seen in a certain light, be even more inflammatory than the ones he has already been bandying about.

More than that, HN is not prepared to say.

I tell him I will see what I can do about the Oxford business.

Tuesday 2 June, 1936

I'd intended to walk back through St James's Park and Green Park – a thing I do when in a reflective mood. But I found myself walking instead up Whitehall and eventually found myself on the Embankment at the end of Northumberland Avenue. A few years back there used to be a soup kitchen here under the railway arches, where the classier end of the rough trade used to congregate on chilly evenings.

I felt a pang of nostalgia as a whole host of memories came flooding back.

And then the nostalgia was replaced by something more mischievous. There had been a shower of rain earlier and the pavements were still damp and the air suddenly felt warm and humid and somehow fecund. The light was unusual too – a sort of magical gloaming that transformed the whole scene.

I was filled with a joyous energy. And I knew instantly that I was about to be sucked into one of those days of non-Cartesian geography. I was about to lose myself in time out of time.

I hailed a taxi. In Clerkenwell, not far from Charterhouse Square, there is a working men's hostel, in the environs of which, on a day like today, a gentleman may find much to his liking. The hostel backs onto a courtyard that gives out onto the street down a tight little alleyway between the buildings.

Men not able to find employment on any given day tend to lounge here, smoking and talking and seeking distraction. If you happen to stray in there and have the presence of mind to ask for directions before you withdraw, the chances are that someone will catch your eye and offer to help.

And so it was on this occasion. A young man barely in his twenties caught my eye and I smiled at him and he followed me. He was fair, with eyebrows darker than his

hair and there was nothing of him but he carried himself well – and in fact he moved with a certain elegance.

We walked for a while and I asked him if he was hungry and he said not – he had eaten earlier. I asked him if his shoes were serviceable but he pointed out quite rightly that my feet appeared to be bigger than his. But he conceded that his jacket was fraying at the cuffs and speculated that, at a pinch, mine might fit him.

So it was settled.

I took him to the "gentlemen only" bed-and-board hotel on Farringdon Road where a room may be had for three shillings.

The room smelled rank. There is no other word for it.

It took the edge of our excitement – and on the way up the stairs he'd made it clear than he was looking forward to this every bit as eagerly as I was. But I suggested we smoke a couple of cigarettes to cover up the smell and I produced my flask, which, quite by luck, contained one of my magic cocktail mixes.

So we sat on the bed, smoking and drinking.

And then, in good time, we were kissing and undressing each other. He was a very good kisser, his tongue probing against mine with sensuous little darting movements. Men from the hostel can be inexperienced or reluctant or nervous. Or, even worse, they can be too experienced and cynical and aggressive. This one was just right.

I eased him out of his clothing. His underwear was pitifully thin and worn.

And then I asked him if he minded if I inspected him for crabs.

Where such an encounter is concerned, pubic lice can be a terribly inconvenient keepsake.

He said no of course he didn't mind and in fact put his hands behind his head and stretched out, raising his knees.

I took my time examining him and he was soon moaning.

And, yes, at that point, I tumbled into time-out-of-time.

We were perfectly matched.

He was every bit in need of relief as I was; and neither of us could get enough.

But eventually we were spent. Both of us.

And we were lying there on our sides, spooned, my front to his back.

He gave a little laugh and I asked him what he was laughing at.

And he said we cannot sleep here now.

I asked him why not, adding that I would absolutely love to sleep with him that night.

And he said, no, look at the sheet. The damp patch. We cannot lie in that damp patch.

I raised myself, and, kissing his shoulder all the while, looked over.

And it was true, there was a huge damp patch on the thin cotton sheet.

A map of Ireland, I said.

A what?

That's what some people call it, I said. Because of course it almost always does, when you look at it in a certain way, look like a map of Ireland.

Yes, he said. Very like a whale.

And I laughed and agreed with him and said: Very like a whale.

And he turned to me with eyes full of wonder and said. You have heard that before? You have been with him too?

Who?

A man I used to go with last year. Whenever I said I saw something else in the pattern of the wallpaper or in the shape of a cloud, he'd say, Very like a whale.

Yes, I said. That's probably it. I must have been with him too. It is, after all, a small world.

Wednesday 3 June, 1936

Lunch with Lord G. He tells me all about his Mad Boy and how terribly in love he is, though the whole situation is hopeless. Back in the Spring, having just been sacked from the army for habitual drunkenness, a mere matter of weeks after accepting his commission, the Mad Boy pitched up at Heber Hall and he has never really left. He has moved into the basement and has made it his own, after a primitive, troglodyte fashion. It didn't take G long to begin sharing his bed.

Love, at least on G's part, has blossomed. This despite the fact that the Mad Boy is impossible to live with. During his over-exuberant phases his energy is matched only by his clumsiness. And if, say, quite by accident, he knocks over a table at afternoon tea, he must proceed to knock over all the other furniture in the room and have the paintings off the walls while he is at it. He leaves a wanton trail of mayhem in his wake and is seemingly addicted to random acts of destruction and great cruelty. He

loves riding, which, you might think, gets him out of the house, but he insists on attempting to ride his favourite horse into the hall and even into the dining room.

That's the sort of thing that happens when his mood is up. The problem is that it does not stay up for long. He has already attempted suicide twice under G's roof.

All of G's closest friends say he must have done with this Mad Boy but of course G will have none of it. He is now talking of taking him to Venice where he has secured a Palazzo for the summer.

He asked me what I thought of this plan, hoping, of course, that I would disapprove, which would allow him every opportunity for scandalising me further. Instead, I told him that I had met my own Mad Boy.

He was quite taken aback.

In fact, he affected to misunderstand me and acted for all the world as if I was attempting to convey to him some news about my son, who is not yet nine months old.

In turn, I reminded him of the time the whole world was agog when he placed a spoof announcement in the Times advertising his engagement to Violet Trefusis. I don't know why I did this. It was a complete *non sequitur*. Or, if not quite that, an ill-favoured analogy.

Our conversation never quite managed to re-acquire its equipoise after that… and he left soon after. The whole business left me with a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction. Talk of Paul made me miss him terribly. We didn't part on the best of terms on Sunday. I have this terrible urge to get in the car and drive to him. A foolish thought.

Thursday 4 June, 1936

After the opera (Bohème: Bellezza conducting, with Elisabeth Rethberg exquisite as Mimi) we took the Ribbentrops on with us to supper at the Durhams. I had been in a glum mood. Although I had been thinking about him all night (or perhaps precisely *because* I hade been thinking about him all night) I was short with Paul when he telephoned in the early afternoon. I had no excuse. I wasn't exactly busy. He'd called at one of our appointed times. And after all, I had promised to see him this week. Or if not through the week, then on Saturday, absolutely. But there was a needy note in his voice that I did not care for and I started to feel that perhaps I should end it. It's all getting out of hand, isn't it?

At Covent Garden, Grace looked so splendid in her white dress and I was terribly proud of her. She really is beginning to flourish again. But at supper I hadn't much to say for myself and more than one person commented on this.

So when someone (it might even have been Ribbentrop himself) suggested we go on to a night club I seized on this with unseemly enthusiasm.

We all piled into two taxis and off we went.

There were, it almost goes without saying, elements of the ridiculous about the whole expedition. The Ribbentrops are not exactly night-club people and no-one quite knows what to make of his current charm offensive in London. He is Germany's pre-eminent figure in foreign affairs – and it is quite unthinkable, as some misguided sources are suggesting, that, when the von Hoesch mess has finally been cleared up, he will become German ambassador to London. It would be like our Prime Minister inviting the Foreign Secretary to become our ambassador in Paris.

We shall see. He's relatively well-connected and well-known in town but of course everyone's in a panic and the race is on make sense of him.

I suppose he aspires to be distinguished in the high old Prussian manner but he comes across as the captain of someone else's yacht: there's an openness about him (or a determination to seem open) yet for all that he seems rather stiff and square. He shakes hands in an over-hearty manner. Never a good sign. As for Frau von Rib, she is… well, words fail me.

I tried my best to woo her of course. At one point, in trying to get a feel for the ways in which their domestic lives dovetail with their social lives I asked her if she was enjoying London's giddy whirl and said I assumed they were receiving all sorts of interesting invitations.

And do you know what? I do believe she suspected I was making her an indecent proposal. She was horrified. But not as horrified as I was when I realised.

It's the funniest thing that has happened to me in weeks.

I still get fits of the giggles just thinking about it.

Friday 5 June, 1936

Dinner at Emerald's. Grace an enthusiastic participant. How beautiful and radiant she looks once more – and there is every indication generally that she is more ready to accept invitations these days. I am not entirely sure what I think about this. Since the

birth of our son, she has frequently been indisposed and has often chosen to spend weekends with her mother and sisters (where of course William is doted upon) rather than hobnobbing at one tiresome country house party after another.

At dinner I am seated beside Laura Corrigan. (Our little misunderstanding is, thankfully, behind us now.) At one point she tells me an amusing anecdote arising from a dinner party attended by HRH last week. Wallis, absolutely dripping with diamonds, was there, accompanied by her husband – an awkwardness that happens rarely these days. This of course meant that the poor man (HRH) would be leaving alone… and he clearly couldn't face this so the party dragged on with no-one able to leave. By now the ladies were divided into two coteries, one in the drawing room and the other, a more select grouping, including Wallis, in the morning room.

Eventually HRH rose and everyone thought he had decided at last to take his leave. But no, he went through to the morning room and stayed there chatting until Wallis's companions, realising he wanted to be alone with her, excused themselves one by one and left the room. Thankfully, however, he wasn't in there *a deux* with her for long and was clearly saying his goodnights.

But when he emerged he said he wanted a bottle of Vichy water and one was eventually found and placed for him on the hall table. However another problem now arose because no-one could find a bottle opener. So Wallis piped up from the morning room: "Ask Ernest for his." Apparently he carries one at all times on his key chain.

HRH went back into the dining room and Ernest furnished him with the opener. So HRH had to sit down with him again.

The perfect end to this story would have seen the water, too effervescent in a bottle that had been vigorously shaken, spurting up like a little fountain when he opened it. Does Vichy water ever do that, like champagne?

For that matter, where is Vichy? Everyone demands Vichy water these days. It is in France presumably, but I know not where. Does anyone know?

Perhaps I will seek it out on my next visit across The Channel.

Saturday 6 June, 1936

After a leisurely lunch *chez nous* we motored down to Romney to join PS's house-party as Johnny-come-latelys. In my old age, I am becoming increasingly determined to find ways of paring these events back to the essentials. Even the basic Saturday-

morning-to-Sunday-evening is almost too much for me to bear these days… but recently there have been attempts to resurrect the Friday-evening-to-Monday-morning affairs of the *ancien regime*. It's a wonder more murders aren't committed during such endless weekends. There comes a point when you can't bear to look your fellow guests in the eye, you don't care if you never see you hosts ever again and you basically have the screaming abdabs. Social crucifixion.

We fully expect to have contrived an emergency by lunchtime tomorrow, a matter of the utmost importance requiring our attention back in London.

Meantime, though, we can amuse ourselves by being snobbish – and Grace is in absolute agreement with me as regards the merits of this ghastly house. She says it is like a Spanish brothel. I do not know how she knows this… but there you have it. The drawing room, for instance, is a symphony in white, off-white, distressed white, cream, whitewash, ivory and alabaster. There's an army of white-uniformed servants who seem impressive enough but are actually second-rate, insisting, for instance, on waiting on one at tea.

When we arrive, the first thing we see is Duff Cooper sitting at a table in the Alhambra hallway, labouring absent-mindedly at a jigsaw puzzle. The hangdog expression on his face as he looks up at us, almost pleading, is a picture.

Happily, Norah is here and we spend the afternoon with her, at first sitting in a little Moorish courtyard affair which looks attractive but which proves increasingly uncomfortable. In the end we decide to walk under the shade of a grove of exotic-seeming trees, with Norah holding forth on the merits of various plants and their scents. What would we do without her?

Sunday 7 June, 1936

When I first joined the Whips' Office, people became wary of me overnight. By people, I mean colleagues on both sides of the House. I suppose they had always acknowledged me a Power in Society but deemed me utterly insignificant as a politician. My appointment, I assume, surprised many. Had they, they must have wondered, underestimated me?

Their verdict, delivered within weeks, was clearly not.

They decided to take me less seriously than ever.

This leads to all sorts of anomalies.

A couple of weeks ago, I had spent the evening in Winston's company. Six or seven of us around a table, gossip mainly, no shop talk, all very amiable. The next day, he shouted over to me as I was passing through the Lobby of the House. "Mr Duncannon… are you avoiding me?" And when I turned and smiled cautiously at him he added, in an even louder voice, aware that he had drawn the attention of an audience: "What have I done to deserve this?"

It was done warmly, satirically. It clear he was having fun (and wanted to be seen having fun) at my expense.

I think I responded with something mildly insulting, in a similar spirit.

But still.

To be treated seriously in the House you must be regarded as a King, a King-in-waiting or a King-maker. To make it even to the foothills of any of these mountainous domains you must put in the hours, which I am clearly failing to do.

Should I change?

Can I?

Indeed, can I face the terrible truth that my ambition stretches to no more than doing just enough to ensure I stagger towards a peerage, in twenty years or so?

Terrible headache this morning, though I'm almost certain I didn't overdo the champagne last night. Perhaps I am sickening for something.

Monday 8 June, 1936

A glorious evening swimming with Paul. The house is quiet but in any event he has rather cleverly engineered access to one of the cottages in the village. I was so looking forward to seeing him but he seems tired. Or disaffected. His performance was rather lack lustre and there were no encores.

The cottage is in a terrible state, very dirty, and it is clear that he has been drinking heavily. I say nothing about this though. Reading between the lines, I fear that our joke at Johnny's expense is wearing rather thin. (Not that it was much of a joke in the first place.) Paul says again that he wants to come to London. He wants me to install him in a flat. Somewhere not too far from the House. Pimlico, say.

I fear it is becoming an *idée fixe*.

Tuesday 9 June, 1936

Clandestine lunch with AK, who has (reputedly) been sailing pretty close to the wind recently. He assures me he has been doing nothing illegal. Or, for that matter, immoral. But yes, he says, it's true. He is winding up all of his operations and transporting them lock, stock and barrel to the United States. I tell him there will be an outcry.

But England is finished, he says. You, as an American, must know that.

Did he hope to infuriate me?

It seems improbable. Because of course he has never noticeably fretted about the impact of what he says on the feelings of others. That is part of his charm.

And after all, I presumed he had contrived this meeting in order to ask a favour. Why would he seek to infuriate me?

In any event, though, I suspect he got more than he bargained for.

I told him that I did not regard myself as an American. I'd never done so. Not in any real sense. It was a matter of no consequence, none whatsoever, for me to disown that accident of birth. In fact, I told him, I had come to detest America. I had come to regard it as the greatest imaginable threat to civilised values.

He listened to all of this patiently, politely.

And then when I was finished, he changed the subject completely. He began talking about racehorses, quite forgetting, I suppose, that the world of bloodstock leaves me cold.

I'm ashamed to say that for the remainder of lunch I basically simmered in my own juices. I even forgot to remind him that he has been less than generous in his contributions to the Party of late.

Wednesday 10 June, 1936

Last week, I rebuked CJC for spreading silly gossip about the German ambassadorial situation. I was particularly annoyed with him for regurgitating the old nonsense that von Hoesch had been murdered in order to make way for Ribbentrop. Or, even more unpleasantly, at Ribbentrop's suggestion. It is an almost childish notion, of course it is. I told CJC I was disappointed to find that he believed it. Or professed to believe it. "Everyone knows it's true," he kept saying.

It's just this sort of talk that's making it difficult to resolve the situation – and it is surely in all our interests to see a fully-functioning new ambassador in place.

Curiously, the mad theory that Ribbentrop will fill the role himself has been gaining ground. If this unlikely eventuality does come to pass, I for one would welcome it. He has failings (who has not?) and Frau von Rib dresses poorly and declines to paint her face – but for all that, I have never hidden my feelings that he could be a great success.

I told CJC all of this. Not for the first time. Then the strangest thing happened. I developed a nagging sense of doubt.

What if it turned out it were true? Obviously the von Hoesch murder theory was mocked as a ludicrous suggestion when fragments of the story of his death emerged back in April… But there's been nothing definitive said about the matter since.

So, oddly apprehensive about what his answer was likely to be, I sought out Vansittart in the hope that he'd be able to clarify and reassure.

I should have known better. He is a paragon of discretion.

He has a wholly gorgeous way of telling you everything and absolutely nothing.

And in fact he had more questions than answers. For instance, he was fascinated to discover if it was true that the Ribbentrops had formed a close friendship with the Londonderrys.

Absolutely it's true, I told him.

The Ribbentrops had travelled with Lord Londonderry to Mount Stewart, where they were his guests over the Whitsun Holiday. They are such good friends, I added, that the Marquis is now known around town as the Londonderry Herr.

Thursday 11 June, 1936

For days, I have been meaning to jot down a few thoughts on the occasion of Sam Hoare's return to the Admiralty as First Lord. I know a good deal about this curious affair – more than most I dare say. I must set it all out in good order, when I have time, probably tomorrow.

Friday 12 June, 1936

We receive a last-minute summons to dine with Lord B and (having scratched our pre-existing commitments) we are soon in the car on our way down to Leatherhead. B has always been very-much-taken with Grace and it clearly flatters him to have her at his table. He always seats her close at hand and he smiles on her beneficently, contentedly. Dinner is a routine affair: Brendan Bracken, Mike Wardell, Jean Norton and a whole host of others out of the second and third tiers.

Prior to dinner, B takes me down to see the private cinema he's just had installed. It's an odd little dungeon, able to seat no more than two dozen, and it's a strangely disconcerting space, with black carpeting and the walls hung with silver silk.

I suppose the décor has been sold to him as the very epitome of modern glamour.

But we are hardly here to discuss décor.

And yet I soon sense an opportunity to turn the conversation towards a subject I wish to pursue.

I tell him that HRH is now much taken with the cinematographic arts. These days, when he accepts a dinner invitation, he asks if you have your own equipment and if you say you do not, he sends his own round in advance along with a selection of films, including at least one feature, plus some newsreels and cartoon shorts. There's rarely time, after dinner, to watch a feature but at the very least he will insist on watching some news. And he absolutely loves the cartoons.

Lord B nods sagely as I tell him this but I can sense he is slightly bored too.

Perhaps he knows his subject too well. Lord B can tell you what HRH spreads on his toast, his views on whether double-breasted waistcoats can be made fashionable again, how often he has been weeping (HRH is currently prone to all sorts of emotional waterworks) and the sensitivity of his prostate.

The problem is that they have never met. Not properly. And there are those who feel that they should come to some form of understanding as a matter of urgency. The problem is that HRH cannot invite Lord B to dinner, nor could it work the other way around… But Emerald is determined that steps must be taken and she has been attempting to convince Wallis of the wisdom of this. Wallis, presumably having consulted her better half, has now agreed. So it's full-ahead-all-engines for concerted efforts behind the scenes – and I have been instructed by Emerald to take a lead role in preparing the ground. But of course the last thing I am able to do is suggest to Lord B that HRH would like to meet him.

Because of course that wouldn't wash. Broadly, he disapproves of B; and both men know that the feeling is likely to be mutual. Lord B believes that HRH possesses neither character nor judgment. B's instinct, the instinct of an astute political animal, is that too close a relationship might compromise him.

So, it falls to me to wait patiently for an opportunity to speculate aloud about whether, if HRH and Wallis were guests at a discreet dinner party somewhere, Lord B might consent to be a guest too. If he agrees in theory, the next problem would be to find a suitable host and venue. Emerald won't do, clearly. Ditto most members of Emerald's inner circle.

Perhaps, if no other suitable candidate could be found, I might consent to volunteer myself.

Saturday 13 June, 1936

Our thinking was that we'd put off travelling to the Dufferin's party to the very last moment – so Grace decided to go out this morning and all our people are, for one reason or another, on leave of absence. William is at his grandparents'. Therefore I find myself utterly alone in the house for the first time ever.

It is a strange feeling, if curiously satisfying.

Or satisfying in parts. Here and there, the house still smells strongly of fresh paint. This is off-putting, as if those bits of the house are not yet truly ours.

Will the work ever be over?

The overall conception is, in some respects, Gerry Wellesley's, though obviously he has been working to my specifications – my grand vision – and I have created the look of many of the rooms, right down to the smallest detail.

The plan is that we proceed in bursts of intense activity – and we have just been through one such. There is no more work scheduled for this year. Which is in some respects a relief.

One day, our house will be a thing of beauty. But it is not that yet.

It merely smells strongly, in parts, of fresh paint.

Sunday 14 June, 1936

Word reaches me that HN is putting it about that I must share at least some of the blame (blame?) for encouraging an ever-closer friendship between the Ribbentrops and the Londonderrys. This is so ridiculous as to be hardly worth answering. The Marquis, for instance, was already active in the Anglo-German Fellowship and hardly needed me to act as Cupid. But of course there is reverse psychology at work here. While seemingly yet another semi-public rebuke for Londonderry, it is primarily an attack on me.

HN is even suggesting that I have become active on von Ribbentrop's part in return for an invitation to attend the Olympic Games. How utterly ridiculous. I have absolutely no interest in the Games and even if I did receive an invitation I would have no hesitation in declining it. I have better things to do with my time in August. Far better things.

I feel no rancour towards HN. He is a dear sweet man. But he listens too much to Winston and indulges Duff Cooper. He believes people are pro-German merely because they are afraid of war. And yet he does his utmost… to make people afraid of war. During a speech he made earlier this year, we could almost hear the tramp-tramp-tramp of jackboots. The truth is surely that the anti-German faction is motivated surely by atavistic prejudice.

They are surely, in the words of one critic recently, "off their rockers."

Tuesday 18 June, 1936

Levinson will have been my secretary for exactly a year tomorrow. I know this because he nudged me yesterday evening at our weekly diary meeting – and there is no greater testament to his tact and discretion than the manner in which he allowed me to pretend that I had not forgotten

He is, in some respects, a magician.

Thank goodness for the workshop elves at Asprey's and their ability to indulge their better customers by turning around modest commissions in under 24 hours.

This morning I asked them to produce a pair of monogrammed cuff-links to my favoured design: obsidian-bead-effect black enamel with gold-inlaid lettering.

I suppose the gesture would be rather spoiled if I asked Levinson to pop round and pick them up tomorrow morning…

Wednesday 17 June, 1936

A luncheon party here at which the star was HB. He told a rather amusing anecdote that seems perfectly indicative of our life and times.

Last week, Louis and Edwina Mountbatten moved into a thirty-room flat at the top of the new building recently raised on the site of her former home on Park Lane. It is one of the scandals of the age that Edwina, who inherited Brook House from her grandfather, Sir Ernest Cassell, was forced to sell it five years ago in order to meet taxation demands. It was an even greater scandal that the house, scene of so many glittering balls and parties and dinners down the decades, was pulled down to make way for a new block.

But continuity was preserved when the Mountbattens secured the top floor flat, which if memory serves has, rather amusingly, been described as "London's first penthouse." The flat is supposedly served by "an express lift" accessed via a dedicated entrance in Upper Brook Street… but predictably, days into service, this lift has already broken down. And who was trapped in it when it failed?

Why, none other than Queen Mary, of course.

Thursday 18 June, 1936

To the theatre with Joachim and Frau von Rib. Supper after.

Friday 19 June, 1936

I hate this sort of weather. An eerie quality about the light. The world all the wrong colours, all purples and greens. Suffocatingly hot, with intermittent thunderstorms. But the storms, no matter how violent, do little to clear the air. Toxic. Oppressive. Can't think straight. Can't face my correspondence. Can't breathe. Barely have the energy to write this.

Saturday 20 June, 1936

To Norah's. Another day with thunder in the air and the mercury consistently above 90… but there is nowhere I'd rather be in a heat-wave than here. I was feeling low,

listless, emotionally shredded. It's hard to say why, really. But all that lifted the moment I arrived here. Norah quite simply works wonders – and it is all down to her personality, her charm and her imaginative capacity.

This is a supremely sensual place – the scent of roses pervades every nook and cranny and there is a riot of colour everywhere. But that alone would not make it as it is. Being here reacquaints you with a deep thirst for life and this happens because of Norah's spark. It's an intellectual spark, a spiritual charge. Always and ever you find yourself challenging yourself, exploring your very being.

Youth has always concerned her and this house has always been a safe haven, a house whose renown passes by word of mouth among students at the university. Thus it has taken on the characteristics almost of an exclusive college society – and invitations continue, to this day, to be highly cherished.

Going right back to the war years, she has always succeeded in attracting the gilded youth of England. They come to sleep in the meadow, bathe in a Thames backwater overhung by trees and read poetry on the rose lawn by the water's edge. Some lucky few, myself included, keep coming back.

I swim in the slow-moving river, its surface black and mirror-like beneath threatening skies and am amused to find myself quite alone when a heavy shower drives my erstwhile companies from the bank in search of shelter. I swim on, revelling in the elemental freedom of the place; then tread water, watching with fascination the raindrops spattering on the water all around.

In the evening, Russian ballet food is served in the courtyard, Norah plays Chopin and we take it in turns to recite verse. Even a return of the heavy showers does not deter us. Nor the incessant rumbling of thunder from all quarters of a dark sky. We take shelter, then return to the courtyard, as if defying the gods, as if challenging them to do their worst.

Later, in bed, I drop off to sleep in a reverie, recalling the people I have loved and laughed with here. Some, of course, are no longer with us… in particular my heart lurches and I sob when I recall poor Ivo Grenfell.

But I am not inconsolable for long.

Sunday 21 June, 1936

More thunderstorms. The worst yet. How bad tempered and unreasonable this filthy sort of weather can make people. How tedious. How tiresome.

Monday 22 June, 1936

In the afternoon I am invited to a meeting with Dunglass, Chamberlain's new private secretary. He fears that a potentially awkward situation might, in the near future, arise. Might I be persuaded to look into it?

There seems to be an assumption that I have the ear of Lord B… and that I am biddable. Or at least that I do not suffer overly from squeamishness.

In any event, I am more than happy to serve. They surely know that.

The potentially awkward situation involves Neville's former brother-in-law, Horace de Vere Cole, a tiresome man known as "The World's Greatest Practical Joker," who died back in February. Neville now fears that a book about him is imminent or that the newspapers are planning to run biographical features of a salacious nature.

There is, I suspect, very little to fear. Yes, there was a scandal. Horace's wife left him to live with Augustus John, by whom she had an illegitimate child – and the child was given the de Vere Cole surname. Neville's wife, Ann, who is (or was) the unfortunate Horace's sister, was only vaguely implicated in any of the scenes of high farce that peppered the whole affair, but Neville fears that something will emerge that will reflect badly on him just as he preparing to oust Mr Baldwin. For instance, the fact that Horace, despite his eminent connections, died in France in a state of terrible poverty is now causing considerable anxiety.

Might Lord B be preparing to make mischief for Neville? I tell him I will see what I can do. However, what I do not tell him is that, contrary to what you might quite naturally assume, Lord B has been on friendly terms with Augustus John since The War, when the latter was attached to the Canadian forces as a war artist. B would be extremely reluctant to do anything that might embarrass him (not that Augustus John is easily embarrassed), even peripherally.

Dunglass is right to fear B, though. I suspect that he will not be Neville's natural ally in the future.

Tuesday 23 June, 1936

Delighted, absolutely delighted. Pleased, in fact, as Punch. I have received an invitation from Joachim to visit Berlin on a fact-finding mission during the month of August. We (I am to be accompanied by Grace) will be guests of the German government and will be billeted in a magnificent suite of rooms in the Eden Hotel. There will be an endless round of parties and receptions, including a glittering event planned for the Ribbentrop's Dalheim villa. He foresees dinner for 600 and will be inviting representatives of all of the German royal families. We are both considerably excited at the prospect – and Grace is already planning her wardrobe.

It certainly puts the whole dreary business of party politics into perspective.

Earlier today, in the House, the Foreign Affairs debate, eagerly anticipated by those who believed it would be one of those great set-piece occasions, was memorable in the sense that it lasted all day and played throughout to packed benches. But it fizzled out terribly. Sir John Simon delivered a tremendous speech relatively early on – and he held us all in thrall for over an hour. Yet by the time it had fallen to Baldwin to sum up, everyone had pretty much lost interest. As we all trooped out, the sound and fury of a week ago seemed terribly distant and dreamlike.

Sanctions? A meaningless word.

An empty concept. A charmless spell.

And Italy? Why Italy?

Oh yes, Italy.

But what were we thinking? What were we hoping to achieve? Remind us.

All of the bars were full to bursting point afterwards… yet everyone was strangely subdued.

Wednesday 24 June, 1936

I am reminded of George Gage's vivid descriptions of his visit to Berlin last year when he met absolutely everyone and was escorted everywhere in high style. He was a guest at a dazzlingly splendid party held in the garden of the Ministerium, attended by more than 700 guests, at the climax of which a *corps de ballet* appeared out of nowhere and danced in the moonlight before ghosting away, creating a feeling among everyone present that they had just witnessed the most delightful illusion imaginable. And then the far end of the garden, which had been in the deepest darkness, was

floodlit without warning; and a procession of white horses appeared, led by glamorous young men and women in peasant costumes. In turn, they too passed from the scene, leaving everyone mystified yet utterly delighted.

I wonder what they will have in store for us.

I cannot wait.

Thursday 25 June, 1936

A roaringly successful lunch hosted by V, at which the star guests were the Grandis, who can now be rehabilitated with the ending of Sanctions. Madame Grandi tends to be somewhat dull, but Count Dino is easily the most popular of the ambassadors of all the major powers – gay, flirtatious, his mischievous eyes twinkling above his neat little moustache. His dinners at the Italian Embassy are always fabulous and everyone will be looking forward to their resumption

Friday 26 June, 1936

A rusticated dinner with Norah and Johnny. Much to discuss.

Saturday 27 June, 1936

A flying visit to the Raeburns at their country retreat, Nineveh Court. They are a charming couple but I'm not sure either of them really appreciates the beauty of this house and the elegant ways in which it has been assimilated into its landscape – the gardens, which showcase the house perfectly, have a formal dimension but they have a wonderfully relaxed and understated elegance for all that.

Old man Raeburn made pots of money in the City doing whatever one does to make pots of money in the City these days… and I suspect they lived a drearily suburban life for decades before moving here two years ago.

His tastes are not entirely refined and his wife, though she makes every effort, is little better. For instance, they own a more-than-decent Cézanne, which is creditable, but it is poorly hung and badly lit, which is not.

The house itself is unique. The original was, I believe, an unremarkable Georgian take on the Palladian but it was extended and partially remodelled in the 20s and there

are quite charming hints of Art Deco in some of the detailing. This is surprising yet subtle. Quite delightful. Witty, almost.

The overall effect is to suggest a forward-looking Classicism and it's terribly refreshing. The effect contrasts favourably with the overblown Sleeping Beauty Romanticism that disfigures at least one ambitious house-and-garden essay that readily springs to mind.

Despite her limitations, Heather Raeburn is a charming woman, warm and natural. Very human, if that means anything. She is a woman of the world and entertains regularly – but there is absolutely no side to her. I can't imagine her saying anything bad about anyone and if she catches you sharing morally dubious gossip she has a way of admonishing you with her silence, yet it's never done shrewishly. She is fundamentally generous and good. In short, she is exactly the sort of woman who puts me to shame – or would do if I weren't so shameless.

Her husband is quite another kettle of fish. He'd like to come across all suave and to-the-manor-born but the thin veneer is easily scratched and underneath there's a pinched Presbyterian Scot absolutely burning up inside, the flames fed in perpetuity by suppressed moral censure.

He's clearly uneasy about me being here.

Sunday 28 June, 1936

In the morning, after breakfast, I explained about my car being out of action and might it be possible to borrow their machine and driver? I was, I said, fretting about unfinished business in town and it was no good – it would be impossible for me to settle to anything today and I'd make a terrible guest.

The look on Raeburn's face was priceless.

On the one hand I knew he'd be glad to see the back of me. On the other, he was clearly succumbing to a suspicion that I was taking advantage of him. It is clearly in his nature to be troubled by such feelings. I suspect he has spent his life guarding against being taken-advantage-of.

So there was a querulous note in his voice when he asked if I expected to be driven all the way to London.

Heavens, no, I replied. Thank you for offering. But I wouldn't hear of such a thing.

The nearest serviceable railway station would do, I told him.

Back here for 4.30.

Packed.

Grace is still out of town and has decided not to return until tomorrow afternoon.

I will have to leave her a carefully-worded note.

Monday 29 June, 1936

Decided in the end on a crossing to Le Havre. For some reason it took for ever. Though the day appeared set fair, with puff-ball clouds in a blue sky, there was a swirling wind on deck, very unappealing… but the public state rooms were intolerably stuffy so I spend much of the crossing at the rail. For hours, it seemed, the coast of France was a faint grey pencil line on the horizon and even as we drew nearer it felt at one stage as if time and tide were against us and we were actually going backwards.

Having disembarked, I took the Paris train, getting out at Rouen. There I hired a car and drove to Evreux via Pont de l'Arche and Louviers and took a room here at Le Grand Cerf overlooking the courtyard. The proprietor here is known to our embassy in Paris and also he enjoys a mutually beneficial relationship with the *Sûreté*. This is a perfect bolt-hole.

And there is time, when I am ensconced in my suite, to reflect on recent events. I don't know why, but I began by thinking of Norah. Sadly, I fear that the birthday party she was planning for her daughter's 40th will have to be cancelled.

I feel for her. Norah I mean. I'll have to say, though, I have been finding her more than a little tiresome. Is she not terribly superficial?

Tuesday 30 June, 1936

My head is spinning.

Twice I had tried to get through to Colin, first at Stornoway House, then at HQ. Third time, I am in luck… but I'm short with him because I'm now chafing at the bit.

Not unreasonably, he rebukes me gently… and I apologise.

He listens patiently to my request then he asks if he can call me back when he's made some inquiries. I have to tell him that that might not suit, so he tells me to call him back in an hour.

An hour?

It was sheer folly coming here. I feel so powerless. I dangle. I am subject to the whims of a man who owes me no favours. None. Not a one.

But at Noon I call again and there he is at the other end, the mellowness of his voice so distinctive and reassuring despite the terrible quality of the long distance line.

Well, he says. Well, well.

How very prescient, he adds, with a hint of a chuckle.

It seems that the Daily Express is planning to run a brief news story about a suspicious death, now being treated as murder, at a country house in Gloucestershire. The police have already arrested a man who'd been staying at the house. It seems an open and shut case.

At first I don't really take it all in.

Sorry… Who has died? I ask him.

There's a pause, as if he's scanning his notes.

It's all still a bit confused, he says. And then he makes some sort of a withering remark about provincial police forces.

But I'm in a mild state of shock.

And so I have to get Colin to run through all the details again. Such as he has them.

How did the dead man die?

Drowned.

And then I ask: Is the paper planning to run a big story?

He laughs at this. Oh no, he says, it will be no more than a paragraph on page 12. News in brief.

Then there's an ominous pause. Should he, Colin asks, be aware of any names likely to be implicated in the future? Are there any steps I would like him to take? Should the Chief be aware that this could turn into a sensitive story? One with wider implications?

No, I tell him. No action at this stage. No flags to be flown.

But yes, my head starts spinning. It is spinning still.

I came here certain that Paul was about to commit some sort of an outrage and that, in the aftermath, having been arrested, he would throw my name into the pot. In that sort of eventuality, it would do no harm for me to be out of the way for a couple of days.

But now?

A death.

Can it be true? A death?

In time I will surely think of Paul as a man I came to know too well.

The question now, however, is whether it is inevitable that my name will be dragged into this. And if so, what the implications are within a broader context.

At the very least, Johnny will reveal that I had been a guest. And all the guests will have to be questioned. Won't they?

As for the rest… it is merely hearsay.

I have nothing to trouble my conscience. He was an orphan. A jobbing actor. A travelling player.

So perhaps it is for the best if I wait. Hang fire.

A week, say. I will not be missed. I will return in time for the Marlborough party.

Yes.

Quite.

I take a light lunch and sit for a while in the lounge, which is no more really than an afterthought to the reception lobby. The hotel is strangely quiet.

A liveried boy hovers by the hotel's main doors but there's little for him to do and he comes now and then to the doorway of the lounge in the forlorn hope that he might be needed.

On one such occasion, I beckon him over.

He comes eagerly.

I ask him if he knows where Vichy is.

He frowns, tilts his head… but then nods enthusiastically. He turns on his heels and disappears before I have time to say another word.

He returns two minutes later with a small bottle of Vichy water, which he presents to me grandly, showcasing the label as if it were a fine wine.

No, I say, shaking my head vigorously. Vichy. The place. Does he know where it is?

Again, that frown.

Is he an imbecile? My French is impeccable – after all, I was here during The War and lived in Paris for two years after. There can be no misunderstanding me.

In the end I give him a coin and wave him away.

So I walk.

I head down towards the cathedral.

I will be patient. I will wait.

Not far from the cathedral I find myself in a hidden little courtyard with a fountain. Its main jet falls steadily but a haze of finer droplets, borne on a fitful breeze, plays erratically across the surface of the pool.

I am too rich and I dine with kings but I am bored and even sometimes lonely.

IV

Thursday, 3 September, 1936. He pushed the plate of biscuits across his desk towards his visitor. Please, he said. Help yourself. The biscuits were a source of quiet satisfaction: the idea of the biscuits every bit as much as much as the reality. This was one of his innovations. He'd even thought of acquiring an electric kettle so that he could offer tea – though there was only one tap nearby, in the WC out on the landing. So this proposition might not prove hygienic.

"You have done very well for yourself I see, Mr Classen."

"Nicholas, please."

"Nicholas."

His guest was being facetious. Of course he was. Or no, not facetious. He was being mildly provocative. This, surely, would prove to be one of his techniques.

A lorry rattled by along Clerkenwell Road: but up here on the second floor, you felt above all that; and after all, it was hardly the busiest of roads.

"I am making modest progress."

"Hardly modest, Mr Classen."

"This is not exactly the Ritz."

"Grand enough. You have this and the outer office – where I presume a secretary is usually to be found."

"An assistant, yes."

"A female assistant?"

"Yes."

"But she is not here today?"

"She is only part-time."

"But still. We don't all have assistants, Mr Classen. And I understand you have been working for Mr Duncannon and have landed some plum commissions."

"I don't know where you heard all that. But it's true that I have been able to do Mr Duncannon some small service."

"I dare say you won't be in these offices for long."

Classen laughed. "Don't be so sure."

"Oh but I am."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because of your fountain pen."

He had been playing with it. Now he placed it delicately on the blotter in front of him. "My pen?"

"Yes. It's new and very expensive. Some people hang on in expensive offices though their shirt collars are fraying. You, Mr Classen, are in a rather different boat."

Classen laughed again. "Well, I can only hope you are right."

His guest did not echo this laugh. He confined himself to adding: "And they're lovely biscuits."

Also in front of Classen, on his blotter, was the man's business card. This he now picked up. "Your card says that you are an investigation agent."

"Yes. And I appreciate your agreeing to talk. I know you must get all sorts of nuisance requests."

Classen nodded sagely at this – though it was not true. He had been left alone.

"Investigation agent. I'm not entirely sure what that means."

"Yes you are. With respect."

"And may I ask who has retained your services?"

"Yes you may."

"And do you propose to tell me?"

"A newspaper."

"Ah."

"That changes things?"

"Not necessarily. Would I be right in thinking that the newspaper concerned is a direct rival to the Daily Express?"

"You would."

"So you are effectively a newspaper reporter?"

"Absolutely not. I understand that the newspaper proprietors who matter have come to an agreement that you will not be hounded."

"Hounded is not a word I recognise."

"As you say. But be assured that I am independent and objective."

Classen gave an ironic little shrug. "But you will be producing a report."

"I have been asked to summarise my findings."

"And what have you already found?"

"Early days as yet. I have seen various documents."

"Including police reports?"

"I have been given no documents, if that's what you mean. But certain passages from certain reports may have been read to me."

"I see."

"In my humble opinion, yours is the only testimony that matters. Can I assume that you are prepared to talk to me?

"Of course. Why not? I'll have to confess that I am intrigued. You said you had new information. Information that might change everything."

"I'm not sure I said quite that."

"Oh, Mr Smith. You disappoint me."

ꕥ

Where to begin? That's always the most important question. If you establish a beginning in such stories, you may have some small chance of reaching an ending. Go too far back and you will only confuse yourself. You will, in short, acquire too much clutter. Too much baggage. Not far enough and all will appear random, arbitrary, aleatory.

Smith needed to step back way before the Sunday. But how far? A day, a week, a month? 20 years? As far back as The War?

But yes, the Sunday. On the afternoon of Sunday, the 28th of June, Mr Nicholas Classen had been arrested. Yet by the end of the month he had been released without charge.

"Does it worry you that many people assume you got away with murder?"

"I know the truth. The people that matter know the truth."

"Is that another way of saying that you have powerful friends?"

"It is not."

"Not all powerful friends are useful, of course. After all, your employer dismissed you."

"That is a downright lie. As you well know, he is prepared to state as much before a court."

"Very well then, you and he parted company at rather short notice."

"He was – is – prepared to stand by me equivocally."

"And what are we to make of the fact that you have formed such close working relationships with at least two of the people present at Elmcote that weekend? I understand, for instance, that you are soon to begin working in partnership Mrs Norah Kemp."

"Sir Herbert made no secret of the fact that he was planning to restructure his practice. The commission at Elmcote was always reckoned to be the last of its sort. The world moves on, Mr Smith."

"And you with it."

"And me with it."

"Was he, do you think?"

"Was who what?"

"The man who died. Was he murdered?"

"Surely only the murderer would be able to tell you that."

"Up to a point. Yes. You are right."

ꕥ

Yes. Where to begin? That is the question. With motive? Does a motive emerge from the details of the story? Or does a story coalesce only when motive has been established?

"You must have some sort of theory of your own, Mr Classen."

"No. None."

"You surely do not believe that it was an accident?"

"Why not? He could have slipped, bashed his head, fallen unconscious and slipped below the surface of the water. Why not?"

"You know why not."

"There are other ways in which it might have been accidental. Or all but accidental."

"The game-gone-wrong theory?" *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain* theory?"

"I mean that there were scores of people at Elmcote on the Saturday. Hundreds. Perhaps someone, mentally disturbed, just happened to commit a murder."

"Just like that? Unlikely. And you'd have to ignore half a dozen pieces of circumstantial evidence."

"You're going to tell me you don't much care for coincidences?"

"Not much, no."

ꕥ

Now and then, yet another lorry rattled its way along Clerkenwell Road. Other than that, the day was undisturbed. A fly buzzed fitfully in the upper lights of the sash window behind Classen's desk. It never quite manager to escape, though the window was open an inch-and-a-half or more at the top.

Smith, to Classen, introducing the whole question of the cuff-links:

"And then of course there's the notion that, if it was murder, and you are innocent, the whole business was contrived to make it look as if you were the murderer. The clothes, the cuff-links, the photographs and papers you were found with. One way or another, you are at the heart of this matter."

"Surely Wilson is. He'd been at Elmcote several weeks. Or Jamie. He'd been there since the Spring. Or Kit, who'd known Johnny for years. I'd only been there two days."

"I know. It's the hardest question isn't it? How far back you go. What is the first cause, the first effect, the prime mover?"

"Exactly."

"But bear with me. Maybe we don't have to go all that far back into the murkiest waters of history. I'm more than interested in what it is that you can reveal. Did you, for instance, have enemies at Elmcote?"

"I had not the time to make enemies."

"And you had no previous relationships with anyone there."

"No."

"But I thought you knew Norah Kemp?"

"Well, yes. I mean no. I had met her. Many years ago on a project overseen by Sir Herbert. I had a very minor role. And Norah didn't really remember me."

"But what if she did? What if she had harboured a resentment against you? Nursed it all these years."

"That is highly unlikely. She is not that sort of person."

"As in not able to carry a grudge? Or as in lacking the venom to prosecute it."

"Both."

"And then of course there's the theory that someone had a grudge against Sir Herbert. After all, he was the one expected that weekend, not you."

"It's possible I suppose, isn't it? Anything is possible."

"Or they wanted to get at Sir Herbert by attacking you."

"Attacking?"

"You know what I mean. And you say you personally had no previous contact whatsoever with Johnny or Kit or Norah?"

"No. None."

"And we haven't yet mentioned Jamie's girlfriend."

"Who?"

"Dorothy Moore."

"Who said she was Jamie's girlfriend?"

"I can't recall. Are you saying they weren't?"

"Not as far as I am aware. If they were a couple, they managed to hide it rather well. I'd be amazed to discover that Miss Moore has any real feelings for Jamie."

ꕥ

At many points (this being one) during the interview, Mr Classen seemed distracted. As if not really listening. Or not concentrating adequately on construing his answers.

It was somewhat vexing.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"I thought I heard a noise. In the outer office."

"I heard nothing."

"Your secretary isn't here today?"

"My assistant. No. As I said, she only works part time."

"She is American is she not?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Or at least she has recently been to America. There are sunglasses in her stationery tray. They are of a design that you can only come by in America, I believe."

"I bow to your knowledge in such matters."

ꕥ

Smith, to Classen, seeking clarification as to the existence of bad blood generally at Elmcote:

"So, you had no enemies. But were you aware of any enmities among your fellow guests? For instance, there is a story, known to just about everybody at Elmcote, even below stairs, that the previous weekend – previous, I mean, to your visit – there was an ugly scene involving Mr Duncannon, the Kemps and Wilson. I take it you heard this story while you were there?"

"I try not to listen to gossip. And anyway, what would it be to me?"

"Well, it's often the case that when we know a few things, they can help us interpret subsequent events. They can help us a form a framework. Miss Voysey, for instance, has been more than helpful in characterising some of the relationships I've been referring to."

"I take it she was helpful."

"More than helpful."

"That was good of her."

"Did she talk to you about the ugly scene I've just mentioned? The previous weekend. Duncannon, the Kemps, Wilson."

"I can't recall."

"What would you say, for instance… what would you say if I told you I'd asked her if she'd talked to you about this?"

"Heavens above! That sounds like one of those fiendishly complicated riddles. Put it to me again."

"It does not matter."

"In any case, I imagine she said she couldn't recall."

"And what do you say? Did she talk to you about this?"

"No, why should she?"

"Did you talk much to Miss Voysey? Generally?"

"No. Hardly at all."

"I suppose I am asking you if you were aware of any friction between Kit and Norah and Nancy."

"No. None that I noticed."

"How about between Kit and Jamie?"

They were hardly the best of friends. I think that would be fair to say. But no friction to speak of."

"How about Johnny? Did he have any enemies?"

"Absolutely not."

"I get the feeling that he was basically some sort of a recluse. Or an invalid. Or both."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"So, in effect, what you're saying is that no-one felt any strong emotions, either way, for anyone else at Elmcote that weekend?"

"It sounds sort of improbable, doesn't it?"

ꕥ

Absent-mindedly, Classen disassembled and reassembled his fountain pen. He would go on to do this many times over the course of the interview. The pen had a piston filler mechanism, controlled by a differential screw within the barrel. There was no leakage. Not once did he appear to get ink on his fingers.

"Wilson then. Let's come at it from his direction."

"Wilson, yes. You realise I know absolutely nothing about him?"

"Indulge me. You may know than you think you know. You might be able to nudge me in the right direction. Together, if we put our heads together, we might make progress. What do you say?"

"Why not."

"Good. At the very least we should go back as far as to the point when Wilson arrived at Elmcote. Or just before, to discover how he came to take up his position. I wondered at the whole business of him being a tennis professional. It conjures up a certain image, doesn't it? But of course it doesn't mean he's a top tournament player or anything. He's just there to play with guests when there's no-one else around. Or do a bit of coaching. He's there, to put it crudely, to smile at lady guests and to demonstrate, if they care for such demonstrations, how best to hold their rackets. Lots of country houses have tennis professional like Wilson on hand. You don't have to be terribly good at tennis. Which is just as well, because Wilson wasn't terribly good at tennis."

"You're a tennis expert now?"

"Bear with me. That notion might be important. Because Miss Voysey seems terribly vague when you ask her how Wilson came to get the job this year. Usually Johnny contacts the captain of the Varsity tennis club, who recommends one of his members. This year, though it didn't quite happen that way. Miss Voysey says she thinks Wilson must have written to Johnny volunteering his services. Usually she handles the paperwork – takes up references, that sort of thing. This year, nothing. She didn't even take a forwarding address. He was paid in cash. And then, seven weeks later, he is dismissed. Despatched. Ejected. Run off the premises. And no-one quite remembers why."

"Maybe he was a student. It was a summer job. Maybe he was a free spirit and he decided to move on."

"Perhaps. But what I'm saying is, if we could discover where he came from and how he got the job – or indeed *who* got him the job – then we might start to make progress. Don't you think?"

"Possibly."

"But you have nothing to contribute?"

"I've already told you. I don't really feel qualified."

"It genuinely doesn't worry you that, for as long as this business remains shrouded in mystery, people will assume you are guilty."

"Let them assume."

"Meanwhile, I can assure you that there will come a time when your powerful friends forget you."

ꕥ

A flock of starlings settled on the roof of the building opposite. They did not settle for long. The sound their wings made, *en masse*, pulsed and rippled and swirled and seemed to re-echo long after they had gone.

"But of course he was hardly a free spirit, was he? Wilson. Because he turns up again. Supposedly, he has a grievance. He's a bit unbalanced. Unpredictable. So… to cut a long story short, the story is, there's this madman wandering around in the woods with a gun. And this madman's name is Wilson. And life at Elmcote carries on pretty much as normal."

"I'm not sure there is a normal at Elmcote."

"Oh, come on. Don't make it out to be something it's not. Elmcote might have seen some racy parties a decade or so since, but it's dull as ditchwater now, isn't it? A bit of tennis. Johnny reminiscing about The War."

"I'm not sure anyone really believed there was a madman running around with a rifle. People were pretty much making jokes about the whole business."

"But everyone knew a gun had been stolen from Johnny's cabinet?"

"I don't think they did, really. I'm not sure I even knew."

"You're not sure?"

"No. I can't remember. And I'm not sure it was actually true."

"Oh it was. The police recovered it. They didn't ask you about this?"

"They may well have done."

"What a brave chap you are. Firearms are so inconsequential that you can't even remember whether you were about to have one pointed at you."

"At me?"

"Why not? Guns go off."

ꕥ

The nib of Classen's fountain pen was of hallmarked gold, tipped out in rhodium.

"And you maintain you had no contact whatsoever with Wilson?"

"Oh, I didn't exactly say that, did I?"

"I think you did."

"Perhaps you weren't asking the right question. The truth is that I think I saw him twice. They'd put me in a room in the oldest part of the house. On that first morning I was pretty sure there was someone there. He'd pushed open the door and was looking in at me as I slept."

"How did you know if you were asleep?"

"Because, Mr Smith, I woke up. Then, later, when I was talking to Johnny, I was stood at his window and I think I saw someone down in the garden."

ꕥ

Smith, to Classen, on how tiresome it can become, this whole business of going round and round in circles:

"We're going round in circles, are we not?"

"Are we, Mr Smith?"

"And you can see the problem, can you not? You can see why people might want to return to this, again and again?"

"Enlighten me."

"We come back to the notion that there is collusion, a conspiracy at the heart of this. The clothes. The cuff-links. The photographs. It's almost too elaborate, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"You don't agree?"

"I certainly don't intend to make light of it."

"The cuff-links in particular intrigue me. Is it true they were in your pocket when you were arrested?

"I was never formally arrested."

"After police were called, you were asked to turn out your pockets. And there they were."

"Yes."

"How? Why?"

"They were in a matchbox."

"Who gave you the matchbox?"

"I can't recall now. And anyway, there is no absolute proof that they were his."

"But how many people connected with the case have those initials?"

"Maybe I picked up the matchbox somewhere. The truth is, though, that I never really looked inside. Not properly. The police weren't terribly interested in the cuff-links, as it happens. Not as interested as you are."

"I like the little details. Tomorrow, if I have time, I mean to conduct a tour of the Bond Street jewellers. Maybe I can find out where they were made."

"And how expensive they are."

"Yes. It might turn out that they are worth a thousand pounds. That might be motive enough, don't you think, Mr Classen?"

"Absolutely. I'd imagine, though, that if someone had killed to acquire cuff-links, they might make some small effort to hide them from the police."

"Well then, let us look at an even more difficult part of your story."

"If you say so."

"You say you left Elmcote that afternoon, not long after surveying the house. But first you had to take off the old workman's clothes you had borrowed. And then, I take it, you gave these clothes back to the housekeeper."

"No."

"No?"

"I'd changed in the scullery. When I came back there was a maid there. So I fetched my own clothes and took them upstairs to my room. That's where I changed. I left the old clothes on the bed."

"So who knew these clothes were lying there on your bed?"

"No-one really."

"It's a sticking point, isn't it? Those clothes found their way onto a corpse within the next few hours. We're presuming he – or should I say it – was dressed in these clothes shortly after death. Or shortly before. Because we're presuming that, when body was discovered, he'd been dead for less than 24 hours. It's hard to say, what with the hot weather and everything, of course."

"You're right. It was very warm."

"You have to assume he was first knocked unconscious. He had received a severe blow to the head prior to death. I understand there is no doubt whatsoever about that. And then, when he was unconscious, someone must have taken off the clothes he was wearing and put on the ones he was found in. And then taken him to the pool. And then drowned him. It's all very elaborate, don't you think?"

"Perhaps he was already naked when he died. Maybe he was already in the pool. Maybe whoever killed him – or found him dead – slipped some clothes on him. To preserve his modesty."

"Preserve his modesty?"

"Yes."

"But then of course there are the personal effects that were discovered in your holdall. If we are to believe your story… if we are to accept that you did not put them there, how was this managed? Again, there's a problem of timing. It's all very tight."

"But I'm not saying I left Elmcote soon after changing out of the clothes I had borrowed. I left them on the bed, then I went down into the garden again."

"And then what?"

"I walked."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Maybe."

"Who?"

"Dorothy."

"This would have been what time?"

"Between two and three I suppose. Closer to three."

"And yet you told the police, did you not, that you did not leave Elmcote until five? What were you doing for another two hours? Walking again?"

"There is much to see."

"And you're suggesting that, in that time, in those two hours, someone made an opportunistic decision to commit a murder and then contrived to make look as if you were the killer. It doesn't really add up, does it?"

"I can't comment."

"But we can surely rule out the notion that this was a random act by a spectator from the tennis tournament, can't we?

"I suppose… if we take some of your assumptions as read, then yes."

"Well, give me the basis of some alternative theories, then."

"I can't. Not at the moment. That's not my job. I don't have that sort of imagination."

"Not your job? This isn't Scout camp, you know. I'm not asking you to peel potatoes."

"I know you're not. I suppose I suspect that what happened was an accident. And that what happened afterwards was almost accidental too."

"But the clothes. We keep coming back to the clothes. If he was drunk, as the second post mortem may have suggested, yes, he could have bashed his head. And yes, he could have slipped below the surface of the water. But if it had all happened that way, how come he was found as he was, wearing those old clothes? If it had been a genuine accident, there wouldn't have been anyone around to know that he was dead – and to contrive a trail of spurious evidence. You see that, don't you?"

"Unless he himself had taken the clothes. As a disguise."

"Unlikely."

"But not impossible. There must be other possibilities too."

"Like what?"

"Again, I repeat – I'm no good at this sort of thing."

"But you see how, on the balance of probability, you'd have to agree that we've narrowed this down to a handful of likely suspects. And the likelihood is that we're talking about at least two people working together."

"The conspiracy theory?"

"Can you fault it?

"Do I dare?"

"Which naturally enough brings us to the next major difficulty with your story. You drive off on Saturday evening. And lo and behold, you're back the next day, having forgotten something. Not only that, when you arrive you discover that everyone has upped and left like thieves in the night."

"What can I say?"

ꕥ

Smith to Classen, on the notion that it could be argued (could it not?) that, one way or another, Classen is surely guilty of conspiracy. To make this charge stick, it would suffice to show merely that he had been making misleading statements.

"Someone acted in cahoots with someone else. There are those who would say that, in continuing to act in the way that you do, you too are in cahoots."

"Cahoots? Is that a technical term?

"You know what I mean."

"Unless of course I did do it. That would take me way beyond cahoots, would it not?"

"I can't abide flippancy, Mr Classen."

"Maybe you'll discover that I am actually Johnny's long-lost son. Or that I resent Kit for corrupting the morals of the King. Or Norah because she once upon a time told a potential client that I was no good. Or you might find I had been having an affair with Dorothy and killed in a jealous rage."

"With the greatest of respect, it is pitiful to hear you speak this way."

ꕥ

Maybe there was no ink in the pen. Maybe that was the reason he could take it to bits and put it back together again so many times without getting ink on his fingers. Maybe it was empty.

"I find it curious there were so many people at Elmcote that weekend who weren't who they said they were."

"Really?"

"Even you. They were expecting Sir Herbert and they got you instead."

"But I am who I say I am."

"And who would that be, exactly?"

"I have nothing to hide."

"Then there was Wilson, who at one stage, as I understand it, was pretending to be a distant relation of Johnny's. And of course Jamie Waterbury. Dorothy too. And most people don't even realise that Kit Duncannon is an American."

"Nonsense. He never pretends to be anything other than he is."

ꕥ

A reprise, a doubling back, a covering of old ground, with apologies. Vis a vis: the notion that some will find it curious (more than curious?) that Classen is so reluctant to dismiss the most incredible theory of them all.

"Don't you find it faintly ridiculous? The suggestion that someone recreated a murder out of a mystery novel?"

"Ridiculous? No."

"Mr Classen, I put it to you that if you fail to take this business seriously, you are in effect treating the victim with contempt."

"I could argue the same goes for those who, for whatever reason, decline to follow all possible lines of inquiry. The book everyone was reading, *The Clue of the Dripping Fountain,* is about a murder committed to destroy the career of a Member of Parliament and bring down the Government of the day. There was a Member of Parliament at Elmcote that weekend."

"You're saying this was a political killing?"

"Why not? It's all the rage, I understand."

ꕥ

A fly buzzing in the upper lights of a window. In fact it was bigger than a fly. It was a bluebottle.

"I'm sorry to ask you to do this… but can we run through your stay at Elmcote again? Step by step."

"Hour by hour?"

"If you like."

"You arrived on Friday evening."

"Late afternoon, yes. For me, as I think I've already told you, this whole business all started maybe a week before, when Sir Herbert sent me a note asking him to stand in for him at Elmcote. He'd agreed many weeks previously to pay a visit, part social, part professional."

"And you knew nothing of Elmcote at this point?"

"I am ashamed to say that, though I had vague notion that its gardens were remarkable, I knew nothing in particular."

"Never been there before?"

"As I say, no. I hadn't even been to the area before."

"Are you saying you had never been to the Cotswolds?"

"Not that particular part. Burford perhaps. But no. Never."

"So you arrived in time for dinner."

"Yes."

"Tell me about that evening."

"It was unremarkable."

"You slept well?"

"As I say, I woke up at one point with the distinct impression that there was someone standing in the doorway."

"You spoke to him?"

"No. I went back to sleep."

"And the next morning?"

"Breakfast. Nothing of note happened. Then we all sat at Norah's feet, absorbing her wisdom. And then in the afternoon there was the tennis tournament."

"You were a spectator?"

"No. I was surveying the house."

"Did you find anything interesting?"

"No. It was all very straightforward."

"And then you left?"

"And then I left."

"Did anyone see you go?"

"No."

"You were not tempted to stay for the tennis tournament cocktail party that afternoon?"

"No."

"There are those who maintain it was not a one of his better parties. There had been, apparently, a violent confrontation between Kit Duncannon and Jamie Waterbury earlier in the day. Then Duncannon's failure to attend the party was noted especially by Mrs Kemp and she created a fuss when Johnny failed to take her concerns seriously. Then there was an altercation between Johnny and Jamie. By then, this must have been in the early evening, almost all of his other guests had departed. That was the last time they were all seen together. The last point, to talk in technical terms, that any of them could vouch for the others' movements."

"I have told you. None of this means anything to me. I had left Elmcote by that point."

"So you keep saying."

ꕥ

The truth is that he had gone back upstairs and had picked up his bag. It felt slightly heavier than he'd remembered; but he thought nothing of that. He'd picked it up; and had left Elmcote. He'd paused only to glance into the room opposite – the one that had been locked. The door was now open and he'd entered. But there was nothing there, that was the plain fact of the matter. The room had no story to tell.

Except maybe for some ashes in the hearth.

Someone had been burning photographs, letters, pages torn from magazines.

So he'd driven.

He'd stopped for a quick bite to eat at The Chequers in Chipping Norton.

And in no time at all, he was on the road again, heading south on the Woodstock road.

He almost made it to Oxford.

He pulled in to a lay-by just shy of Wolvercote.

He sat for many minutes, head bowed, his forehead resting against the rim of the steering wheel.

His holdall was on the passenger seat. He pulled it towards him and unfastened the zip. His personal effects were as he expected. Nothing missing that he could see. But there extra items of clothing here: a man's plaid shirt, a pair of brown slacks, some underwear, a pair of much-worn off-white tennis shoes. And, bizarrely, the book everyone had been reading. The murder mystery story. Beneath that, at the very bottom, some papers and pages torn out of magazines. Some black and white snaps, too. They were of a young man with light-coloured hair. And last of all there was a key. It was a substantial key, an iron key, the key to a mortise deadlock. In other words, a front door key. It sported no identifying tag.

He knew immediately. The door it would open. He knew. He just knew.

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Classen didn't tell Smith about this second key, this additional locked door. It was a part of his story that, seemingly, only he knew about. No-one had asked him any questions about this. So it was his secret – and in any case, it was in no-one's interest to complicate matters.

As it happened, people were always far more interested in the other door. The one opposite his room on the top corridor. It was odd how people chose to misdirect themselves.

As in:

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A supplementary question, with regards to the door on the top corridor:

"What do you reckon was the significance of this? The door now being open? When before it was locked?"

"I don't know. I can only speculate that Wilson had been secretly using the room but had been scared off when I was billeted in one of the rooms opposite. I'd already alerted Miss Voysey or one of the maids to the fact that the door was locked. They must have found a spare key."

"Yes, I suppose that could be it. But there was nothing in the room when you looked in. No indication, I mean, that anyone had recently been in there?"

"No. Other than maybe a few charred papers in the grate."

"As if someone had been destroying evidence?"

"Evidence of what?"

"Good question. Any ideas?"

"None."

"And that was it, was it. You left Elmcote?"

"Yes."

"You went home. To London?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to anyone when you got home? Did anyone see you?"

"No."

"No? How can you be so sure?"

"I mean I don't think so."

"And then, first thing next morning, you got in your car and drove back to Elmcote?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I had forgotten something."

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Oddly, there were some inaccuracies here. Closer to the truth might be the notion that he'd slept in his car. He'd attempted to drive on toward London but hadn't made it much further. He'd pulled over again just a few more miles down the road.

He just sat there thinking.

Then at some point he'd attempted to drive back to Elmcote; but he'd missed his way in the dark. You'd need supernatural powers to negotiate those sunken lanes in the dead of night.

So he'd slept.

As soon as it was light, he was able to head back – though he managed to loose his way many more times. Navigation was by no means easy, even in the daytime.

But eventually he found his way.

He drove past the entrance to the main courtyard at Elmcote and on down the lane through Elmcote Bartrim. No-one was awake or abroad; no-one saw him. About half a mile further on through the hamlet there was a turning on the left: a rough track that eventually petered out within a copse.

This was where he parked.

He rolled down his window and listened.

For ten minutes or more he sat dead still, staring at nothing, listening.

But he could hear nothing.

So he set off.

Where the track joined the lane, keeping to the shadow of the hedgerow, he stopped and listened again. Nothing. Not a peep. Even the birds were strangely silent.

Nothing stirred in the hamlet of Elmcote Bartrim as he approached. Not a sound. The cottage he was heading for was the last one on the left, the one nearest Elmcote. It was the one kept for guests. It had featured on the plans Johnny had given him the day before but he'd not had the time to survey it.

He'd brought the key. It fitted. It turned. And he was in.

It did not take long to make a survey. Downstairs: a living room with a tiny kitchen off it. Upstairs: two modest bedrooms. No bathroom, no WC: clearly, if he cared to look outside, he'd find a privy.

The cottage had, until very recently, been occupied. There were scraps of food on one of the kitchen cupboards: a heel of stale bread, some biscuits, a half-consumed jar of damson jam. True, as far as he could make out, there were no personal effects in either bedroom. But there were cigarette ends in the ashtrays and empty bottles in the living room. Lots of them. And cognac bottles. On the mantelpiece, on the hearthside tiles by the fireplace and fallen on the floor by a chintzy armchair.

He sat in the armchair while wondering at the spectacular squalor all around him. There were mud stains on the rug, dirty plates on the windowsill, teacups with furrings of mould growing inside, sticky patches of jam or beef extract on the upholstery of the armchair and on the low table beside it. And magazines and newspapers everywhere, strewn with mad abandon across the floor. They were foreign, these magazines and newspapers: American mainly but some French ones too. Prominent on all the pages visible were pictures of the new King, King Edward, pictured with a woman Classen did not recognise. A dark-haired lady with an angular face.

This lady was, seemingly, important: because an American magazine called Newsweek featured a picture of her and the King on its front page. He was helping her out of a boat. Perhaps they were on holiday together. The King was wearing a casual shirt; she was in a thin cotton dress.

He made a perfunctory attempt to gather all these publications into a bundle. How odd, he thought: the spectacular mess in the living room and in the kitchen, compared to the scene upstairs. The two bedrooms were spotlessly clean. No objects, not a speck of dust. The beds had been stripped. It was as if someone had begun upstairs but had not had time to do downstairs.

He soon tired of tidying. Instead, he sat down and considered.

And of course he began to realise that the magazines in his holdall featured the same sorts of pictures as the magazines here in the cottage.

He had a sudden urge to go back for the holdall. He'd left it in the car.

Should he risk it? Should he risk increasing the chances he'd be spotted?

And as he weighed this proposition, a new thought struck him.

What if he'd been left some sort of a message? In amongst the papers at the bottom of the holdall there might be a note. A note explaining much that still needed explaining.

He decided to risk it. He went back to the car… and he had soon returned with his holdall. No-one spotted him, as far as he knew. Elmcote Bartrim was as still as the grave.

Once more, he tore open the bag and emptied its contents onto the floor. The first thing that struck him was that the ripped-out magazine pages in the hold-all were similar to the ripped-out magazine pages strewn about the floor of the cottage. Same small cast of characters, the same ridiculous headlines. He also became aware of the true nature of the photographs. The Box Brownie snaps. The ones of the young man with light-coloured hair. In many of the snaps he was lying naked on a bed. It looked very much like one of the beds upstairs in the cottage. He was pictured in a range of provocative poses, in a state of arousal.

Classen's fingers trembled as he replaced them, every last one, back in his holdall.

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Strangely, improbably, no-one ever made very much of the fact that his car was eventually found parked where it was parked. Off a track in light woodland near Elmcote Bartrim. But then, why would they?

It's one of those inconsequential little details that tends to get buried by a welter of other detail.

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Maybe he slept again. In the arm chair. He was terribly tired.

Maybe, though, he walked. He took his holdall with him.

He closed the door, locked it and threw away the key.

One way or another, it must have been ten-thirty when he made his way up the lane. And at first sight, as he neared The Old Garden, everything seemed much as normal: because there was Norah sitting at the white-painted wrought iron table under the Cedar of Lebanon.

She was reading. And yet, as he approached, Classen realised there was something not quite right.

"No coffee this morning, Mrs Kemp?"

She put down the book and turned slightly to take his full measure. She was in Edwardian lady mode again, in a voluminous white blouse with frills and a long pleated skirt.

"My dear Mr Classen. I had thought you had departed."

The little lilts and lifts in her voice were always immensely appealing. It was as if she were always questioning you, mocking you even. It lifted your heart. And yet, perhaps for the first time, Classen perceived a stony quality in her voice. Also, as he stood over her, he was aware more than ever of her imperfections: the way one corner of her mouth turned down as she spoke and how one eyelid drooped slightly.

"I had," he said. "And now I have returned."

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Smith, his senses sharpened, as if on the verge of revelation:

"At what stage did you realise that Norah had been abandoned? That everyone else had left. The other guests I mean."

"I didn't really think about it."

"Why not?"

"It didn't strike me."

"You're saying everything seemed as it should be?"

"How was I to know how things should be at Elmcote on a Sunday? I was only a visitor. They might have been at church."

"But surely, it must have felt unnaturally quiet. You didn't get a feeling something was wrong? You didn't say anything to Mrs Kemp?"

"No. Even on the Saturday, when Elmcote was gearing up for the tennis tournament, there were times during the morning when everyone suddenly seemed to melt away. There were times when you could feel quite alone."

"Norah Kemp didn't seem agitated? She didn't let on that, unaccountably, she had been left behind by her friends?"

"No."

"And what conclusions can we draw from that?"

"None that I can think of."

"And then she told you, quite matter-of-factly, that you should go and help the gardener?"

“The head gardener, yes. Mr Adams. She told me he was somewhat distressed.”

“What did she ask you to do, Mr Classen?”

“She asked me to help him bury a body.”

“And you didn’t think that odd?”

“No, not in the slightest. When you get to know Norah, nothing about her will ever surprise you.”

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The remains of the dachshund named Adolphus were to be found in The Temple Garden, so called because of its dense matrix of tall yew pillars, sculpted in a tribute to the Great Hypostyle Hall of the temple at Karnak.

The corpse was at the temple’s very heart and it was not a pretty sight. The dog had clearly died in a savage attack.

Frank Adams was standing staring at the mess, as if paralysed. He was hugely grateful to see help arrive.

Classen, fighting back an urge to retch, circled the remains.

“When did this happen? Is there any way of telling?”

Adams sucked his teeth and considered.

“Could it have been last night?” Classen insisted.

Adams was now shaking his head. “Earlier than that, I’d say. A shade under twenty-four hours.”

“But no longer?”

Adams again shook his head.

“I don’t suppose this is ever the busiest part of the gardens. Being so far from the house.”

Adams made it known that he agreed with this assessment.

Classen again circled the remains.

“I don’t suppose a fox could have done this?”

For a third time Adams shook his head, this time more vigorously and emphatically than before.

“So what do you suggest we do?”

Adams had brought a sack. He suggested they shovel the remains into this. This could then be conveyed to a quiet corner of The Orchard, where there was a pet's graveyard.

Adams had brought his best garden spade. The one he had been given by the old King.

But he handed the spade to Classen. He had not the stomach for this sort of work.

The remains (and a good deal of gravel besides) were soon in the sack.

They set off for The Orchard, Adams walking on ahead, Classen carrying the body, or what had once been a body, in the sack.

It was a warm morning, if overcast. The light was diffuse, the day still seemingly hesitant and provisional… and enclosed. It was as if a leaden silence lay over the whole land.

A grave had not yet been dug.

This Adams now took it upon himself to do.

He fashioned a generous apportionment: one foot wide by three feet long by two-and-a-half feet deep. The sack was lowered in but not covered.

It was a solemn process: but dreamlike for all that.

And this sense of unreality was compounded when Adams produced, from his jacket pocket, a compact little black book, its boards and spine tooled with gold lettering, its pages gilt-edged. It looked for all the world like a prayer book.

For one horrified moment, Classen feared that Adams was going to begin reading something wholly inappropriate.

But it did not come to that.

ꕥ

There were no books in his office. Shelves, yes, but precious little on them.

Classen's desk was remarkably uncluttered too. Some people collect all sorts of accoutrements: framed photographs, silver cigarette cases, the odd Art Deco distraction, shiny metal models of racing cars or biplanes or Flying Scotsmen.

Classen had nothing, not even a desk lamp.

Oh, except for a plate of digestive biscuits. And a blotter, on which he laid the parts of his fountain pen as he disassembled it.

"You say you said little to Adams?"

"Hardly a thing."

"No attempt to ask him what he thought was going on?"

"No."

"You didn't try to enter the house?"

"No."

"You merely went back and sat with Norah Kemp again?"

"Yes."

"While she read a book?"

"Sort of."

"The book, I take it, was the murder mystery story that everyone has been talking about."

"Have you read it?"

"No."

"So you are not, in fact, open-minded?"

"Of course I am."

"Clearly not – otherwise you would have read the book. Looking for clues."

"Maybe there is time enough for that."

"Maybe. But in any case, Norah was reading poetry."

"Poetry?"

"Yes. You've heard of poetry haven't you?"

"You're not asking me to believe you sat there discussing poetry?"

"I suppose, yes, that's what we did."

ꕥ

On the way back to the house from the Orchard he caught a glimpse of a white peak of canvas above a hedge – and his heart leapt. He made a beeline for The Theatre Lawn. The marquee: its presence, its size, its very whiteness, its convivial promise: all this, surely, added up to a denial of despondency and dejection.

He entered the marquee and stood for many minutes at its heart. The air was warm and sweet: it was the sweetness of decay: the grass, a green carpet to this canvas room, was dying underfoot.

He left the tent. He marched up the house's main entrance. The doors, under its pillared portico, were shut. He leaned a shoulder against their heavy oak but they were utterly immovable.

He had a moment then, a dark moment, a moment when all seemed lost.

Then he made his way back to Norah.

She was still reading her slim volume of Marvell's verse.

"Poetry, Norah?" he asked in his most scathing tone.

She closed her book and laid her hand on it, as if swearing an oath. "Yes, Nicholas, poetry."

I thought this was more your thing," he said, picking up the murder mystery story that lay also on the table. And then a curious thought struck him. "But how did it get here?" he challenged her, almost aggressively. "This book. I thought I'd taken it with me yesterday."

At first she didn't follow. Then the penny dropped.

"Oh" she said; and then added, mischievously: "But there is more than one copy of the book." Then a faraway look came into her eyes and she smiled sweetly. "And isn't that how conjuring tricks work?"

"I don't understand."

"Something disappears here… and magically appears again over there."

He almost looked round, to see where the "over there" might be.

"I see," he said. But he did not.

During all this he was standing, though Norah had indicated more than once that he should sit in with her. Which he now did, reluctantly; and as he did so, he cracked a knee against the unforgiving wrought iron of a table leg. Under different circumstances, Norah might have smiled at this.

There was silence for many minutes. Not a strained silence: it was as if they'd both rediscovered the means to be comfortable in each other's presence.

The day was overcast; now and then the breeze stiffened; and when it did, the trees all around swayed and they made a sound like the sound a tide makes, surging and pulling on a pebbled beach. And the breeze also carried drifts of smoke; bonfire smoke, as sweet as it was pungent.

And then, as if in a vain attempt to dispel awkwardness, as if making the most absurd of small talk, Norah asked: "Are you familiar with Marvell?"

Classen indicated that he was not.

So she opened the volume; and for a fleeting moment, Classen feared that she was set on reading to him.

But she did not. Instead, she said: “I used to know this one almost by heart. Once upon a time, I insisted on reading to all new clients. Almost as a rite of passage. It’s called *The Garden*. It’s the one with the famous line about a green thought in a green shade.”

From the blank look on Classen’s face it was evident that this meant nothing to him.

“And of course everyone assumes that it’s a pretty little poem about how pretty a garden may be. It isn’t. It’s actually about an innocence beyond love. Can you comprehend that, Mr Classen? Imagine! Beyond love. The Apocalypse of love. Do you see? And innocence is actually a figure. A young woman… like perhaps in that Botticelli painting of the girls dancing. Because of course this poem is about the Garden of Eden too: and how, when you have succeeded in annihilating the ego, your soul can be freed and can become a bird in a tree, singing and combing its silver wings.”

By now, there was a sullen, almost mutinous look in Classen’s eye.

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Smith, to Classen, in an endeavour to be absolutely clear on this point:

“Sorry to labour this… but there was no suggestion whatsoever that anything was amiss. Norah, for instance, was not agitated?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am sure.”

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Sullenly, mutinously, Classen cut Norah short: “The marquee. It still stands.”

“What of it?”

“You hint at catastrophe. But life here goes on. It must go on.”

“Staff are being stood down. The house is quite empty. I’m not sure, Nicholas, that I know anything any more. All gone.”

"Even Dorothy?"

"I thought you might ask about her."

"And?"

"Well, I am afraid the news is not good in that respect. It turns out that they are engaged to be married. Johnny only found out on Friday, though Kit worked it out independently too. They make quite a couple." She paused momentarily then added, unnecessarily: "I mean Dorothy and Jamie, of course."

He said nothing.

"Yes," she said, sighing, as if this came as news to her too.

"Engaged recently?" he asked.

"Earlier this year. Don't ask me why they keep it a secret, though I think we can guess. The irony is that Johnny didn't send her to New York check up on Wilson's story. No – the thing is, he sent her to check up on Jamie. Johnny had started to realise that he was not quite right. His story didn't quite add up. So, he sends a woman all the way to America, at great expense, to check up on her fiance. It's quite funny when you think about it, really."

"He wasn't a polo player after all? He wasn't called Jamie Waterbury."

"Oh yes. He was a polo player. He didn't lie about his name. It's just that, he was not related to the Waterbury branch of Johnny's family."

"And Dorothy? Her and Jamie? Are you sure?"

"She has been a regular visitor here for months now. Perhaps they just hit it off. Perhaps she just needed a husband."

"You don't believe that."

"No – maybe I don't. But some people, no matter how attractive are just never asked, don't you find? Perhaps he merely asked. And maybe she thought, in a way, that she was marrying into all of this."

"Elmcote you mean? But I thought… Well, I thought that she was independently wealthy."

"Her family lost everything in The Crash. According to Kit. Did you see the black eye she had yesterday?"

"No."

"She hid it well with make-up and those great big sunglasses."

"I didn't realise. Was it my fault?"

Norah clearly did feel like sparing him "Probably," she said. And then she looked a little more shame-faced. "Actually… not entirely your fault. That's what I was hoping to tell you. I remember now. Where we met before. It must have been more than ten years ago. You were a very junior member of Sir Herbert's team. I remember him treating you rather meanly. And I was impressed at the way you were bearing up. But the truth is, I've been telling people you're someone else entirely."

"I know," he said. "It doesn't matter. It really doesn't."

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Mr Smith to Mr Classen, insistent once again: seeking to place a detail of no small interest in the greater scheme of things:

"And is this where we come to the cuff-links? I thought you were about to tell me more about the cuff-links."

"Well, yes, there's nothing to tell really. I had to borrow a dinner jacket and a decent shirt for dinner on the Friday evening and I picked up the cuff-links quite by accident. When I got back to London I realised I'd come away with these damned cuff-links. I thought they might be valuable. So I just drove back to drop them off really."

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Yes, the cuff-links. Because it was at this point, with Norah theorising vaguely about dynastic politics, that he remembered them.

He checked in his pocket for the matchbox. It was still there. For some reason he took it out. And he rattled it in Norah's general direction.

He opened his mouth – but no words came.

She smiled at him sweetly, as if he were a simpleton.

He was beginning to realise this was no ordinary box. Each side of the sleeve had a similarly crude sort of design: lettering surrounded by an intertwined border of badly-drawn poppies. No colour: black ink on beige card.

On one side the lettering read:

Gloucester Institute for the Blind.

And on the other side it read:

Disabled Servicemen's Association.

He slid the drawer from its sleeve.

Inside, there was a pair of cuff-links. They were identical to the ones Kit Duncannon had loaned him. Blobs of black enamel, like sleek black beetle backs; gold letters floating in each shiny blackness. Identical to Kit's except that the letters were different. Kit's featured a monogram of his initials, K and D. These featured the letters P and W.

He felt a chill. He felt as if he were no longer really of this world. He felt that he was looking down on it from somewhere else.

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Outside, nearby, a pigeon, leaving the ledge on which it had been resting, clacked its wings as it took flight. A companion, its wings also clacking, soon followed.

"She's also a woman of some means."

"Who?"

"Your secretary."

"My assistant, you mean. What makes you say that?"

"There is a copy of *Country Life* on her desk."

"That is hardly surprising. Everyone in our profession must read *Country Life*."

"Everyone?"

"Everyone. But come. You said you had news for me."

"Did I? Perhaps I did. A new development? Yes. It happened yesterday evening. It will be in the papers tomorrow morning. A twin-seater Tiger Moth crashed in France. It is believed that the aircraft had been hired by a man to take him back to France after the Olympic Games in Berlin. A man in his twenties. In misty conditions toward dusk, the pilot had in all probability been making for Nancy aerodrome. The aircraft came down in woodland north-west of Lunéville. Neither the passenger nor the pilot survived."

"I see."

"Might this change everything?"

"It might."

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Classen and Norah at a table under a cedar tree in The Old Garden at Elmcote: He felt a chill, as if he were no longer really of this world, as if he were looking down on himself.

"Norah?" he said. "If we go now to The Pool Garden, what will we find there?"

How on earth was she meant to answer that?

Obviously, in all mystery stories, just as there is always some sort of a ghost-like presence, there is always at least one sibylline figure. And yes, in this case, it is clearly Mrs Norah Kemp. Fanciful, intuitive Norah. Observant Norah: because the future, especially the near feature, can surely be intuited from the evidence of our senses in the here and now. It is written in looks, in glances, in intonations.

And yet… even the all-seeing Norah was unable at this point to peer very far. She had no capacity for, say, predicting aviation fatalities. Nor could she have guessed that, having left Elmcote in such a peremptory fashion that very morning, taking Nancy with him, Johnny was destined never to return. Norah could not have foreseen that he would be taken ill that winter at his villa on the Cote d'Azure; and that, after a long illness, he would face an even longer convalescence. After the fall of France he would suffer a relapse. He was destined to die in Vichy France in 1942.

Norah could not have foreseen, either, that the garden at Elmcote would soon return to nature, as all gardens do.

Norah wasn't there to save it. Neither was Nancy. Nor Kit.

No. Not even in her wildest dreams.

Brief lives: The truth is they are all now ghosts. Every one.

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So it was a stupid question. Of course it was.

"Norah? If we go now to The Pool Garden, what will we find there?"

That's what he had asked. And she had responded: "I don't know. Is this some sort of riddle?"

"We will find a drowned man, won't we Norah?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said.

But he stood and walked. And she followed.

Their route was straightened and narrow, along alleyways between high yew hedges, under green arches, along close pathways, down steps. Into The Pool Garden.

And there it was. A body floating in the pool. Unmistakably, it was dressed in the old clothes that Classen had borrowed the day before. That much was immediately apparent: the high-waisted serge workman's trousers, khaki; the collarless shirt with elbow repairs, sky blue. There were bare feet protruding from the ends of the trousers; hands from the shirt sleeves. There were no cuff-links. Of course there were not. It was not that kind of shirt.

Classen didn't bother taking his shoes and socks off. Or rolling up his trousers. He got into the water and began wading toward the body. It bobbed slightly. Now and then, spray from the fountain landed on its back, leaving a fleeting pattern of spatter marks, wet on wet.

He turned the body over.

A dead man. No more and no less than a corpse. He, it, had clearly been dead some while. Many hours.

There was a gasp. Classen looked over. The gasp was Norah's. She'd gripped the edge of the pool to steady herself. Her other hand went to cover her open mouth. And her voice, when it broke through, from somewhere deep within, was a pitiful thing. No more that a croak really. "Oh my god," she moaned. "It's Wilson."

Envoi: In late September, a stranger appeared at Elmcote. He was an official receiver, appointed to wind up the affairs of a bankrupt marquee-hire company based in Gloucester. He parked in the main courtyard, got out of his car, stretched and breathed deeply of the good country air.

Then he strolled. The paperwork suggested that there was some wayward inventory located here.

And it was true: a huge white marquee was still standing not far from the house. Its guy ropes had slackened quite naturally and the canvas of its main canopy sagged in places. But still it stood.

He made a note in his notebook. And then he strolled some more.

For of course he was curious. He'd heard so much about Elmcote. Someone had died here in mysterious circumstances. A man had been arrested and then released. Another man had been arrested; and again, in similarly confusing circumstances,

released. The attempted extradition from Germany of a man wanted for questioning in connection with case had failed. One popular newspaper had mounted a campaign against allegedly incompetent elements within the Gloucestershire police force. The notion was that the supposed victim (his name may or may not have been Paul Wilson) had actually died of accidental causes – and, furthermore, the suggestion was that the post mortem examination had been bungled. Subsequently, a police surgeon had resigned.

Then, in perhaps the most sensational development of all, a man wanted for questioning, a man calling himself Jamie Waterbury, a man who'd been at guest at Elmcote that weekend, had died in a plane crash.

Just in the last few days, while one newspaper continued its campaign against administrative incompetence, a rival publication had hired a spiritual medium, a woman who was confident that she'd be able to establish communications with the deceased and with other persons of interest in the whole affair. Seances and other similar sorts of events were planned.

Meanwhile there was a groundswell of opinion arguing that what the Elmcote Affair was absolutely crying out for was the intervention of the sort of detective commonly found between the covers of a good murder mystery.

However, there were those, cynics no doubt, who argued that no-one would ever really know the truth.

The official receiver for the marquee company was no cynic. In fact, he believed that if you were suitably sensitive and attuned, you could perceive certain sorts of energies emanating from in and around and about the area where certain sorts of events had taken place.

It was not long before he found himself at Heaven's Gate. It was shut but not padlocked; and some sort of a fever of mischief must have come upon him because he had this irresistible urge to pull it open. It wasn't easy. It was massive; the wrought ironwork every bit as heavy as it looked. But at last he managed it, the gate groaning on its gargantuan hinges as it opened.

And then he turned for home. He walked back along the garden's main avenue, its Renaissance-palace enfilade of exquisitely-fashioned rooms. The *palisade a l'italienne* of pleached hornbeams, the sunken Yellow Garden, The Circle, and the voluptuous deep double borders of flowers-for-cutting in The Old Garden.

There was a little white latticework table near (but not quite in) the dark green shadow of a magnificent tree: a Cedar of Lebanon, he reckoned. Its wood-and-canvas companion chairs had been stacked carelessly against the trunk of the tree; but curiously, on the table, there was a book. A cheap cloth-bound hardback without a dust-jacket, it was weather-beaten and rather the worse for wear.

He thought about picking it up and slipping it into the pocket of his raincoat. But in the end he did not.

He left it there on the table as he walked on under the shade of the immemorial cedar tree.