

SO IT HAD COME to pass. Exit, stage right, a weeping King, led by his belt buckle. Exit, stage left, a bruised bruiser of a Prime Minister, supernumerary, a worked-out Warwick, a provincial kingmaker needed no longer now the King was unmade. And in his place, stepping into the Premier spotlight, a man of quiet confidence, a man who had always known this moment would come and who was utterly assured as to its rightness: a conceited man, a man, in other words, well-practised in mastering conceit. Scrubbed, pressed, immaculate in a wing collar, a stickler, a grey man with a salt and pepper moustache: and yet, for all that, a man who'd almost succeed in convincing you there was a twinkle, a mischievousness behind the bombastic façade. Chamberlain, in short; Chamberlain plain.

It was like the denouement to a History Play. Or, who knew, the opening scene of its First Act.

He stepped right over to the lip of the stage and stood there, scanning to left and to right, as if to take the measure of every single member of his audience. And then it seemed as if he were about to strike a dramatic pose. Looking up now, uppish, his eyes fixed on the back row of the gods, it seemed possible that at any moment he might shape a definitive gesture; his hand might shoot up and he'd clutch at an essence in the empty air, destiny perhaps, and pull it passionately to his breastbone in his fist.

But this gesture, the gesture of all great dictators, did not come. He merely stood there, the faintest suggestion of a smile playing on his lips. There were a few scattered coughs from the darkest depths of the auditorium; but not a pin dropped. And the more he stood there in the spotlight, inviting you to take him in, Chamberlain plain, the more you were aware of motes of dust dancing in the column of lit air that isolated him from the darkness.

Motes, like microbes, like a swarm of tiny insects. They somehow made him seem moth-eaten.

Behind him, lit only by their leader's reflected glory, his cabinet. The sort of supporting cast of which only a Caesar might dream: Hailsham, Halifax, Simon, Hoare, Eden, MacDonald, Hore-Belisha, Inskip. Even Harold was there, to the very back of this tableau.