

O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

All the Bright
Contagions



Colin Holcombe

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by Colin Holcombe

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ALL THE BRIGHT CONTAGIONS

—A NOVEL—

Colin Holcombe

CHAPTER ONE

I worked some more colour into the background until the phone rang a third time.

'Ah, there you are', said my dealer. 'You remember the lunch we talked about? Well, I have Mrs Stumpfl with me now. Shall we say one thirty?'

So it had come back, one of those advances that were always threatening those castles in the air I built to women's charms.

'So that's a yes, is it, old boy?' he continued.

'Reg, I spent the whole weekend there. Toured the estate, admired the pictures, did everything

needed, but not once did a commission come up. There's a living to earn, and if Sir Richard's portrait isn't finished on time—as the secretary keeps ringing to tell me—there will be blood on the moon.'

'Then we've good news for you.' The voice broadened into sunny cordiality, and over the phone came a picture of the scene at the Cope Street Gallery. Reg Ecclestone with green tie under crumpled corduroy suit, glasses pushed up over a great dome of a head, probably lunging about the desk, waving the receiver in the air. Opposite would be Mrs Stumpfl, her neat figure dressed in something from Stehle or Catherine Walker. I can give you the jottings. A suave Russian beauty, controlled in her movements, with brilliant, grey-blue eyes that seemed larger than their surroundings. Heinrich Stumpfl got the same treatment, though with less approval: the travelled executive with the smooth manners, the frizzled hair thinning and scraped back.

That's what came to me as we sat at table: the Stumpfls, an MP acquaintance and an American couple staying the night. Natalie Stumpfl was poised and correct, that shimmering body hardly belonging to its dress. Heinrich Stumpfl was politely affable, like a Swiss banker with important clients, leaving his wife to arrange the seating and lead the conversation. I was intrigued, but also annoyed as the evening wore on and there was still no talk of a commission. Reg's bullying rankled, though I hadn't been looking forward to another stay with Christine's parents, which the weekend was replacing.

Of course I should have done more research when Stumpfl's name drew a blank on my library shelves, and taken my chances when asked to explain the Daily Telegraph's snooty review of my last show. I only smiled, however, and said that was journalism for you, at which our American friend thumped the table and exclaimed, 'Hell, that was right: these newspaper men didn't know a damn thing.' We laughed and talked about the

shipping business, new regulations from Europe, and their Bermuda holidays, while silently, all the time, I felt the exotic Mrs Stumpfpl was weighing me up with a practised innocence.

Perhaps these recollections detained me, as I was late getting to the restaurant, but on giving Reg's and then the gallery's name, I saw Natalie Stumpfpl sat at a table for two. 'Reg not joining us?' I said, taking the napkin from the waiter and filling our glasses.

'No', she said, the expression holding me at a distance. 'Is that difficult for you?'

'Not at all. Delighted to see you, Mrs Stumpfpl.'

She looked at me for a moment, and then went back to the menu.

'So you've been shopping', I said when the waiter had taken our orders.

‘Just a jacket and a belt.’ She reached for the shiny bag at her feet. ‘Something for one of Heinrich’s conferences.’

‘This season’s colours should suit you.’

She replaced the bag, and looked at me carefully. ‘Is that what you usually do, Mr Staunton? Start by advising women on their appearance?’

‘For a commission I often have to. What did you have in mind?’

‘No. That would be something else.’

I toyed with the glass. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘this is going to be difficult, but perhaps I should say I’d be only too pleased to paint your portrait. A captivating face, but not easy to get.’

‘My likeness you are talking about?’

‘The inner likeness. Faces are what we show to the world, but the truth is more difficult. Long pencil studies, careful squaring up and then the utmost patience.’

'Not the artist's response, what he feels towards the sitter?'

Of course that's the essence, the manners and personality of the whole body to be conveyed in a few features, but the obvious was escaping me as I breezed on. 'Tedious hours of sitting by you, and a large bill from me. Frankly, I'd do it for nothing, for the simple pleasure of painting you, but that's not being professional. Or sensible from your point of view.'

She looked down, as though swallowing her thoughts, but I drew the last bolts across. 'Now, Mrs Stumpfl, you know what we're talking about. If you'd wanted to commission something you should have discussed it when I was up at your place a couple of months ago. Or at least with my dealer present. No doubt I'm adding two and two to make five, but a private tête-à-tête causes misunderstandings, with outsiders, and the parties concerned. Crass of me to mention it, but all I undertake is portraits to the best of my ability.'

'Portraits. I see.' The voice was detached and colourless. 'Not the "Christine Sitting: Study Number Three" I bought?'

'Ah, one of my life studies. I'd forgotten Reg had those. For your husband?'

'Your model is beautiful, is she not?'

'Professional.'

I'd swear I could see the thoughts working in the interval, but I was wrong. 'Mr Staunton,' she said, 'your private life does not concern me. My task was to find out who we would be dealing with. That is why I arranged this meeting, which you have read too much into, though your looks and charm get a lot of unwanted attention, I expect.'

To say that I felt aggrieved is to underestimate my annoyance. I was now without a script, as if I'd blundered on to the stage in the wrong production and stood blinking at the lights. More than clumsy, I felt ashamed, as though I'd been caught in an act

of gross public indecency. 'Then I owe you an apology. Inexcusable of me.'

The mouth opened, and she almost laughed. 'No, that is too much. Could you not call me Natalie? If I can call you Patrick.'

'Just as you like.'

'Well of course I have no designs on your virtue. You have your way to make in a world that depends on contacts and recommendations. That speaks for itself.'

I didn't reply.

'Though no woman's going to be insulted to learn that she can still turn heads', she continued. 'In her own particular way, I am saying.'

I wondered how far she'd push this nonsense, but the voice suddenly dropped its playfulness. 'So we must talk about Botes. How did you find the house?'

Familiar ground. However little I may have learned about the rich, this I did know, and had prepared a few compliments, even for the Stumpfls' place, which seemed odd. You went down a steep drive from the electrified gateway, through parkland and trees, and then, half hidden in the wooded hollow, saw an extended Jacobean facade, genuine, and all that survived the waggish attentions of some nineteenth-century restorer. Natalie Stumpfl was expecting more than the usual banalities, of course, and I said, 'Botes Manor? Striking exterior, of course. And the inside . . .'

'It is an empty shell, I know.'

'It could do with some personal touches, but it's an office as well. Your husband works from home, doesn't he?'

'You are good', she said, smiling at last, the first unaffected smile I'd seen of hers. 'I am not a worldly creature, as my husband will tell you, but I did finish my courses. In Moscow and in Paris.'

'A reference to my Oxford years. Well, I accept the admonishment.'

'Patrick, what is the trouble? We are at Botes again. All the time I was trying to bring you out and you put me down. Here is the famous Patrick Staunton, I thought, the up-and-coming portrait painter, the gangling figure with his enthusiasms and his good opinion of himself. Heinrich found you entertaining, but to me you seemed a fraud.'

The conversation was taking a familiar turn, but I put on a mournful expression, heavy with personal injury. She stopped, and looked exasperated. 'Well, that is what I thought. Wrong, but understandable, I think.'

'Well, I'm sorry to hear that, because I really took to you. From the moment you held out your hand and made the introductions.'

'I tried.' The silence continued, but I could afford to wait. 'Yes,' she continued, 'perhaps I have spo-

ken out of . . . not well. Rather rudely, Mr Staunton . . . Excuse me.'

'Mrs Stumpfl, Natalie, I'm a painter, without expertise in anything else. If someone wants my opinion I say what everybody else says. If that makes me evasive or patronizing or sycophantic then no doubt I am. Painting is all I understand, and not even that sometimes. Whatever you learned in art courses, I see it only as a practical skill, nothing different from plastering or playing golf.'

Gingerly she took the line. 'I did take a course, yes. I wrote a dissertation. How did you know that?'

'Nothing unusual, and no harm done, provided you understand that writing is not painting.' I gave her a magnanimous smile, but Natalie Stumpfl had lost her self-possession, and was looking at the tablecloth. Seconds ticked past. She opened and rearranged the handbag again. I could see the warm skin tightening over the collarbones, spreading under the lapels of the bouclé jacket, and the gleaming curves of the lashes, their vitality almost

tangible. I was in no hurry, and had now stopped transferring skin tones to paint, imagining only that fragrant body in its neat clothes.

She looked up, her eyes inches from mine. 'You are laughing at me! You are, aren't you?'

'At this little comedy, Natalie. You are very pretty when you frown.'

The sharp tap she gave my hand came with a sudden girlishness that was enchanting, and then unsettling. I tried not to look at the pink nails, or the small teeth that opened to take the slices of fruit. Do not get involved, I said silently, repeating it over and over as Natalie Stumpfl laid out her plans for the commission. There was a whole year of work. Portraits of Natalie and her husband, formal full-length pieces, and a couple of small character studies. Fine, fine, I said. And some landscapes, views of the house and perhaps some interiors. Why not? I said with careless imbecility: not my speciality but I was sure to cope. Each stage drew Natalie closer, more candid and confiding. It was a

long-cherished plan of hers. Whatever arrangements suited me would be fine for them. My social commitments in London, my once a week class at the adult education centre: they were understood. The work could be exhibited, yes, of course. As we left the restaurant, I was not so much drugged with happiness as transfixed by danger. She asked what we could do now. There was a moment of deep longing, and then the sharpest awakening. I was penniless, without social credentials, and had on my arm the wife of someone rich enough to end my career.

‘Some shopping?’ I said.

‘We are not going to see something? You have talked so much about artists.’

‘Exactly. You’ve had enough of my prating.’

She stopped. ‘That was different. You came down the stairs, you said good morning and you went straight to our Kustodiev in the corner. I like the picture, but no one else has heard of him.’

'Boris was good enough in his way.'

'I know. And what you said was true.'

'Well then.'

'Because I was angry. The night before you treat me like a simpleton, and now you are playing games. That is why I walked out.'

'What was the point? No one else in your place cared about painting. I didn't think you did until I saw the Kustodiev and then the Serov. It was a peace-offering.'

'Patrick, I have had two months to know that.' Her fingers tightened on my arm. 'You don't understand? I wanted you as a friend. I built up these hopes, and then you walked in and dashed them. Why are you so unapproachable?'

'Shall we try the National Gallery?' The word 'friend' caught me short of breath as we climbed the stairs to the entrance and pushed through the revolving door.

‘So where do we start?’ said Natalie. ‘The Impressionists?’

‘Bit crowded usually.’

‘Not aristocratic enough?’

‘Natalie, none of the best art of this century has been painted for a social elite. An intellectual or political one, yes, but not one that stresses good manners, tolerance and a detachment from life.’

‘So why did you not accept our Moscow invitation? We could have opened doors.’

‘Because you weren’t being serious.’

‘And you had not told Christine.’ She swung round. ‘Is that not true?’

‘Very likely. Let’s try the Venetians.’

She took the stairs, and I followed her into a room that looked airless this weekday afternoon. Sometimes paintings will blaze into speech, but now they seemed only repositories of craft, what

painters discuss and understand. Occasionally Natalie called me over and I explained how the work had evolved, the successes and the patchings over. Carried away with these expositions, I wasn't thinking when I added, 'Some things can be perfect. Wouldn't say you were too far off it.'

She shot me a surprised glance, but was smiling again. 'The Titian you do not like?'

'Lived too long. Around him all kinds of wonderful things were being done, but his hands weren't up to it. Of course our demented critics have praised the freedom and spontaneity of the work, but it's only rather sad.'

'Is that what you are afraid of?'

'Some were prodigiously gifted to the end. Tiepolo was. Those over there. Just scenery painting, but wonderful.'

'It is very accomplished.'

'You should have come to the Venetian exhibition at the Academy two years ago. Good deal more than that.'

'It is better than Boris, I know.'

'Kustodiev was a colourist. So was Matisse. But they kept everything in a high key. No shadows. Tiepolo brought in tone and colour in a way that no one else ever has. See how the tertiaries work together, the yellows and greens all tied in. Same with the other colours. That's more than craftsmanship. Boucher, Veronese: they're not in it at all.'

'So where is Patrick Hugh Staunton?'

'Don't. I have my strengths, but they're nothing like this. Students in those days were apprenticed from the age of five to painters who knew their craft. Hour after hour, day after day they were drilled and encouraged, for years and years. Not just their craft, it was their life, how they saw and understood themselves. Perhaps you see that dedication in dancers at the Kirov, or American

basketball players, but nowhere else. Today it's just words from critics who don't know what they're talking about.'

I'd said too much, and we'd collected a small crowd. 'Patrick,' she said, slipping an arm through, 'I understand. Can we have some tea now?'

'Shouldn't have gone on like that. Lots more to see.'

'I must go back soon.'

'St. Martin's crypt? The Meridian Hotel?'

'There is a cafeteria downstairs. Heinrich is collecting me at four.'

We found an empty table, and I brought over the Earl Grey tea she'd wanted, with a slice of lemon. The eyes flickered as she took it, and she angled herself out of direct view. Neither of us spoke for a while, and I only reluctantly pointed out the usual crowd of students, visitors and the out-of-work that would make an ideal pencil sketch. You

should try, she responded, allowing a long silence to follow. It had to be got out, however, and so I asked again. Yes, the commission was still on, if I wanted it.

Somehow we got through the fifteen minutes before the Daimler arrived. Heinrich climbed out, exchanged a few words with me about his wife's hair appointment, and then saw Natalie into the back. She gave me what I thought was a despairing glance, as though she had tried to make a conquest but had only hurt herself. That was a conjecture, a trick of the light, however, and I told myself that this was simply an important commission that would get me launched.

Frankly, it wasn't Natalie concerning me as I walked round to see Ecclestone. Or the vigilant husband, whose features I had been assessing again: the hard intelligence, and the eyes that sat waiting in their sockets. Not even Christine, I decided when I reached the plate glass door of the Cope Street Gallery and pressed the buzzer. My

Miss Manderson was currently out of town, enjoying a budget holiday with a sister up north, a prelude to the usual nesting instinct. Something deeper worried me as I peered into the gallery that afternoon. Several minutes went by. Then the customer, a portly gentleman in a blue pinstripe, was at the door and Reg was ushering him out with every show of genial favour.

Ecclestone led me through to the small back-office and listened with a faraway expression. 'Yes, I thought you would.' The thirty-five per cent had come rather easily, I thought, but any grievance was snatched away by the contract Reg took from the drawer. All the details were in place, confirmed by Reg's scrawl and the precise signature of Natalie M. Stumpfl.

'All we have to hope now,' I said as I handed the contract back, 'is that the painter can deliver. Hasn't been consulted too much so far, has he?'

'Wouldn't worry, old boy. Everyone has complete faith in you. They wouldn't have made you painter-in-residence otherwise. Private people.'

The eyes shifted and didn't respond to my inquiry. But Reg had finished his patter, and it was time to start mine. 'More Natalie Stumpfl's idea than her husband's, would you say?'

'Well, you know how it is', he said carelessly. The young wife who wants to make something of the house, but Herr Stumpfl is behind her. All the way.' There was a pause, a momentary hesitation, as he added, 'I'm sure you can look after yourself.'

'As usual', I said as Ecclestone began to rearrange his pens. 'Well, I'll be off then. Thanks for the commission, and I'll keep you posted.'

'Do', he said, and held out a friendly hand. 'You deserve it, and I'm sure you'll acquit yourself admirably.' He accompanied me to the door and gave his special boyish grin. 'For both of us.'

'Right you are', I said, feeling the pursed look following me till the corner was turned into Bond Street. I joined the rush-hour crowds making their way down Piccadilly and paused for no reason outside the Meridian Hotel. What I was looking for I cannot imagine, except some friendly stranger with whom I could escape the thought that I was already far out to sea.

As there was no one at the bar, I settled in the lounge, insisting on coffee from the Thai or Malay waitress who came over with the tourist menu. Coffee to replace tea? Just a straight pot of coffee. Could she do that, in this over-gilt room of mirrors and chandeliers? She conferred with the head-waiter, and coffee appeared. For a while I turned over the events of the day, only vaguely following the movements of the waitress as she floated round. She laughed at my request for the bill, and another deluge of fragrant coffee was splashed into the cup. The woman left with such an air of happiness that I wondered when the smiling apsara came off duty. Unreal, but I wanted reassurance,

and company, and that compliant young body without life's troublesome complications.

Perhaps Natalie had been in the room some time, but it was only then I heard that soft and slightly husky voice. Cautiously I looked round. She was sitting a few tables away, with her back to me, happily chatting to the MP I'd seen at Botes. My first impulse was to leave. It was none of my business, and the two of them might well have been waiting for Stumpfl. Only I didn't think so, not in the Meridian Hotel, and Natalie's hair looked the same. Why the lie, given so glibly when Stumpfl had collected her? That he didn't want Natalie around after she'd played her part, I could understand, but why such an obvious falsehood? I strained to hear what was being said. Odd rushes of words. Laughter. They knew each other well, I realized with a stab of pain, and then came the obvious.

I had been a fool. Stumpfl knew exactly what his wife was up to. She had her life and he had his. It was as clear as day. She had teased me on Tie-

polo's rococo beauties and I'd given her a lecture on the painter's craft.

I slunk off to the basement bar and ordered a double whisky. An American in shirtsleeves was already in place, stuffing fistfuls of peanuts into his mouth, and there were some Chinese, with a spiky intelligence behind rimless glasses. The lounge waitress came through for a signature. 'No, I'm not staying here.' I said with a smile. There was a look, the dark irises disappearing into the upper lid and reappearing with a hint of reproach that stilled the blood. 'Unfortunately,' I added, 'but keep the change . . .'

'Sompong', she said as she took the note. 'Thank you, sir.'

It was the 'sir', inflected and smoothed away into a rustle of sibilants that brought my resolution to its knees, causing me to order another double, and perhaps another after that, though I don't remember, or the tube journey back, though I found myself undressed when I woke the following morn-

ing with a hangover that was soon to be the least of my troubles.

CHAPTER TWO

Christine Manderson was back a week later, in ample time to pose as the dashing blonde when we drove out to my dealer's party. We parked the old Mercedes in a gap in the long line of cars, and walked up the chained path to the mock-Tudor house. 'A knockout.' declared Reg gallantly. 'Even more stunning than the paintings.' He led us through the chintz-furnished lounge to the guests on the far lawn. Natalie I noticed, and James, the sharer of my studio in Hammersmith, listening to an unusually animated Stumpfl. 'Come and meet the others', insisted Ecclestone as I went to join his

wife, who was on her own, flustered as always by company.

‘Fantastic turnout, Sibyl. Half the town must be here.’

‘We do our best.’ Christine had now reached Natalie. I saw Reg make the introductions, and Christine’s hands stay firmly on the hips. Not a good start, I was thinking as Sibyl chattered nervously. ‘You can thank the Stumpfls. They insisted on celebrating the commission.’

‘Hope they chipped in.’

‘Oh, we can run to it, at least for the moment.’ She intercepted my glance across the garden to the neighbouring properties that emerged from the depths of the hill. ‘All mortgaged, you know: built on hopes.’ She patted my hand. ‘That’s why we were so pleased you accepted.’

‘Pretty well had to.’

'Will you let me say something without taking offence? I've been watching you. You haven't taken your eyes off the glamorous Mrs Stumpfl since you arrived.'

'Frau Stumpfl is out of my class. Not to mention that she's happily married.'

'Not from what I can see.'

I made some deprecating gesture. 'No cause for worry. All sorted.'

'Just be careful, will you?' said Sibyl. 'I have to go and check the food.'

Natalie was picking her way from group to group, and Christine had collected her usual band of admirers when the first course appeared. We took our plates, and I helped myself to something for Christine who was still talking to a group clearly of my profession. 'That's what he says. Don't you, Patrick?'

'I thought you'd like to start with the salmon. Looks excellent.'

'There hasn't been a decent painter in England since Orpie.'

'Orpen. Shall we try the table over there?'

'Don't patronize me. That's what you said.'

No doubt I had, but now I was playing my role of Patrick the charmer, and could have done without the thin voice saying, 'So we have an unbeliever in our midst.'

'Freddie, good to see you. Christine, this is Frederick Howells. You can read him in the Sunday papers.'

'A veritable Judas, I do declare.'

'Don't know I've ever been numbered among the twelve elect, but let's trade blows some other time.'

‘Why should we?’ said Christine, pushing the plate back. ‘Aren’t you going to stand up for yourself?’

‘Everyone knows Patrick’s views.’ I took her firmly by the arm, though she kept looking round till we reached an empty table.

‘Now what have I done?’

‘Just didn’t want an argument with Howells.’

‘I thought you believed in yourself.’

‘You know that.’

Christine had been there when I unearthed an old volume of ‘The Studio’, and found I liked the work, better than anything today. Of course I continued giving the required answers to my first year class—how we approach the giants of modernism, how their ideas count more than technical skills—but started to look carefully at the painting business. Patrick the Apostate made his own paints and canvases, and even stopped running the usual

course on contemporary theory. For a whole term the Principal said nothing, but then had me in. Art colleges are state institutions, with syllabuses that prepare students for careers in advertising and commercial art. Didn't I understand that?

Theory was reinstated, but I added some proper aesthetics to the usual nonsense. I dug up old painting manuals, and set students their humdrum exercises, until the year-end college exhibition caused a rumpus. The hanging committee voted my work out, and I countered with the regulations. The work stayed, and I doubled the prices. Out of the blue, Reg Ecclestone phoned one lunchtime to say that he'd seen the portraits and would I consider a small commission? So the career began, slowly, the second commission coming months later, when I was still teaching five days a week, and not enjoying the notoriety.

'Red or white?' said our host, appearing suddenly. 'You can drink, can't you, my dear?' He tipped the white into her glass but shook his head

at me. 'Not if you're going to hide over here. Not fair to the others, keeping a smashing creature like this out of circulation.'

'I'm all right, Mr Ecclestone', said Christine, looking up with a pleased smile.

'Then I shall push people on to you. The Stumpfls for a start.'

I got to my feet as the two came over. 'Patrick,' said Natalie, 'how nice to see you again. And Christine. You have met Heinrich?' She settled herself as I held the chair. 'The weather has turned out warm again. You English are so much wiser. Heinrich, I told you. I should have worn something like Christine's. It is very becoming.'

Natalie may have a slight accent, but her English is better than that. Often it's astonishing, like something from a thirties novel, and Christine must have realized that battle lines were being drawn. 'Yes, an odd country,' I said, 'but we do make an

effort in this short summer of ours, mayflies as we are.'

'That is not correct, I think', said Stumpf. He sat down and poured his wine into Natalie's glass. 'You are not summer creatures.'

'We haven't all bought the gloomy Modernist creed, if that's what you mean.'

'Is the Bauhaus gloomy, Mr Staunton?'

'Pretty soulless, wouldn't you think?'

'And you, Miss Manderson?' said Stumpf abruptly. 'You know these things? You have been to Germany?'

'Once', said Christine. 'With Patrick.'

'Two years ago. We took a coach tour to Berlin, Prague and Budapest. A fleeting glimpse of the cultural monuments. Of the past, mostly.'

'That is pity for you. Now everything is changing.'

'I admit we should know our eastern neighbours better. Even Christine thought our little coach tour was a wild adventure into the mists of the Slav homelands.' I turned to give her the floor but she was only baffled. 'We have to talk, Chrissie', I said, reaching a hand across. 'The Stumpfles have paid us the compliment of setting up home in England.'

'Have they?'

'You must come down and see us', said Natalie, the perfect teeth appearing in a radiant smile. 'To make sure we are looking after Patrick properly.'

'Of course, and thank you', I returned, as Christine did nothing but fold her arms indignantly. 'Perhaps we shall even talk about prospects in the east, though I don't know there's much in it for an old reactionary like me.'

'Mr Staunton, there is.' He looked at Natalie as though by signal. 'But you would know that. Oxford? Modern history?'

'Rather a blind alley.'

'You got your degree, but you did not use it.'

'That's the English system. Study one thing and do another. Hopelessly old-fashioned.'

'But you had reasons, no?'

'Very likely.'

'It is business', he said, smiling at my annoyance. 'We Germans are methodical people.'

'But you are not German, are you? Or only in name.' There wasn't a flicker of acknowledgement, but Stumpfpl paused, and I could see the hand had been called. 'Now, please,' I said, 'surely we don't have to fight these battles. Both sides have much to repent of, but doesn't that belong to the past?'

'That is the victor talking.'

'Herr Stumpfpl, your wife will tell you the English look at everything from their own interests. The Renaissance, literature, schools of painting: all grew up woefully out of shape in this cold climate.'

'You see, my dear: the English understatement. The land of free speech. The great empire, the originator of the industrial revolution, and Mr Staunton tells us that England is only a misshapen copy.'

'In artistic matters. For the everyday conduct of life, no doubt it's best the English do muddle along. Perhaps business even boils down to common sense.'

'You deceive yourself, Mr Staunton. Decisions are planned. Always they are part of a larger strategy.'

'So you see how hopeless I'd be.'

'But you have sold yourself to my wife. That is something not easy.'

'A wife as attractive and intelligent as yours would bring out the best in anyone', I said, ignoring Christine, who looked back wary and uncertain.

'And how would you know?' said Natalie, the voice issuing as though out of nowhere.

I was surprised to see how piercing was the look beneath the doll-like features, but if Christine had been threatened, and my past troubles brought up, I wasn't going to let matters drop. 'Natalie,' I said, 'you have a degree in art history. You saw my work, and said you could count on my doing the job properly. But if some penance is needed, if we must right the wrongs of modern Europe, then perhaps we should tear up the contract right now.'

The smile held, but for a moment there appeared—how shall I put it?—something faltering and pleading in Natalie's expression. She turned away, and looked for reassurance to her husband.

'My wife has a diploma in picture restoration', said Stumpfl. 'But in other ways you are right.' He nodded to Natalie, who got to her feet. 'We shall look forward to seeing you at Botes soon. I hope you will come too, Miss Manderson. It has been a pleasure.' Natalie smiled at Christine, and shook hands with me, the hand lingering a moment.

'A great pleasure', retorted Christine when they were out of earshot. 'What was all that about?'

'Chrissie, I have no idea.'

I'd registered Stumpf's dexterity within an hour of our meeting, but I had never seen him before in this forensic manner, nor found myself so inadequate to the occasion. The Stumpfs left the party an hour later, and I told Christine to announce our departure around four. Howells had disappeared, but I was not sure of safety till we were motoring home along the M40, both of us fretful and depressed.

Things were different when Christine first appeared, one evening at the college dance. I'd heard one of the models referred to as the 'blonde bombshell', but hadn't met her. It was only boyish high spirits, after some student I'd been dancing with went off to get us drinks, that caused me to stroll up to the figure chatting near the band, and I'm surprised she even heard me above the noise. She turned round immediately, however, and I saw

those cornflower-blue eyes open with surprise. My partner was waiting, however, and after a few minutes I sauntered back. An hour or so later Christine reappeared, gave my partner a shove, and dragged me off.

We got a taxi back, Christine running into the road and stretching out her arms to make the driver brake suddenly. 'He'll tell you', she said, and handed over a note. The closeness of our dancing was nothing to the frank happiness with which she now reached up and folded me in her arms. We were still lying over the back seat, her warm body pressed into mine, when I realized we'd stopped. Dreamily she came to, pushed the hair from her face, and staggered down. The cabby was waving the note she'd given him as I fumbled for the extra money, but the man simply drove off, the only time I've seen a flicker of heart in our national institution.

My flat was much too neat to be true, and, with that uncanny intuition of women, Christine marched over, pulled out a drawer and tossed its contents

out of the window. 'You belong to me', she said, as I stared into the garden below. 'I don't share. Not Christine Manderson.'

So began the affair, good in those days. She could cry off, be difficult, but once in bed was always direct with her feelings. Models do not take up with painters, I should tell you, despite the biographies and the public's fantasies. They are modest creatures who earn too little from back-breaking poses to continue associating with the trade. All the same, students do sense the privacy of the bodies they draw, however engrossing the posture of the skeleton, or the exact webbing of the dozens of muscles they must note and understand. Here is a creature extended and vulnerable in a way they wouldn't otherwise see, and with that familiarity comes possessiveness. The sense of something stolen from the class fuelled the dislike when Patrick turned apostate.

I don't think Christine cared. She doesn't make enemies, and placidly continued her hours as

commissions began to arrive, and I could transfer to one day a week at the adult education centre at Belsize Park in north London. Two summers later I won a large commission—the six grandchildren of a doting landowner—and in a fit of confidence didn't reapply. Immediately I regretted the decision and spent six months on State support. Once settled into the hand-to-mouth existence of the other tutors, however, I began to like the threadbare independence. I had time to widen my interests, though it was to Georg Michnik that I owed my interest in matters Russian.

Georg is a Pole, a taciturn etcher in his early sixties. At that time I knew him only slightly, as a shambling automaton who would hunch his shoulders at being spoken to, and then swivel round to fix a gimlet stare through wire-rimmed glasses. To everyone's relief he took his meals in the etching room, an outbuilding of the converted school that served as the centre, and it was here that I mentioned the Stumpfl's pictures after my return from Botes.

He looked at me crossly. 'The Futurists? They are rubbish.'

'The World of Art. Serov, Supunov, Kustodiev. I saw a couple recently.'

'They will be copies.'

'Looked pretty much like the genuine article to me.'

'So now you are expert?' Georg gave his Himmler look and went to turn off a hotplate beginning to blur with smoke at the far end of the room. He'd understood, though, and was waiting for details as he settled himself again. 'These people have money?'

'Heinrich Stumpf. An industrialist or something.'

'No wife?'

'You know my policy.'

'When I was a young man it was different. I was the best dancer in Warsaw.'

I doubted that, but said, 'How life passes.'

'Like a dream. You do not know that because you are young. You think life will go on just the same, for ever and ever.'

I saw myself the recipient of a shameful confidence the old man would later regret mentioning.

'The young never listen.'

Not true. Largely through Georg I started drawing: in life-class and at railway stations: anywhere the body is relaxed and at ease with itself. I even spent two exhausting weeks in Delhi—a cheap flight and an even cheaper hotel—where for hour after hour on the hot roads I drew the bustle, the street porters, the women trudging about the markets.

Georg might produce his etchings of rural scenes, which were beautiful but strangely empty, apparently selling only at some Painters' Cooperative he belonged to, but for me it was people. Couldn't you exhibit back home, I'd once asked

him, but he'd had only growled something about art being universal.

He was still looking at me. 'She is married happily, this client of yours?'

'Georg, people are. Or they have the freedom to change.'

'They are luckier than they realize.'

I knew what he meant. Poland when the war ended: whole cities destroyed, people starving, a quarter of the population missing. I knew how Georg had wangled a student exchange to Czechoslovakia and fled to Austria when the Uprising failed.

'But we build again. Stone by stone we make Warsaw as before: Poland for the Poles.'

It had been stupid of me, and Georg was now off on his favourite theme: the need to believe in something, that art expressed spiritual values. In my present state I might well have believed him. 'I know what you think', I said, nodding to one of my

sketches he'd put on the wall. 'Just amusement to people who have nothing beyond their self-satisfied vanity. That's why the latest commission includes some landscapes. Broadening my scope.'

'That is sure? You are doing landscapes? You are getting desperate, my friend. Or this client of yours . . . ' He looked at me shrewdly and then winked. 'You have more freedom there?'

'Nothing like that.'

'Well, your friend will ask around.'

'I'd be obliged if you did nothing of the sort. Heinrich and Natalie Stumpfl are simply clients.'

Georg's marriages I'd heard about in his flat one wet February, crouched round the smoking paraffin heater. He'd been annoyed when I'd only nodded, and rummaged in a drawer. 'You think my wife not beautiful?' he said, producing a photo.

She was. 'Renata, is that?'

'Marie. Austrian.' He looked at me with jovial complicity. My Polish wife was something else.' But then he changed, and I had to prattle on about my own affairs, which didn't interest him, not in the slightest, though he opened a new bottle of schnapps. 'To women', he said. 'Or in your case, because you do not understand much, to woman, eternal woman.'

'What does that mean?'

'I tell you what you do,' said Georg, leaning confidentially across, 'you rejoice.'

'Rejoice has it, Georg. You're right.'

'No, you listen, my young friend. You understand nothing. Life is a bewitchment, an enchantment. If you do not know that then you cannot be artist. You see: here I have nothing, but I am happy, because I look at the world. It is tragic. A terrible place, but it is beautiful.'

Matters had gone too far to make a joke, and I stared at him uncertainly.

‘Do not worry, my friend. You will see. It will turn out good.’

It hadn't so far, and all that was clear this afternoon as we drove back along the M40 were other people hurtling past in the fast lane. Occasionally I joined them. Patrick Staunton may not have the family intelligence, but he does have the sportsman's steady nerves. The Mercedes has seen better days, however, and I soon had to drop back into the middle lane. We were now entering Hillingdon, the western edge of London, passing rows of suburban houses and sensible lives. With Christine quiet, I thought again of explaining the commission, the four days a week I should have to be at Botes.

I was always explaining, even to my father when I'd tried to prepare him for Christine. ‘Just bring her along’, he'd said promptly. ‘If she's a good-looking girl that'll be more than enough.’ But I could see within a few minutes that the old boy was determined to enjoy himself. ‘We came here for our

honeymoon', he remarked as soon as we settled for lunch in the Basil Street Hotel.

'Oh right', said Christine.

'Seems a long time now, though the décor hasn't changed.'

Christine looked round vacantly.

'Or the waiters, by the look of them.'

'Don't know about that,' I put in, 'they wouldn't have been Greek or Portuguese then.'

'Spanish', decided my father, calling one of them over. I have a reasonably stocked mind, but my father is a natural, one of those who grow peevish when surrounded by everyday stupidity. Once Penelope, my brilliant sister, was dead, from leukaemia at twenty, he was already making plans for an early retirement to Spain. 'It's a fascinating country', he said to Christine. 'Still Moorish in places. Berbers, as you know.'

Christine was unruffled. She took the old gentleman in the frayed linen jacket as a leftover from another age, to whom she had no responsibilities. It never crossed her mind that my father was expecting a contribution to his talk on Andalusia. Or that in our bantering exchange, he was continually trying to draw her in, though without success. When he asked to be seen off at the airport the following day I knew I was in for some searching questions.

He seemed conciliatory at first. 'Clearly level-headed', he said after a longish while, mostly spent discussing the items for which I was to scour the antiquarian booksellers. 'No doubt about that.'

'Amazingly good-natured.'

'She is. And much else. It's none of my business, but if you want someone devoted to you, to look after you, then you'll never do better than that woman. Not in this world. You understand me?'

'I do know that.'

'Well, don't bridle at what I'm saying. Tell her. If you care for her, get married. There's nothing else to be done.'

'Christine might very well turn me down.'

'But if you want a soul mate, more your intellectual equal, then it's no good stringing her along. For her sake or yours.'

'So we're not talking about Christine.'

'Patrick, you are all I've got. The one person I still care about. I've done my best to instil the fundamental decencies of life, but I seem somehow to have failed. I don't know what you propose to do with this woman, or your whole life.' He was angry, and I thought for a moment he'd pick up his belongings and march off through Departures.

'I'm to plan for what I don't even know myself?'

'Then isn't it time you found out? I fought in the Spanish Civil War, but not at your age.'

'I happen to be working hard.'

'Why take up this damn-fool profession in the first place?'

'It's the only way I feel in charge.'

'I told you at the time, and I'll tell you again: what is done is done. You will always remember what happened, and so perhaps you should. But there's no point in blighting your future with it. Just face up to your shortcomings. We all have to.'

He stopped and was staring at me, the skin stretched sharply over the impatient cut of the eyes and small jaw. But we'd both said more than was needed, and were glad when a couple joined our table. For several minutes we were silent, until my father gathered his things and said, 'Let's go for a walk. I'll be cooped up for hours in that metal tube shortly.' I carried his battered holdall and we walked through the terminal building, pausing to watch the aircraft coming in over nearby runways. 'There's no one else, is there?' he said gently, almost as an aside.

'I meet attractive women through my work. But that's as far as it goes.'

'Couldn't you get around more?'

'I have to paint what I can. Mostly that means the women of rich husbands.'

'You don't know? You should, Patrick. Look, I am sorry for the unpleasantness. I care about you, and would like you to do well. Write to me, would you? You used to write very well.'

'I used to do a lot of things', I said and shook his hand. We walked to Departures. He went through and then suddenly turned, waved his hat, and disappeared.

That had been nine months ago. I had written, but not said anything important, a fact that weighed on me as we arrived at the flat. But Christine, balm as she is to all life's complications, simply stripped off and climbed into bed. 'Come on then. If you still want me?'

'Rather', I said, repeating it an hour later, though she wasn't fooled.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

Christine took a last puff, and squashed the cigarette stub into the ashtray. 'You know, I think you're giving me up.'

What can you say to someone who expresses herself so nakedly, when you have a warm-blooded woman reeking of intimacy, her flushed body waiting for your answer?

'Are you sleeping with her?' The eyes had gone opaque, as they do those rare occasions when something troubles her.

'Who, for Heaven's sake?'

She sat up, tucked her legs in and said, 'So that's it. You're afraid. This Stumpfl woman has given you the shakes.'

'Nothing of the kind.'

'You're afraid of the experience, the deeply transformative experience into a vulnerable, caring human being.'

'Chrissie, put the psychology book away, would you? I'm telling you the truth.'

'You're a monster. Any thought of me cross your mind, the poor mutt who's been going with you all this time?'

'Now that you can't complain about.'

I was shot down immediately. 'You were a million miles away this time.'

'Was I? Sorry.'

'Is that all you can say?' Abruptly she swung herself off the bed and padded over to the sink, the broad vastus muscles flexing under the raw sienna of the thighs, a mesmerizing sight, making the soul ache for brush.

'It'll have to be instant. You're out of the other.' She lit the gas, dumped the kettle on the ring, and padded back. 'You're a fool. I could be really fond of you.'

'What about going out tonight?' I said. 'Try the new French place?'

'What do you take me for? I'm not forking out so you can give me the bad news in swish surroundings.'

I watched her sit down heavily, tug on a pair of briefs, and then go over to the TV., finding one of the panel games that were her usual refuge when vexed. Soon would come tidying up the flat: stacking the folders, returning plates and dishes to the sink. I know she had no conversation, that we'd go to college functions, and at the bar she would sit, hour after hour, saying nothing, only waiting until she could take me back to the flat.

There my little arrangements were sacrosanct. A book might be collected from the floor and placed

on the bedside table, but the page at which I'd left it open would still be upwards or have a marker. She worried endlessly about my diet, and if I got low on tea or bread I would find that she'd slipped out and restocked. Her family's birthdays were remembered, and all her friends', scrupulously, and what was chosen was always thoughtful. No doubt she was possessive and domineering, but if there is a heaven we go to, then I believe it will be peopled with warm and caring creatures like Christine.

She was bringing the coffee, and loomed over the bed. There were the two cups, the sunlight playing over the dark surface, a large hand with pink-painted nails, a warm body with its peach and salmon blotches and small freckles, the crisp white brief—and astonishment. Whatever I'd been thinking a moment ago, I now had a picture, possibly a whole series of pictures. I should have to add items to the tray, and perhaps give Christine a half-open housecoat, but here was something I unquestionably wanted to paint. I knew it as I always knew them: a searing pain of recognition, and then the

despairing months of working it out. Christine was not in a mood to be asked, however, and for a while we concentrated on drinking the coffee. 'Now, Chrissie,' I said at last, 'we get on well enough, don't we?'

She didn't hide the contempt. 'Just tell me.'

'You've met the Stumpfls. All they've done is commission a large series of pictures.'

'So Christine will model the dresses, is that what you're asking?'

'You're a different size. I'll get someone else if necessary. What I'd like to keep you for is something different.'

'So why all the drama? You've had good commissions before.'

'There isn't any drama, though I have a feeling that all is not well, that I'm being played along.'

'The contract's been signed?'

'Yes.'

'Well, maybe it's just you treading the straight and narrow with your clients.' The happy expression returned. 'Only I never know with you.' She frowned and tentatively slipped an arm round. 'You're keeping me for the other series?' She looked at me carefully. 'Well, I may even get the meal tonight. On your forthcoming earnings.'

'Don't worry. I'm in the funds. Sold another of my pieces recently.'

A mistake. It was blindingly obvious before I'd finished the sentence, but I had to sit there, smiling, as Christine gathered her thoughts. 'Which picture? One of those studies of me?'

'One of those that Reg took away for a mixed exhibition.'

'And this Stumpfl woman, she bought it?'

'As it happens. For her husband.'

'Patrick, you're a fool.' She got off the bed and walked about the room, finally plonking herself in a chair opposite. 'God, you're a fool. I might till then have swallowed your story. But it's Natalie after all. She's got designs on you, and you don't know what to do.'

'Of course not. Natalie simply bought the study because her husband collects paintings.'

'Because she's sizing up the competition.'

'Come on, Chrissie.'

'You know how much you owe me in modelling fees? Two hundred and eighty, with yesterday's session. So you can pay up. If this Natalie Stumpf's got money to throw about, there are deserving causes nearer home.'

'Christine, you'll get it. Once the contract's over.'

'Oh no, you're not escaping into work this time. You're going to have to do better than that.'

'Let's just go out, shall we?'

'And forget all those times when you were prancing round your studio, showing off what I'd bought you.'

'You've been fantastic, Chrissie.'

'And you've taken advantage of it. 'Oh, you look so enchanting, Samantha. Please sit your elegant fanny down here, Lady Stewart.'

'Mrs Stewart, actually.'

'I know you, Patrick. You're a fraud. Maybe the work isn't bad, but women don't pose for that. They like to be titillated. It's what you're good at.'

'Chrissie, just shut up.'

'That's struck home, hasn't it? Well this time the shoe's on the other foot. You're going to have to interest me. And not just interest, work for me. Have a shower and come back. I want it properly from you this time. No fantasizing, no just going through the motions. I'm a woman, just how much you're going to discover. When I'm finished with

you, you're not going to feel a separate person for a long time.'

What could I say to that, borrowed as it was, I suppose, from some book she'd been reading? But she was right, and stayed so for the weeks following, until I took myself wearily off to Northamptonshire and the new assignment.

CHAPTER THREE

Botes Manor stands at the far edge of the Cotswolds. On three sides are the level fields of the shire counties, bordered by elms and slow-meandering rivers, but for a few miles around the house the land rises again into small hills. The estate is not marked on maps, however, and, as on the previous trip, it took some time to find the entrance, where I had to pose for the surveillance camera before the gates whirred slowly open.

Two miles down the drive the facade came into view. Thin ribbings of yellow sandstone rose into spires and were separated by immense diamond panes of glossy darkness. Again it had that secre-

tive appearance, and the housekeeper stood waiting when I brought the Mercedes to a halt on the gravelled forecourt. The Stumpfls were away at present, she said, but arrangements had been made. We went through the high entrance hall, and up the stone staircase to the first floor. My room was a short way down the passage: a man's room, homely and airy, with a scatter of Persian rugs on the floor and deep armchairs. The late sun sparkled on the lead joins, and through the rippled glass I could see the lawn sloping down to the swimming pool. Perfect, I told her, and went down to collect my second bag.

Mrs Wylie was hovering when I helped myself to the cold buffet laid out in the small dining room. Herr Stumpfl had been most particular. Whatever I wanted for breakfast, or any other meal, I was to let her know. Kippers, I said, with toast and coffee. She nodded, and later took me up to the north wing where a room had been converted into a studio. My easel, mixing table and paints had been brought over as I'd asked, but there were also stretchers,

another studio easel and two rolls of canvas. New brushes stood in jars, and I didn't need to run my fingers through to know their quality.

My first concern was to plan the assignment. The owners would come first, and after them the staff, and then the house. I made rough drawings of the Mrs Wylie, Bursken the bailiff, and the groundsmen, and afterwards splashed in a little watercolour. The real work would have to wait until my hosts returned, as I explained to Christine on my first weekend back.

'So we're having to live it up all on our own-some.'

'It's just a job. We agreed the money's going to be useful.'

'We agreed that you'd be out of this hole by now. You haven't even looked at the Steeles Road flat.' She handed me the sales details again.

'We will.'

'And there's an invitation to a fancy dress party. Opened it because it could have been urgent.'

'That's all right, Chrissie. I don't have any secrets from you.'

'So who are Mr and Mrs G.F. Howard?'

'Must be Jerry Howard. Haven't seen him since Oxford days.'

'You can count me out.'

'Don't be silly. You'll like him. What are you going as?'

'You don't listen.'

She agreed in the end, and through the London A to Z we found a detached house in one of Esher's leafier quarters, expensive and not what I'd have expected of Jerry's background. Our host wasn't at the door, and I couldn't place the brunette who stretched out a black-gloved hand. 'Of course,' I said, going back, Christine not following, 'you're Jerry's wife. We haven't met.'

'And you're Patrick. Told you much about his errant past, has he?' she said to Christine.

'No.'

'Just as well. You and I should have a little talk. If you haven't netted Patrick by now you clearly need some help.'

She put a protective arm around as I tried to intervene. 'I'll look after her. You go and enjoy yourself.'

'Lost the better half already?' said one of the men who'd strolled over.

I grinned. 'Patrick Staunton.'

'Peter Rivers', he said, shaking my hand again. 'Yes, you can count on Gloria. That Avengers turn-out suits her, don't you think?'

'So that's what it is. I had more lurid ideas.'

'Naughty boy.' He looked at me closely. 'Old friend of Jerry's?'

'Oxford days. Same college.'

'Ah, the artist. Jerry said he'd invited some luminary or other. But I can't say you look much like a painter to me.'

'I'm Attila the Hun, in case this get-up isn't making the point.'

'Not like the other industrious little doodlers we have in our agency. You wouldn't keep your head down for long.'

'I'd be happy to try.'

'Packaging. That's what we do.'

I laughed. 'Tell me how Jerry's doing.'

'Ask him yourself. He's through there. But make sure you meet my wife. Veronica's got her eye on you.'

It was Jerry, though older, with a little heaviness in the good-natured expression. He poured a whisky and then, without looking up, doubled it.

'Rapine and slaughter tonight, is it, O valorous one?

'Jerry, how are you? Long time.'

'Fine.' He gave my hand a vigorous shake. 'You've met Gloria, haven't you?'

'She snaffled my girlfriend.'

'You could always pick them.'

'Gloria is charming. Congratulations.'

'My friend, I thank you.' He bent down to open another box of glasses. 'Drop back in an hour or so, would you? We can slope off and have a pow-wow. Unless you're going to stay the night? Bags of room.'

'Love to, but I don't think Christine approves of my drinking buddies.'

'Say no more. Toiling like the rest of us, eyeless in the mill at Gaza.'

I wandered round, through the six rooms that made up the ground floor, all furnished in standard taste. Snatches of conversation floated past: the job, last year's holiday, the children's education. One could do worse, even if all the bright promise of these bodies was already settling into comfortable middle age. In the garden I found a concrete bench and put my feet up on the sundial, realizing that Christine had been right: my boots didn't go with the costume. Still, I preferred a Bohemian style, even as I liked the Spartan surroundings of my bedsit, with its scuffed plaster and curtains that didn't reach the window-sill.

'Why's that?' Christine had once demanded.

'The contrast. Your glowing skin against the tawdry scene.'

'You're sick.'

'The freedom to make a new world.'

'And selfish.'

That's what I did. Women bought themselves underwear and bedroom ornaments that no one would see because the objects created a world of interior luxury. That world I sensed—eventually, if I flattered and cajoled enough—was filled with an individual personality. It's what I painted, and what they paid for, even if I cheated with the fees or the setting. To create a presence that only the two of us understood, to stain the air with a bright radiance, as someone put it. The phrase came back as an intriguing reminder, and I wasn't for a moment aware of Jerry standing over me.

'You ready?' he said.

'You're not giving up your own party?'

'We most certainly are. Sir Walter Raleigh and Attila the Hun are off to the local for fresh supplies. Come along.'

We threaded our way through the cars parked in the long driveway and set off down the road—sauntered, I should say, with the self-conscious

happiness of boys truant from school. Ten minutes brought us to The Wheatsheaf, where Jerry held the door. I went through into a lounge almost empty this warm Saturday evening. 'Lummy', said the barmaid as I made my way over.

'No, this is on me', said Jerry. 'Sheila, let me introduce an old friend: Patrick Staunton the painter. Now in disguise.'

I grinned raffishly.

'Take your hat off when you meet a lady. No manners these barbarians.'

The woman collapsed slowly on to the bar, displaying an extravagant cleavage. 'You're off your block. Both of you.'

'That's no way to speak to an old and valued customer. I shall have the usual, if you please.' He handed over a fiver. 'And my friend . . .'

'Will have a tonic water.'

'Careful type, are we?' said the woman, placing the drinks on the bar.

'Driving.'

'Use the tube, loverboy.'

I smiled, put on my helmet, and carried the drinks over to the table near the window.

'It's good to see you', said Jerry. 'And sit round here, so you don't ogle my property. All going well, is it? The good and the great queuing outside your studio?'

'I'd like to hope so.'

'You think I've sold out', he said in that self-deprecating drawl I could now remember.

'You're doing pretty well, as far as I can see.'

'Balderdash. The blight of middle-class respectability has fallen across my life. How does it go?'

'And there is nothing left remarkable under the visiting moon?'

'That's it. True, my friend. I see nothing of the old crowd. You're the last of the innings.'

'Patter of tiny feet now?'

'Sebastian and Philip. Take after their mother.'

'Congratulations.'

'Yes, all satisfactory on that front, but you know what I mean. I want them to make something of themselves. You don't have a real job, but the sky hasn't fallen in. Not everyone has to have a mortgage or holidays abroad or school fees to save for.'

'Sometimes wish I had.'

'Really? Cupid's arrow has struck home? Found your soul mate, your true heart's desire? I am most profoundly happy. Don't be put off by the moanings of this poor married doormat. Marriage is an honourable estate. Engaged to the woman? Christine, is it?'

'Not exactly.'

'You may bend Uncle Jerry's ear. I am replete with the wisdom of ages, and very discrete.'

'Hence the budding affair with our friend over there.'

'That is a gross slander on my character.'

'Just wondering where I fitted in.'

'Nowhere. Unless that studio of yours is available?'

'Not really.'

'Occasionally?'

'Jerry, I have a poky bedsit that serves as flat and studio and everything else. It's Christine's territory. I've never brought women back there. Or clients. They go to a studio I share down in Hammersmith, where there's no privacy. None at all.'

'Just an idea.'

'What's wrong with a quiet hotel?'

'Gloria. She scrutinizes everything: it's her money, or most of it. Besides, a painter's studio would be romantic.'

'Anything else I should know? Nothing about having promised the poor woman a sitting?'

'It is possible.'

'You haven't changed. Look, these days I never work for free. I have to be professional.'

He looked at me forlornly. 'Understood. I should have known better.'

'Sorry.'

'Quite all right, old man. We forget how people are when we haven't seen them for a while. You always were a serious coot. Stuck to your guns, whatever you did.'

'I'm not making difficulties. Just the truth.'

'What you have to remember is that not all of us are made of the same unbending steel. It causes

problems. Patrick says no, and everyone has to adapt. Even Rowena did. Now don't interrupt. I'm going to tell you something. You know who went up to Scotland afterwards to see her father? Muggins.'

I stared at him, puzzled. 'Didn't know you'd met him.'

'Why did I invite her to that last ball? Just to take her off your hands? No, it was because I was in love with her. Absolutely besotted. All that time you were half taking her out and playing around I was the one who desperately wanted her back. Didn't you know that?'

'Why the hell didn't you say?'

'Because we were friends, and Rowena wanted you. Is that hopelessly derring-do? If Rowena could be happy with you I wasn't going to stand in the way.'

Slowly the memories came back: Jerry's behaviour, the odd hints Rowena had dropped. I saw the kindness of Rowena's father, the unspoken as-

sumption among the staff that I would gradually take over. Of course I'd been flattered, as any young man would, and it was only one afternoon, as we sat in the drawing room in the spotlessly-kept house, that I realized what was missing. Rowena was a presentable woman. Her father had all the straight dealing you'd expect of a military background. And the setting was magnificent. But there was nothing of the atmosphere in which Patrick Staunton could live. A better man would have ended matters on the spot, spoken to laird and daughter, and quietly packed his bags. I hung about, though, shocked by the revelation. For a whole year I couldn't explain.

Jerry was looking at me.

'I don't know what to say.'

'All forgotten, old man. Water under the bridge.'

'Look, I'll do the girl's portrait, and gratis, if that's what you've promised.'

'Like to do Gloria's as well?'

'I'm not cheap now. One grand at least.'

'Ask two. Just get us a room in London with the extra cash.'

'No, Jerry.'

'Or just slip us the money.'

'Rather high stakes, isn't it? With a good-looking wife, beautiful home, two children . . .'

'If I don't break out occasionally, I shall go mad. Sheila is something I must have.'

'Couldn't you use her place?'

'Seen her boyfriend, all fourteen stone of him? Sheila knows the score. She's not my type any more than Christine is yours.'

'Christine is about the kindest creature I know.'

'Right, grovelling apologies, old man. We'll fix up a dinner party sometime. I thought you were just playing around.'

‘Would you mind if we went back now? I promised Christine she wouldn’t be abandoned.’

‘Understood. We shall go back on the instant.’

I looked at Jerry during our return as though to find something I hadn’t seen before, but he was just the same, ambling along with that small boy’s quizzical expression. The front door was open as we came up the drive and I could feel the music heavy on the air. Christine was sitting it out, but got up immediately I came into the room. ‘Right,’ I said, ‘let’s dance. Dance as though our lives depended on it. Chrissie, please.’

Both Stumpfls were back the following week, though it was through Natalie that I made arrangements. I began their portraits in the studio, working at them alternately. The fierce look had not returned to Stumpfl, and I soon gave up trying to balance the man’s chilly ambience with his busi-

ness successes, concentrating on the dotting pleasure with which he followed his wife around.

In truth it was Natalie's portrait that pleased me most. There is something unexpected, even magical about a portrait coming to life, and I began to feel I'd never painted so well. Even Stumpfl would look in at lunchtime, and again at five. Sometimes he would sit there after dinner, with all the lights turned on, which spoiled the flesh tones that I'd built up with acid yellows and pinks. But it made no difference. He was astonished, and I think for those spellbound minutes Natalie's portrait meant more than all his shipping and international concerns put together.

The portrait began to make claims on me too. There was nothing unusual about the pose, just Natalie three-quarters facing, with the light coming from the window and reflected on the left. Too much light, an older school would have thought, not so much bathing the face as dissolving into it, as though that surface were a gentle swelling from the

ground itself, a soft-breathing membrane of transparent subtleties that I wove hour after hour in a slow frenzy of concentration.

Perhaps the strain began to tell, as I started making excuses. We should go out, walk in the grounds, take picnics, place characters in a more natural setting. All these experiments came off: Natalie sprawled by the picnic hamper, in a loose white top, her sandalled feet pushing into the grass. The pencil found its own way, picked out just the right features. Even the watercolour washes, where I touched in the shadows in the far eye and under the chin, and then filled the background with the glowing greens and blues of the thick trees behind had only to take their place around something that was already abundantly alive.

The reasons were obvious. With this carefree gentle creature I was in love, wholly given to her presence, and could not imagine how it should be otherwise. I had said nothing, and done nothing, but Botes staff and Stumpfl himself were as aware

of it as though we walked around all day with tall paper hats on our heads. In six short weeks, where not a word of intimacy had passed between us, it was as though I'd known Natalie all my life. The light chatter of her voice, the precise fold of arm, leg and body in a hundred arrangements, her dresses, the indescribable softness of her body fragrance: all this I felt and was fiercely partisan to. Since she knew that, and seemed instinctively to know what I would say and do next, there was no need to draw attention to the matter. We were courteous and awed by each other, and the day went on quietly around us.

Unreal, you will say, adolescent, make-believe. No doubt, though left to myself, composing landscapes, or half reading a book in the library after the Stumpfls had gone to bed, there wasn't an inch of her body that I didn't imagine caressing and intimately filling. But all fantasies vanished on seeing her, and while I'm sure that no gross physical act would have distressed her, nothing was expected or advisable. If a word is wanted it is ver-

tigo. Here on the high trapeze we swung effortlessly through our elaborate routines, safe while we followed them exactly.

I generally got up early, went for a stroll around the estate, and then joined the Stumpfls for breakfast. Natalie was a late riser, but Stumpfl had put in an hour or two at his desk, appearing soberly correct in grey suit and tie. Natalie dressed informally, but I never saw her in negligee or dressing gown. Perhaps it was a courtesy to me, so my imagination should have less to fasten on, but in time I realized that Natalie was also a sensible and organized woman, her day fitting into her husband's routines.

For long periods the two were away on business but Natalie always prepared lunch when back, and often dinner as well. She had her own interests, probably the estate finances, as I saw her in conversation with Bursken, or bending over the flower beds with the gardeners. Did she still see her friend in London? I knew she did, but whereas she took

the ten o'clock train on Saturday, I had left the Thursday evening before.

What could I say to the dashing blonde? Christine had drawn her own conclusions, and was soon trying to compete. She now cooked on Friday evenings, having a meal prepared when I came home from class. She bought herself recipe books, and invited Georg and another couple to lunch one Sunday, which went off well. Just needs company, Christine said, reminding me of what I should have done years ago. She talked for the first time about painters, dragging me off to London exhibitions on which she had clearly done her best to become knowledgeable.

Of course we also toured the letting agencies, tramping up and down stairs, admiring rooms, gardens and a host of details I carefully noted on the particulars—a tedium relieved only by the charm of some agents, with whom I was often chatting as Christine stocked up with even more literature. Each prospect was to be our new life together. I

gave way to breezy enthusiasm, which was then tempered with qualifications, and remarks that we wanted the best, something worth the money, which of course depended on keeping in with Reg, the Stumpfls and a continuous stream of new clients.

Perhaps it would still work out. None of this was Christine's fault, and I tried as much as was humanly possible to be attentive to this good-natured woman. Each night I would draw her up and batter away at that heavy libido, filling and pounding as at some impregnable fortress that was locked against me. She always responded, eventually, her body shuddering in paroxysms that would have been gratifying had I not been drenched and shaking with exhaustion.

Those thoughts were somewhere else when I fastened another sheet to my pad and began on the figure sat in the long grass and pretending to read. 'Can't see why we shouldn't have one of these as a full-length painting.'

'We are forgetting someone.'

'I could easily paint Heinrich in. You take his place. Just angle yourself and look at me.'

'Patrick, he will not want that. And I should not either.'

She looked angry for a moment, and then went on sorting out the hamper. I took a sandwich and a couple of boiled eggs, and then sat away from her, gazing towards the house which appeared on the far slope, its south face almost white now in the strong sunshine. One of the gardeners was working on the terrace, and in the upstairs room Heinrich would be at his desk, writing or on the telephone.

'Look, my idea, I know, but should we be having so many of these picnics?' She didn't reply and I turned round to find her staring into the hamper. 'Is it wise, do you think?'

She reached a hand across and I realized that she'd been crying. 'You have finished the studies out of doors anyway.'

For a second I wanted to take the body in my arms and say that I should never finish admiring and being near her. That was against our understandings, of course, and I said, 'Suppose so. It's just the trees that keep me awake at night, as Heinrich knows.'

'You should not tease him. When he pays for something he thinks it belongs to him.'

'He can have the work when I'm satisfied', I said. 'That's the only way he's going to buy me.'

Natalie coloured. 'Do you know what my classmates are reduced to, the people I trained with? They are in tiny flats, one room flats in tower blocks where nothing works. Their lives are not going anywhere. Of course they may be lucky: their husbands do not come home drunk, or beat them up.'

The rest have become couriers or call-girls or cheap prostitutes on Komsomolskaya ploshchad.'

'That's not what I'm talking about.'

'You do not know why Heinrich was angry at Ecclestone's party? All these people who gave themselves airs, and do not know a thing outside what appears in the papers. You waved Heinrich's openings aside and started on some airy nonsense of your own.'

'I don't know anything about business.'

'Heinrich does not know how to talk to people. But you do not know what the others were like—fat Poles, German bankers with their business expenses, Americans not out of nappies. Heinrich was the only one who treated me like a woman. He did not sidle up, or make promises. For six weeks he sent a car for me every evening, and took me wherever I wanted to go. With me he was honest and straightforward. One evening, he looked across the table and asked if I would be his mis-

tress. No terms he give me. Nothing about a flat or foreign currency. Patrick, I liked him. I was happier that night than I was ever in my life.'

'You left him for Paris.'

'Heinrich sent me. After six months he said I should get a qualification recognized outside Russia. There were no strings. If I found someone else, or wanted to stay abroad, he would understand.'

'Generous of him', I said, trying to keep the bitterness from my voice.

'Maybe he is a ruthless operator, but that is not with me.' She smiled. 'You are thinking of Magwitch and "Great Expectations". Someone Heinrich could always think of.'

'Is that why you moved to England?'

'It is why you were chosen. Because you also have a past.'

'There's nothing mysterious about me.'

'Who are you trying to find? Your mother, the little girl that dumped you?'

'Rowena didn't dump me. She took an overdose.'

'She dumped the whole world. Just as your mother did.'

'Natalie, what is this?'

'Why did your father marry? He was old for that.'

'We have been doing our homework, haven't we? My father met Pru through a wager. She was a helper in the college canteen, just serving and doing the sweeping up. But she was beautiful, and when someone bet my father, this old dry stick of a bachelor, that he'd not get her, he took the challenge.'

'He fell in love with her?'

'Completely, though there were always other men. She was away weekends at a time, even when I was small.'

‘So you blame her. Which is why you keep Christine.’ She paused. ‘Don’t you understand? Heinrich wants me to forget someone by taking up with you.’

The blood drained away.

‘In time. When there is something to bring us together and keep me safe.’

‘From your friend in London?’

She smiled. ‘Why are you so slow? Of course I am interested, and perhaps more than interested. But you will not leave your model, and I cannot leave Heinrich.’

‘I’ve no reason to. Christine is one in a million. I can hardly support myself, and certainly not someone like you.’

‘You do not want an affair because you do not know what will happen.’

‘I’d be more desperately in love than ever. You’ve no idea what it’s like.’

'It is a nightmare for me too, every time I see you. That was why Heinrich talked me into lunch with you, because I liked you. I told you: he is clever.'

'Heartless is more like it.'

'Then it is a heartless world, if you want something badly enough. Patrick, are you listening to me? Please, I cannot say more.'

The pain came so suddenly that I wasn't even aware of holding Natalie in my arms, or of her whispering urgently as she freed herself, 'Not now, Patrick, please, please darling . . .' It must have been in stupefaction that I got up awkwardly to put distance between us. A plate snapped under my feet as I went over to adjust the easel. Then the wretched contraption fell over, and I was trying in my confused way to set it up again when I felt Natalie's hand on my shoulder.

'I am going to the house now. Heinrich and I are eating out tonight. But you will think about it?'

'What use is that?' I muttered, still picking the grass from the paint. I looked up, but Natalie was now walking back to the house.

Christine had a surly manner when I returned the following day. Her flat had been burgled, nothing much stolen, but the whole place turned over, which Patrick seemed not to understand. At Saturday lunch we had one of those sputtering discussions on how the relationship was developing.

'I'm not pressing you to marry me. I'm even turning a blind eye to your carrying on with this German tart.'

'I'm not carrying on.'

'I said I'd get a better job so we could have a decent flat together. Which you still won't decide on.'

'They haven't paid me.'

'Patrick, you could give up the commission tomorrow. If you weren't playing me along.'

'I want what's best for us.'

'Best for you.'

'I'll go and see Georg this afternoon', I said. 'He wanted to look at my landscape sketches. All right, Chrissie? I'll be back to cook.' She didn't reply, but sat down heavily in the one armchair and turned on the television. 'About six', I added, pulling the door behind me.

Georg gave me a pointed look, poured us schnapps and helped unpack the folders. 'Ja', he said irritably, waving me aside to sort out a small pile, which he laid on the table. 'These are all right', he decided at last. 'For you it is start. It is not bad.'

'Thank you.'

'But it is not art. You are not a landscape painter. It does not talk to you.'

‘Just tell me about the colours. I’m trying to work the Stumpfls into their setting.’

He looked at the Polaroids I’d taken of the Stumpfls’ portraits, and then put them down.

‘Just the colours, if you would.’

‘Terrible, my friend.’

So it came out: the pent-up frustrations, the evasions I’d been forced to adopt. I was shouting, perhaps wildly, that Georg knew nothing about the Stumpfls, or portraits, or anything at all. His figure seemed to collapse into itself, but then he was recovering something from the table drawer, a studio album, I realized as I took the folder and turned the pages. Georg was just about recognizable—not unhandsome in a thickset way—but his wife I knew immediately, the smile radiating from the figure stood on the church steps.

‘She was beautiful, Renata, ja?’ he said hoarsely.

'Yes. And those portraits are not so bad.'

'That is why I tell you make changes. Now, when you can.' He'd gone over to the table and was looking again at the Polaroid shots, at Natalie's portrait, which he picked up and stared at for a long time, shaking his head as he put it down. 'My friend, it is dangerous. You do not know these people.' He shook his head again and waved me into the armchair. 'All these months and you do not know who this man is.'

Perhaps I did, vaguely.

'Matynia,' said Georg carefully, mashing the syllables between his teeth, 'Kostek Matynia. This I tell, and you listen, you listen very carefully.'

It was after twelve when Georg finished. I'd phoned Christine earlier, and did so again after our talk, but she slammed the phone down. Georg found me a blanket and I slept in the easy chair. In the morning I went out for supplies early, and made a decent breakfast. There was much show of digni-

fied refusal, and Georg was so long dressing in the bathroom the eggs turned leathery, but around nine we were both drinking a final coffee as the weather cleared and the prospect of another sunny day glowed through the window.

‘Why don’t we go down by the river? I’ve got another portrait to do this morning but I should be clear by one. You could bring the car back and collect Christine, couldn’t you? Have a pub lunch.’

Georg looked at me suspiciously. ‘Christine know this?’

‘Better you don’t tell her.’

‘Ja, okay, we go.’

We didn’t talk on the drive down, and afterwards Georg simply moved over and drove off in his gear-grinding way. I walked over to the turn-of-the-century frontage, creaked open the door and went through. There are several small rooms off which James and I use by agreement, but only the one studio, a large converted room that opens on to the

garden. James is not a tidy person, I was still clearing the trolley and adjusting the screens when the doorbell rang. I went out to find Sheila and partner lodged on the doorstep.

'This is Stewart', said Sheila, tripping back in a tight pair of jeans and smiling half-embarrassed. 'He's my boyfriend.'

I saw what Jerry had meant: a large man with an angry expression, crew-cut and a gilt earring disappearing into the strong neck. 'Delighted to meet you', I said.

'This your place?' he said, pushing past me into the studio.

'What I share with a colleague, yes.'

'You do all this?' He walked over to the portrait of Gloria and then pulled some others from the stack of failures.

'That is so, Stewart. Can I get you a beer or something? It's a tiring business watching someone have their portrait done.'

'Okay girl,' he said, 'seems all right. I'll get your bag from the car.'

He carried in a large suitcase, took himself round the other rooms, and then went out, slamming the door. 'Was that necessary?' I said once she had finished examining the stack and flopped into the portrait chair.

'He didn't think you were genuine.' She stretched out lazily and smiled. 'But I can tell.'

'Right, well, we've got a couple of hours. For changing, there's a screen back there, or a bathroom on the left. Give me a shout when you're ready. I'll fix some coffee meanwhile.'

'Okay, loverboy.'

Some ten minutes went by. She was making up, I supposed, which would have spoiled the silky

complexion. 'All right, is it?' I called out as I came through.

'Ready', she sang out.

I nearly dropped the tray. She was sprawled elegantly in the chair, legs crossed, wearing high heels and nothing else.

'Lord in heaven! What the hell are you doing? It's a portrait we agreed.'

'Do you think I have a good figure?' She unwound and stretched herself, angling her arms behind her head. 'Stewart thinks so.'

'He may not be so thrilled at you showing yourself off to someone else.'

'I want you to paint me like this. You do other women, don't you?

'I paint professional models, under certain conditions, which doesn't include a private studio when there's no one else around.'

'Afraid Stewart will come back and catch us? He wouldn't mind.' She stepped down and walked across to the suitcase, from which she extracted a wallet of family snaps.

There was Sheila on the bed in various poses, by the window, sat in the garden and holding a straw hat coyly over bust and navel. 'Fine, but not my scene.'

'Stewart took those. Belongs to a photo club. They swap them, the boyfriends. So he wouldn't mind.'

'Sheila, let me explain. Painting is not photography. It's hard work. You have to stretch yourself into unbelievable poses. It's uncomfortable after five minutes and unbearable after ten. It's badly paid and not well regarded. If you want glamour, go and see one of the west end agencies.'

'I have, and they won't take me. Even tried the local art college. Awful. They didn't come out looking like me at all.'

I remembered my early efforts. 'So who's to know I'd be any better?'

She was off in a flash, over to the stack and pulling out canvases till she found what she wanted. 'There you are,' she said, holding up an unfinished study of Christine, 'if you can do that for her, you can do that for me.'

'Jerry said a quick portrait sketch, because he'd led you on.'

'What's a boring old portrait to me?'

'Soft complexion: excellent bone structure: you'll be amazed.'

'Your friend coming here?'

'About twelve,' I lied, 'and I'd like the portrait finished by then. I don't want the situation exploited.'

'Oh I am, I am.' She smiled provocatively. 'Please Patrick. If you paint me like this I'll do whatever you want.'

'Very well', I said angrily. 'We have an hour and a half. I'll do a life study for twenty minutes and then the portrait. That's my last offer. Twenty minutes and you're going to have to keep still.'

The pose was a difficult one, enough to make even Christine complain, but Sheila kept it surprisingly well, the arms and body sweeping out in the joy of life. A good figure: chubby but with a soft lustre to the skin and two neat little dimples above the sacrum. 'Right, that's it', I said, putting the charcoal down.

She came to stiffly, eased her shoulders and then stalked over. For a moment she said nothing. Then she unfastened the paper from the easel and held it up. 'Can I have it? I'll tell Stew it was the life class at college.'

'Whatever you like. I'll leave you to dress, and we'll get started on the portrait.'

'Patrick, which one? She skipped over and hoisted one dress and then another from the suitcase. 'Which one?'

'The black.'

'Don't go. You can talk to me.'

'There are certain proprieties we're supposed to follow.'

'I want to talk about Jerry.'

'What about Jerry?'

'I'll tell you.' She rummaged about in the case and selected some red underwear, which, humming slowly, she slipped on. 'Fasten me up, would you?'

'What about Jerry? I hope you're going to be careful. He's got a lot to lose.'

'Everyone knows about Jerry.' She fluffed out the dress and went to look in the mirror. 'Do you

know why he fancies me? Because I won't give it him.'

'Then what's the point?'

She didn't reply but settled on the chair, and straightened her head. 'Is that okay?'

'About it. More to the right and look up a bit.'

Half an hour went past, and there were no difficulties. In fact I began to be amused by this forward creature, similar to Natalie in size but so different otherwise. Around half eleven I called a break, and Sheila stepped over to inspect progress.

'Cor. That's marvellous.' She kissed me on the cheek and then turned the easel to view the sketch from a distance. 'Better than the other one, isn't it? Expect you were nervous. Your girlfriend the jealous type?'

'Sometimes. Only these last months I've been so busy she only sees me at weekends.'

'Wish Stewart would. That would be really nice.'
I must have looked surprised, as she went on coyly, 'You know. He's a piledriver. When he's not working on that exercise bicycle he's grinding away at me.'

'So why, excuse my curiosity, do you want to take up with Jerry?'

'Because I want someone to hold me, whisper sweet nothings in my ear. Is that too much to ask?'

'Suppose he might.'

'Doesn't have to be Jerry.'

'No thank you. My life's quite complicated enough.'

'I know you'd be nice.'

'And it's not fair on Jerry.'

'You went round together, didn't you, because you pulled the birds? I can tell. What do you think of these?' She fished out a small pair of briefs from

the suitcase: black silk, slit up the front and trimmed with lace. That's what I'm going to wear now. Think Jerry will like them?'

'I thought Stewart was picking you up.'

'Told him I was seeing a girlfriend.' She made a face, opening her mouth in surprise. 'When you've phoned for a minicab we can talk about this modelling you're going to give me.'

'Oh no I'm not.'

She draped her arms around my neck. 'Please.'

'Four days a week I'm up in Northamptonshire on a big commission. For the rest of the time I'm using Christine for another series. I don't have a moment spare.'

'This Christine my size?' she said, hanging in closer.

'No. What are you anyway, 34 E?'

'D. I just push them up a bit.'

'Well, look, possibly, just possibly, I could do with someone to model the dresses. The client in Northamptonshire is about your build, though not so full in the bust. If you could get into a C fitting without doing yourself a mischief I suppose there could be some work.'

'That's my boy.'

Irritably I finished the portrait, sprayed the two sketches, and slipped them into separate tubes. The minicab called some ten minutes later, and I gave the suitcase over. Back in the studio I tidied up so there was only the August sunshine streaming through the windows when Christine arrived an hour later. She handed the keys over, and seemed in a good mood. Georg had brought his etching plates, and would be busy while we talked, the two of us, to make up for some of the recent troubles.

It was possible, I thought at Botes the following afternoon, though Stumpfl himself wouldn't have been present.

'So,' said my host, throwing the newspaper down as he got up from the chair, 'you are not represented in German galleries?'

'I have an exclusive contract with Reg Ecclestone.'

'That is why I obtained his permission. I have contacts in Frankfurt and your work will appeal to Germans. You have some paintings unsold?'

Of course I was thinking of Georg's words, the atrocious pictures they conjured up. Perpetrated by Stumpfl's thugs, or people he had worked for. 'Not really, Herr Stumpfl.'

'Mr Ecclestone tells me you have twenty pieces with him. They will make a good introduction.'

Why had Georg given me the stories? Surely you keep them to yourself? Your own wife dragged

off, raped and mutilated. 'I have to organize things.' I could see him at his desk, signing papers as the knife sliced off a breast.

'That is why Mr Ecclestone has lent us your portfolio. My wife has made a booking for Tuesday. You have no objection?'