Arthur Sellings

Smile DAY

JUNK DAY

by

ARTHUR SELLINGS

In this taut novel, published after his early death last year, Arthur Sellings explores further than ever behind the barriers of communication.

The world has gone up in smoke. Douglas Bryan picks his way through the rubble of what used to be London. He falls down to a cellar, which is occupied by a woman who in the old days was a nun. Bryan, an ex-painter, and his new 'wife' set out together to build a new life out of the 'junk'. But they have not reckoned on the plundering instincts of the other survivors or the ruthlessness of new dictators who rise from under-ground laboratories in the north. . . .

Following THE SILENT SPEAKERS, THE UNCENSORED MAN, THE QUY EFFECT, THE LONG EUREKA and INTERMIND, Sellings' last novel, JUNK DAY, finally confirms his position as one of Britain's best writers of science fiction.

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JUNK DAY

By the same author

THE SILENT SPEAKERS

THE UNCENSORED MAN

THE QUY EFFECT

THE POWER OF X

THE LONG EUREKA

INTERMIND

JUNK DAY

by

ARTHUR SELLINGS

London
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for Ruby Mears

Chapter One

Bryan picked his way over the ruins, lingering in each patch of shadow that the moon cast as his eyes sought a path across the vulnerable brightness to the next.

Bryan . . . that had once been one of his names, when people had had more than one, when there had been need for them to separate all the people in telephone directories. When there had been telephone directories . . . when there had been people. To speak of.

There must be directories about still—probably millions of them rotting away under the rubble. But, divorced of function now—except maybe for stuffing in a crack to keep the wind out—how could they be said to be any longer what once they had been? Like the buildings that had twisted and fallen on them. In their atoms abided, save for what the seasons scoured from their surfaces, all that had once made them machines for living in. But the machines had seized up. And the great city-machine that had been their sum lay buckled and rusting under the sky.

The atoms of the people who had lived in it, they too were still here, in buried bone and rotted flesh—and in dust borne on the breezes that crept, by old habit, through the memories of streets.

Yet Man had finally proved what he had dared to believe since the day he had started fingering at the universe—that at the last count he was more enduring than his creations . . .

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if only barely. The great machine he had built had died. The body of mankind had died too. But within that body a few cells stayed stubbornly alive. If like the directories—and the rusting pipes, the blind meters, the dead cables—they too had lost their function, they had gained a new one.

As survivors . . . to survive.

Bryan didn't know—who could?—just how many people were left in London. Several hundred—possibly a few thousand. But surely no more, and so scattered over the vast area that had once been the metropolis that you could travel for a day without seeing anyone at all. True, you couldn't travel far on foot in a day, because of the rubble. But even if you went by river you seldom saw more than one or two people from sunrise to sundown.

The few roads relatively clear of rubble were those that had once bordered parks and open spaces. And they were losing their own battle, against a tide of green.

The green was worse than the rubble. You could twist an ankle scrambling over rubble, but hardly worse unless you were careless, and if you were that careless you wouldn't live long anyway. But the green hid brambles that tore at the skin to fester. Worse, harboured snakes, and the vipers had outbred the others. Now there must be more, many times more, than people. Soon they would be as common as rats.

But the worst danger in the green places was the lack of cover. They could conceal a snake, but not a man, unless he went on his belly too. If that meant that they could not conceal a human enemy either, that was little comfort. Somewhere you had to come back to the ruins. Then you were like a man standing in light and surrounded by darkness, not knowing what eyes were watching.

As he was now, whenever he crossed moonlight.

This was the kind of time when it was dangerous to think about how few people were left, of the odds against any eyes watching at this time, at this place. For each time and place was one more and the odds tilted back and one day they levelled.

The day that had happened to him he had been off guard. It had been a year ago and he still limped from the axe blow that had torn into his thigh. His knife had saved him, but only because it was a special kind of knife. He had found it in the ruins of a theatre. In the same place he had also found a poster of a girl, all black tights and white flesh, in a forest of blades. It had shredded in his fingers as he tried to peel it from the walls . . . but her image had returned to haunt him at night. He might have been day-dreaming of her when the blow had struck. His attacker had come out crouching from cover then, circling before he leaped in for the kill. Backing away, blind with pain, Bryan had hurled the throwing knife. Then he had passed out. When he came back to the world, the sun was red on the jagged horizon and his attacker was lying dead with the throwing knife sticking from his chest.

The odds had levelled that once. He had beaten them, but that only meant that in the future—whatever future he had left—they would be stacked more heavily against him.

Not that people attacked each other for the brute love of killing. There were no longer enough people left for that luxury. And men had not descended to cannibalism. There was no need. There was enough food in the city for its remnant of population, even three years after. There had been plenty of tinned food. There still was, though you had to

dig deeper to find it. When it ran out, well there would be the rats and the snakes; the cats, the dogs.

But if hunger was rarely a reason for killing, the other reasons were just as ancient: for shelter, for a mate, for covetousness of anything that might ensure survival or make it bearable. His knive had saved his life—but it might well, swinging brightly at his waist have provoked the attack. Since then he carried it, its edge honed as sharply as its point, in a webbing scabbard inside his tattered windcheater. For one reason for killing was the oldest of all—the fear of being killed. Once men had made laws against that fear, brought together by needs that were greater than their fear of each other. Their fears had been natural ones, as their needs had been natural.

But what had happened three years ago had been unnatural, the shock too great, so the natural bonds had not yet had time to knit—as even the muscles and sinews of his thigh had knitted after weeks of pain. Here and there the severed nerve endings of mankind were beginning to find each other. But only slowly.

He froze now into the shadows. His eyes narrowed, obeying a three year old reflex, for eyes could flash whitely, dangerously, in darkness.

The sound had come from his left. Slowly he turned his head. A stone dislodged? The wind could do that, or the shrinking and settling that night's cold effected in the ruins. But behind the small noise he could have sworn he had heard the soft sound of something alive. He stopped breathing, but his heart seemed to thud louder in the sealed caverns of his body.

There was an abrupt explosion of sound. A pair of shadows, so ragged and entwined that they were almost one, split from

the background of night and went spitting and yowling across the moonlight and into the dark again. Bryan caught a flash of orange and dirty white. He let the air out of his lungs. His lips began to quirk in a smile of relief, then straightened. This would mean another delay. There were advantages in travelling by night; it was still the time when most people slept. But, though silence had descended again on the ruins, somewhere a brain might have been startled into wakefulness by the sudden noise.

He cursed now that he had decided to attempt the journey home before dawn. He had been wise, he told himself, to stay under cover that afternoon. A band of four men was a sight rare enough at any time to demand caution, though he was carrying nothing in his rucksack worth anybody killing him for. It had been a poor day. But he was a long way from home. This was north of Chelsea, and foreign country. It had been a familiar region to him in the old days, but he had been elsewhere when the crackup had happened. It had been there, not here, that he had cleared a living space around himself, become a known factor to the other people who had survived there. Here he was a stranger, an unknown quantity. He had waited until night had fallen. He knew now that he should have holed up for the night. But his nearness to the river and to his boat, hidden under rotting wharves, had been too tempting. He had told himself that he could reach home before sunrise.

But it was not too late to change plans. He was in the shadow of a likely-looking ruin—a long building whose bottom storey was still standing.

He edged along the wall, peering for a darker shadow that would mean a doorway or some other hole to admit him.

There might be somebody living here, but he trusted to being able to smell them. The danger would be of somebody only sheltering, as he meant to, somebody who had not been here long enough for the hollows of the ruin to have taken on any life odour.

But there were no hollows, no entrances that his groping eyes or fingers found in the darkness. He came to the end of the wall, turned it—and stopped dead. The moon was obscured now by tattered clouds, but he turned back to the dark side of the wall before, leaning against it, he laughed silently and without humour. For there was nothing behind the wall but more acres of desolation.

An image from an almost forgotten world stirred in his memory. A world of television, and shadow world within shadow world, of silent pictures resurrected around midnight. Of a little man in a funny little black moustache being chased by a horde of soldiers in spiked helmets and slamming the door on them—a door in a solitary wall like this one.

The memory died. He suddenly felt tired. He had been travelling since dawn, his only respite the hours spent in hiding, and that a dubious one. It had been a cramping hole. His leg ached dully.

He pulled out a precious cigarette from a crumpled packet. He bowed his head as he lit it, shielding the brief light with aching care. He drew a deep draught of the smoke down into his lungs. It tasted hot and musty, the same as every cigarette did now. He had fitted up a primitive humidor once to try to restore the taste to dry and crumbling tobacco, but it had only multiplied the mustiness. Thank Christ one didn't feel the need so much in this world. Probably because the pressures of civilisation were off. By the time the supply

of tobacco petered out he felt he wouldn't worry about smoking any more.

He nipped the cigarette out between finger and thumb, replaced it carefully in the packet, slung his rucksack and went on his way. Perhaps it would be easier further on, he told himself, but not very hopefully.

It started to rain, not steadily but in gusts that blurred his eyes. He turned up his jacket collar and trudged on. Half an hour later, in the shadow of rubble mountains, he came to a ruin that looked promising. It only looked so by the crazy logic of the times and his present need—because it looked unpromising for a permanent hideout. It was too small for that—hardly more than a hovel standing in the middle of what looked like excavated foundations. It might have been a demolition site—before the big demolition job had come. The hovel looked like a watchman's cabin.

He stood there for a moment, sniffing the air. He thought for a moment that he could smell the river very near. But it was impossible to be sure on a night like this, with the wind veering and the rain waking vagrant smells in the air.

He swung down and picked his way across the terrain, skirting twisted shapes of metal and blocks of concrete. He reached the central ruin. There was a way in. It smelled dark and dank—but safe. There was no taint of human, or other, life here. The interior was no more than six feet square, but that was room enough. He crept in gratefully.

And cursed gratefulness and every other luxury of emotion as his foot went through the rotten floor and his body after it. The realization that this couldn't have been a watchman's hut, but part of the building that had once stood here, flashed through his mind as he was falling. And something else. He

could have sworn that he saw flickering light. Then his whole vision was filled with light, bright and painful, as he landed with an impact that clouted the breath out of his body.

When his vision drained of red there was no longer any light at all. He was in utter darkness and utter silence, except for the tearing of his breath as it fought its way back into his lungs.

Then something hard cannoned off the muscle of his shoulder. He reacted instinctively, twisting sideways and away. Hands clawed for his throat. He brought his arms up savagely, breaking away the hands before they could reach their target. His right hand started for his knife. Before he could reach it his attacker was on him, scratching, biting, kicking.

Bryan realized three things almost simultaneously. The first brought only relief: that his assailant was weaker than himself. The second brought a mixture of emotions, but explained the first.

This was a woman.

Chapter Two

The struggle was one-sided and brief. He got one arm in a lock and brought it up from behind, forcing the woman to her feet as he rose too. There was a whimper of protest and her head made a half-hearted attempt to butt him under the chin. He tightened the screw. She sagged.

Her hair smelt sweet and strange in his nostrils. So did something else, more strongly now, the third thing. She had been drinking.

'Who else is here?'

There was no answer. He gave the screw on the arm a twist against the limit.

'Nobody,' she said sullenly.

'No man?'

'I haven't got one.'

With his free hand he got his knife out and jabbed the point in her back, just above the wrist that he held firm.

'You'd better be right. One move from you or—' he peered into the darkness and his voice, hardly more than a whisper, seemed to echo hollowly in it—'anyone else and you get this between the shoulder blades.'

He waited. The darkness didn't stir. He released her arm, but gave a jab with the knife, making her yelp. He kept it there while he fumbled in his pocket. He brought out his lighter and struck it.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to even that meagre

light. He was in a passageway. Something at his feet caught a stray gleam of the flickering lighter flame. Still keeping the knife in the woman's back, he stretched down and picked the object up. It was a brass candlestick, the kind with a twisting column and a heavy square base.

'You shouldn't have missed,' he muttered, hefting its solid weight in his hand. 'You might have saved yourself a lot of trouble.' She didn't answer. 'Right, march.' He prodded her forward at knife point. The corridor gave into a room beyond. The room was shadowy in the tiny fitful light, but there seemed to be nobody else there.

'Satisfied?' the woman said dully, without turning her head.

'Not yet.'

Her shoulders shrugged. 'Please yourself. I've got more light if you want to be sure.'

'All right. But no tricks.'

He kept close behind her as she moved to what looked, in the dimness, like a high bench. There was a flash of light in her hand and she lit a candle. It was tall and red in a brass holder, a twin of the one she had tried to open his head with. She must have doused it the moment she had heard him. As the flame guttered now and took hold, a pool of yellow light spread into the room. She held a heavy table lighter in her hand. She turned, glowering at Bryan speculatively. He gestured brusquely with the knife. She picked up another candle. He set the candlestick he was still carrying on the counter top. She put the candle in it and lit it. He gestured again with his knife. She put the lighter down.

'That's better,' he said.

'Satisfied now?"

Bryan looked at her, and was not displeased at what he

saw. It was a thin face, but not gaunt; the lips full; eyes pale and set wide apart. Her hair was red and neat and gathered with a black ribbon. Or looked as if it normally was, for it had become disarranged in their scuffle. She adjusted it now, with a bend of arm and wrist that was achingly feminine. She was average height and compact, breasts small under a grey shirt.

'How d'you get by without a man?' he asked bluntly.

'You men think you are so important.' Her tone changed. 'I had—' she hesitated momentarily—'A husband.'

'Past tense? What happened to him?'

'I don't know.'

'Sure you didn't jump him one night, too?'

She glared at him. 'I don't like the way you talk. What did you expect me to do?' She rubbed her wrist. 'You needn't have been so rough.'

'What did you expect me to do?' he mimicked. 'I was only looking for shelter for the night.' The tension ebbed from him as he looked around. 'Looks as if I've found it.'

It was like something preserved out of the ruins of Pompeii. Only the drunken angle of a big wall mirror, hanging by a single fixing, bore witness to the catastrophe that had shattered the world. It had once been a club—that was obvious—with a group of tables, a few chrome and red leather stools at the counter, an array of bottles behind it, a one-armed bandit in the corner. On the corner stood a tall square bottle of Johnnie Walker and a half-filled glass. It must have been an ordinary enough small drinking club once, but the sight of it now made his throat ache . . . and not from thirst only.

He was conscious of the woman's eyes upon him as his own roved round the place. He knew what she must be think-

ing. She had found this place and would kill him rather than share its secret. Unless—

He turned his back on her and went across to the fruit machine. He fumbled in his pocket for a coin. He usually carried a few, without knowing why. He put one in the machine and pulled the handle. It was stiff, but it worked, surprisingly. It was an old-fashioned mechanical type. This couldn't have been much of a club in a world when there had been many clubs. The drums went spinning round and *click, click,* with that wait for the third one there always used to be, *click,* fell into place. It wasn't a winning line. He turned back to the woman.

She hadn't moved. He went back to her and looked down at the knife that was still in his hand. He laid it on the bar top. Her eyes followed his action. He stood back and gestured toward the knife. She didn't move. He stepped forward, picked it up by the point and put it into her hand. Its point winked in the candlelight. Seconds passed. Then she turned it in her palm and handed it back to him. He smiled slightly and put it back in its scabbard.

She gestured to the bottle of whisky. 'Drink?'

He drew his tongue across his lips. 'Something else first.'

He went back down the passage and looked up. From below it looked too small a hole for a man his size to have fallen through. But it was too big to leave like that. He looked around, found a couple of metal beer crates and piled one on the other. From them he was able to swing up and through the hole.

He peered out over the ruins. He stayed watching—though the night was very dark now—and listening, for a long minute. Nothing stirred. Then he gathered up debris, bits of

brick and plaster and rotten wood, and piled it on a piece of board. He placed the board by the hole, then let himself down on to the beer crates. He reached up and jigged the board across to cover the hole before getting down. On an afterthought, smiling thinly, he set the beer crates open side up. Anybody else falling through wouldn't have as lucky a drop as he had. And they'd certainly make more noise. He dusted his hands on his jeans and went back to the room and the woman.

She poured him a drink. She was sitting by the counter. He took the stool next to hers and raised the glass.

'Happy—'

He choked on the phrase that had once been so commonplace, and took a swig of the whisky. It burned his throat. It was months since he had tasted whisky. He took another swig and it was better. He felt the glow as it went down and was grateful for it. His bones had become chilled during the day's wandering under the pale April sun and the cold night sky. He was conscious again of his leg aching, but no longer cared.

'You started to say something,' she said.

'Did I? Oh, happy days, that's all. But the state of things being as they are—' He broke off. 'You mean you never heard that saying before?'

'Yes—I think I did.'

He looked at her. How old was she? Twenty-four, five?

'What did you do? In the old days.'

She hesitated. 'I was in a convent.'

'*What!*' He began to laugh. Somehow that sounded funny. He didn't know why. Convents had been a part of the old world, hadn't they?—just as much as railway stations or

libraries or cinemas—and they were all a retreating memory now. But their memory wasn't incongruous, as this was. If you could somehow get a cinema working again you might be able to find an audience of one or two to submit to the darkness. But nobody could *believe* any more.

'I was only a novice,' she said.

'Uh-huh.'

'I hadn't taken vows.'

'Just as well,' he said with a vague half-gesture, half-look around him. 'Were you going to go through with it?'

'I don't know. I think so. Does it matter?'

There was silence for a moment. Then he said, 'So much for the husband.'

'There weren't any priests left,' she said coldly.

He grinned. 'Just getting the record straight.'

'You don't need to.'

'I know I don't. It's none of my business. I was just trying to—well, if you were bothered by it, trying to tell you I understood.'

She smiled slightly, surprisingly. 'I don't mind. It's something to be arguing. To have somebody to argue with.'

He nodded. It was tough enough for a man.

She seemed to read his thoughts. 'I might have been training, not for vows, but for *this*.' She laughed now, but briefly and there was an ache of memory in its sound. 'You get used to privation and solitude in a convent.'

He looked at her, feeling a pang of sympathy. But, that being an emotion that he had nearly forgotten to feel, let alone to express, he said, almost brutally, 'You made your own choice, didn't you?'

'Did I? And did it matter? We didn't have any choice in

what happened after. Did we choose to blow the world up?'

'You ought to believe so. Man's freedom of action under God and all that jazz.'

She frowned at the last words, but answered him.

'I'm not sure any longer. Once everything seemed so simple. One had a choice and made it. Not just for me—going behind convent walls, submitting to a discipline—but for everybody. But after *it* happened I had doubts . . . that God was wrong to have loaded his poor creatures with all that responsibility of choosing. It—it was so final. There was so little left. I don't mean buildings and things. Or even people. There was no . . . no pity left anywhere. If God put all that power in man's hands, surely out of His infinite mercy He would have left some spark of pity. I can't explain. I've had such a lot of time to think, but—'

'Who hasn't?' he muttered.

'—I still don't understand.'

'Don't let it bother you too much. Who says *people* blew up the world? Maybe it was in the cards—something that happens to a world at a certain stage in its life. Like cancer. Or a time-bomb. The minutes and the years and the ages went ticking merrily away, then suddenly—*pow*.'

'That's even more horrible.' She shuddered and took a drink from her glass. 'That's like saying that God buries traps.'

'Why not?' He took a swig from his own glass. 'Just to teach man not to be so cocky. Like that Job character.'

'But that was only one man, not everybody. One man . . . a lesson. But if this was a lesson who will learn? Who's left to learn?'

'Confucius he say, teacher who blow up classroom is left with few pupils.'

'How can you joke about it? Nobody will even know *how* it happened, let alone why.'

'I don't give a monkey's myself.'

'A what? I don't—

'I mean I'm not worried.'

'But you must be. You're an intelligent man.'

'Want to bet?' He felt slightly embarrassed. That was another feeling he hadn't felt for a long time. 'All right, have it your way,' he said roughly. 'It was the Day of Judgment.'

'But it *wasn't*. That's what I can't understand. There were two of us left alive in the covent—two out of ninety. I was working in the garden with Sister Teresa. I don't remember what happened. I was hoeing the vegetable plot—then I was staggering to my feet. I must have been knocked unconscious. Sister Teresa still was. Unconscious, I mean. I brought her round, and we stood there on the hill—this was in Highgate . . . it seems strange to talk about *places* now . . . they don't seem to have any meaning any more, so that they seem never to have had any meaning . . .'

Her voice was ragged.

'Where the convent had been there was just a black pit in the ground. And over London was a great pall of smoke—yellow like the sky before a storm. And I stood there, listening. I often used to stand listening in the garden. Sister Teresa used to rebuke me sometimes, but when I did I was only listening to the sound of the city and it used to . . . somehow comfort me. It was only the noise of cars and lorries and trains and millions of people going about their business, the world I was prepared to forsake, but—sometimes I'd lay awake at nights, and that voice would be hushed, but it never stopped. It was the world for all its waywardness

going on, God's purpose being worked out. And then—

'That was the first thing that registered on my mind. I saw this great jagged gap in the ground where the convent had stood, but it was somehow unreal—a mistake that was going to be put right, like a cloud passing across the sun . . . or something gone wrong with my eyes for a moment. It was terrifying, but *unreal*. Then I heard that the voice was gone. It sounds crazy telling you . . . I haven't been able to tell anybody before . . . but there were all kinds of noises in the air . . . ghastly noises . . . people screaming . . . explosions . . . a great wind howling and tearing at the yellow cloud—but all I suddenly heard was the terrible silence behind it. The voice had stopped and God's purpose had left the world. Then I knew—or thought I did.

'And I knew that Sister Teresa was thinking the same thing. Not about the voice, but about what it was that had happened . . . that it *was* the Day of Judgment. Because we fell down on our knees together and prayed and waited . . . I don't know exactly for what . . . for the heavens to open, I suppose, and for the Almighty to come down in a great chariot, supported by a host of angels and archangels. Or perhaps only a terrible trumpet blast and a blaze of light.

'And we waited, on our knees, while the ruined garden grew cold around us, and the screams died away to whimpers, then even the whimpers stopped. And the sun pierced the yellow cloud with an unearthly green light before it died. And we realized that there was still day and night . . . that the heavens hadn't opened up in the final terrible glory . . . that they had already opened and closed, and that there had been no Judgment.'

Bryan drained his glass.

'Hadn't there? Perhaps you've got the time-scale wrong. Who says the Judgment has to come in one day? Like all that stuff in Genesis. A day could mean a century or a million years. I read an article once about how the ancient Hebrews were all mixed up about time. Perhaps it was true and they lived for centuries and begat Isaacs and Ishmaels when they were a hundred and fifty—or perhaps they didn't.'

'That's why—why I can't understand.' She drained her glass too, and refilled both of them. 'If God has punished us, why are we still here? Or is it *us* who are being punished?' She took a quick swallow of her whisky. 'Sister Teresa wasn't worried about questions like that. Her faith must have been stronger. We sheltered that night in the ruins of the church next door. Next morning she said that we must obey our vocation, even if the convent was gone. We must go out into the world to tend the injured and dying and witness to the still-abiding love of God. We went out . . .'

She shuddered. 'Two days later Sister Teresa was raped and mutilated. It could have been me. It *should* have been me, I suppose. I was younger. But I don't think it was just lust . . . they were defiling what we stood for. I suppose we were some symbol of the system of things that had betrayed them. Sister Teresa obviously had more authority, so they wanted to get her out of the way first. That's all I can think, looking back at it. But it was all crazy and confused. The men were mad drunk. I managed to escape, I don't know how. And I don't know how I survived through the next days and weeks. I remember sometimes thinking that Sister Teresa's way was the only way—to witness to the faith to the end. Only—'

She took another swallow at her drink.

'Only what?'

'Only that she died crucified under a monster, not on a cross. That she died screaming, not witnessing to anything but her own degradation and the victory of evil.' Her voice rose almost to a scream, as if she were compulsively acting out the other's part in the tortured script of her memory, then died to a dull whisper. 'Then she—just vomited and was dead.'

Chapter Three

He did not know what to say. If she had told him this out of some need for catharsis, then there was nothing to be said. If confession, he did not know the words. *Ego te absolvo?* They weren't his to speak. Finally, conscious of its inadequacy, he said, 'Perhaps her death served some purpose. Perhaps some of those responsible will have survived and will feel a sense of guilt.'

'*Perhaps? Guilt?* Is that all her death was worth? Is that all the faith the world has to rebuild itself on—a chance and a sense of guilt?'

'That's all most faiths had,' he murmured.

She looked at him curiously. 'You're a strange man.'

He shrugged. '*Upon the normal earth he knew himself strange; here where all is strange he moves in peace.*'...

'What's that?'

'Part of a poem.'

'Who wrote it?'

'Does it matter? Whoever it was is dead by now. Anyway, nobody moves at peace in *this* world.' He drained his glass. 'And I'm not going to feel guilty for me or for anybody else. Not while there's a bottle of booze about.'

She filled both glasses up again. He reached in his pocket and fished out his crumpled cigarette packet.

'Would you like one of these?' she said. She leaned over the counter and brought up a round tin.

Nostalgia hit him like a blow, making his eyes water. Clubs, whisky, bar stools, were things you found when you were already a man. But this bearded sailor mark was something straight out of his adolescence when everything was new. Not in airtight tins of fifty like this, but with the same symbol on furtive packets of ten, shared with girls in the back seats of cinemas, along with other things. His fingers trembled as he took a cigarette out and lit it.

He exhaled the smoke ecstatically, reluctantly. 'God, I haven't tasted a cigarette like this for years. Oh, sorry.' He held out the tin. She took one. He lit it for her. She smoked awkwardly. 'I was carried away. Memories,' he said.

'Perhaps it will be better when all the old things are gone. I remember my father used to have tins like that.' She shook her head. 'There are too many memories about—useless memories.'

He exhaled smoke in a long sigh. 'They're all we have left now.' He smiled ruefully. 'That's what old people used to say. Perhaps we all got old suddenly.'

'What did *you* do . . . before?'

'You said memories were useless.'

'But I want to talk. Only, please, we won't talk of monsters or death any more.'

'All right. Me? I was well-trained too. I was used to poverty, most of the time anyway. *And* discipline, if not—' one eye ogled her from behind his glass—'if not chastity. I was a painter.'

'What kind of a painter?'

'The pukka kind. An *artiste peintre*, as the French have it —*had* it.'

They each shivered at the same thought and knew why

the other did. It wasn't just the desolation outside but not knowing how far it extended.

'Somewhere in the world,' she said quietly, 'there must be *some*body.'

'I haven't noticed any rescue expeditions, have you?'

After a silence, she said, 'What's your name? Mine's Veronica.'

'Mm-mm . . . Sister Veronica.' He was feeling the effects of the whisky. 'We have a little sister and she hath no breasts; what shall we do for our sister in—'

'*Please*.'

'I'm sorry. Our sister hath goodly breasts.'

'I don't mean that. You can be funny about me if you want to. But don't call me Sister.'

'Oh, all right. Veronica then. That's a bit prissy, though. I'll call you—let's see—Vee. How's that? Mine's Bryan.'

'Bryan what?'

'It's what Bryan.'

'What Bryan? Oh, yes. *What* Bryan, then?'

'It was Douglas once, I think.' He pondered over his drink, turning the glass in his fingers. 'I might have been in training for this kind of world too. I opted out on society long before it opted out on me. On me and everyone else. I used to go around like this before, in torn jeans and a beard. I didn't have much of an audience then, either, come to think of it.'

'Weren't you a very good painter?'

'I was bloody marvellous.'

'I seem to say the wrong things always.'

'Think nothing of it. I never did like people who said the right things. But no artist can answer that question . . . *could*. Oh blast bloody tenses!'

'That one seemed indicative.'

'Hey! You're a humorist.'

'Am I? Oh *indicative*.' She laughed quietly. 'I didn't mean it as funny. I always used to be saying things like that, making the sisters laugh when I didn't mean to at all. I remember once—' She stopped. 'I only meant that you seemed to imply that you didn't paint any more. Don't you?'

'What, in this rat race?' He grimaced. 'How conditioned was my reflex! That's the answer I used to give people in the old days when they told me I ought to push my stuff more round the phony world of art galleries and so-called art patrons. See? Nothing's changed. It's still a rat race, only now it's a real one. A race with the rats, to see who'll take over the world.' He emptied his glass. 'May I have another drink?'

She poured him one, holding the bottle vertical as she shook the last drops out of it.

'I—I'm glad you came,' she said quietly.

'Thank you.'

'Glad it was you, I mean. It could easily have been somebody worse.'

'Go on—spoil it.'

'I'm sorry. It's been such a long time. But you asked me for a drink when you could easily have taken one.'

'I'm your guest, ma'am,' he said in the accents of a Confederate colonel. He stretched his arms luxuriantly. '*I'm* glad I came. It's been a long time for me, too.'

She looked at him warily. 'I meant expressing myself. Please don't get any wrong ideas.'

'Wrong?' He threw back his head and guffawed.

She looked angry. 'Are all men the same?'

'Basically, probably.'

'I thought you might be different.'

'I've heard that one before. Different who from? That husband of yours who disappeared so mysteriously one night?'

'It wasn't one night. It was one day.'

'Whenever it was. What was so bad about him that you'd want me to be different?'

'He wasn't bad. He was a good man—in his way. There may not have been a priest to solemnize our union, but—' She stopped. 'What are you grinning about?'

'You didn't need one, the solemn way *you* talk.'

'If you're going to laugh at me—'

'I'm not. Not at you. I always used to laugh when people got serious about personal relationships. A girl once told me it was a defence mechanism. It probably was. My personal relationship with painting was a hard enough job. Go on. Please. It's a form of gratitude, that I can laugh again.'

'Is it?' She grimaced. 'Perhaps that's what I missed with—with him. All it was with him was a bargain. That he would feed me, protect me, in return for his own . . . his own gratification.'

'That's a pretty time-honoured arrangement. Didn't he keep his end of the bargain?'

'Yes.'

'Did you?'

'That doesn't concern you.'

'You're telling me about it.'

'Yes, I kept my end of the bargain,' she murmured. 'It was just that it was so—so primitive. I suppose he was a very simple man, and it was wrong of me to expect more. But I was with him for nearly two years and I knew hardly any-

thing more about him at the end of it than at the beginning. He had been a stoker, that's about all he told me. He seemed to be proud of that. He said there hadn't been many stokers left in the world. He was a very methodical man, getting water, collecting wood for the fire, searching for food and things. He had a big pocket watch. He said he had kept it going all the time, through everything. Every day when he went out and came back he would pull his watch out of his pocket—just as if he was still clocking in and out of his old job.'

'That was *his* kind of defence mechanism, I suppose. What more did you want to know about him? Or anything else? Knowledge is a luxury these days.'

'Is it?'

'No, I suppose we've still got to keep on learning—learning to survive.'

'I wish I could make you out. Do you always say the opposite of what you mean?'

'I'm one of your Jesuits. I'd twist truth any way up. A dirty-habited Jesuit of the ruins, that's me.'

She glowered at him. 'It's so easy for you.'

'Sure, it's the life of Reilly. He was another Jesuit.' His face, which had become relaxed under the influence of the whisky, suddenly tautened vehemently. *'Easy!'*

'Yes, because your lot understood so much—before this happened.'

'Don't let the fancy words fool you, lady. They cover a dark abyss of ignorance. What did your lot call it—invincible ignorance?'

'You seem to know quite a bit about "our lot".'

'I had a friend once was a Catholic. We used to have

arguments and he'd always finish up saying I was invincibly ignorant.'

'But that's a term that was only applied to savages, people who couldn't possibly know any better.'

'*Now* I learn!' He laughed. 'I knew he was only joking.'

'Oh . . . I see. But that's just what I mean. You understood things. There was so much I didn't know. I've tried to learn since, by reading books.'

'Didn't you read before?'

'Of course. But mostly religious books. And school books, when I was young. Anything else was only the kind of book approved of by the Church. I've tried to make up for it since. I used to get my husband to bring them home for me. He used to—anything he found—but they were a strange mixture. I'm not sure he could read even. They were usually broken and damp-stained, but I read every one of them hungrily.'

'You don't mean *religiously?*' He flapped a hand. 'Don't mind me. What kind of books?'

'We-ell, there was one called *Rats, Lice and History.*'

'You must have picked up some useful hints from that.'

'It was a history of typhus. And *East Lynne.*'

'Should be on every survivor's bookshelf.'

'And *Psychopathology*—' she faltered over the word—'*of Everyday Life. That* was a strange book. And a history of the Industrial Revolution in three volumes, but my husband only found the first two.' She shrugged. 'All the books I read, they might as well all have had a last volume missing.'

'Just what did happen to your husband?'

'I told you—I don't know. He just went out one day and never came back. I didn't sleep that night. Next day I went out to look for him, but it was hopeless. When I came back somebody else had moved into our cellar. A man and a

woman. I told them to leave, but the man just laughed at me. I threatened to kill them—'

'You're *tough*.' His tone was ironic.

'I had a gun. A pistol. My husband always left it with me when he went out. I told you he was a good man. He protected me and trusted me. If he had taken the gun with him that day it might have saved his life.'

'And it might not. What happened to the people who moved in? *Did* you shoot them?'

'No. I looked at the woman. She just looked back at me . . . without any pleading in her eyes. If there had been I might have felt my own situation more keenly, weighed it against hers and pulled the trigger. *She* had a man. But her eyes were just blank. Like an animal's. Then I saw that she was pregnant. I just turned and walked away. And the man laughed again . . . as if he'd scored some kind of victory. I suppose he had.'

'What did you do then?'

'I moved on. I've kept moving on.'

'You must have had a hard time.'

'I've managed. I had six bullets in the gun.'

'How many have you got left?'

'I used the last one some time ago.'

'I ought to count myself lucky then. You might have put it through me.'

'I might have.'

'How long have you been here?'

'I don't know. Two weeks, maybe three. I haven't been out of here since I found the place. I've lived on biscuits and tonic water.'

'And whisky.'

'And whisky.'

Something occurred to him. 'I fell through the ceiling. How did you get in?'

She pointed up to a grill in the shadows of one corner. 'That lifts out. It's a ventilation shaft.'

'There must have been a building here, then. I thought it was a demolition site.'

'Perhaps the building toppled in the river. There's a big mound of rubble that side.'

'You mean this place is right on the river?' He laughed hollowly. 'The joke's on me. I'd given up hope of reaching the river tonight. I've got a boat hidden away. I should have *heard* the river. But you never know in these blasted ruins.'

'I know. You can't hear the river in here, even through the ventilation shaft. The other end of it comes out over the river, but it's blocked up by rubble. Or almost blocked up. I only stumbled on the place by accident. I've been living along the waterfront since I used the last bullet. I—I felt safer somehow. If I was attacked, I mean.'

'You mean there was always a way out.'

She nodded dumbly.

He moved from his stool and put his arm around her. She trembled under his touch.

'I'm glad I lost my bearings,' he murmured. 'You won't have to take any way out now. I'll look after you.'

'Don't say that,' she said, flinching. '*He* said that.'

'And he was a good man.'

She thrust his arm away and, slipping from her stool, made a distance between them.

'What's the matter?'

'Why are you so heartless? I tell you about myself and you only mock me.'

He laughed and moved to her, walking easily. She made an attempt to escape again, but stopped before the movement was hardly more than a gesture. She did not resist as he unbuttoned her shirt and slowly took it off. She was naked beneath it. His hands shook slightly as they fumbled at the button of her slacks. He stopped.

'I—I don't want to mock you.' He turned his eyes away as he spoke, and his voice was low. 'And I don't want to hurt you or force you to do anything. It's just that it's so—so hard to be tender again.'

'I know,' she said. 'It's harder still if you never learned how to be tender—that way. He was the only man I ever knew. I felt even talking about him the way I did just now was a kind of betrayal.'

'Perhaps he betrayed you. Perhaps he found some other woman. Why do you have to feel so *guilty* about everything?'

She trembled under his hands. 'I don't know.'

She was silent for a long moment and they stood there motionless. Then, as if she had just made up her mind on some quite impersonal matter—as if this was a world which left any room for any impersonal decision—she said quietly, 'You can have me . . . if you want to.'

He looked into her eyes. 'And you said *I* was strange.'

'Is it so strange? Isn't that how you want it . . . freely? Without forcing me? And how I want it . . . without any kind of a bargain?' She kicked off her shoes, undid the button at her hip and stepped out of the slacks. She straightened to face him, her skin golden in the candlelight. 'But on one condition.'

'I thought you said no kind of a bargain?' He smiled. 'Anyway, you're in no position to bargain.'

'You said you wouldn't force me. Just one condition.'

'All right. What?'

'That it's not . . . not impersonal, the way it was with—' She stopped. 'That it's not impersonal. That you keep reminding me who you are, that you tell me about yourself.'

'I've told you about myself, haven't I?'

'I want to hear it again.'

'Tomorrow.'

'No, now. While we're . . . we're . . .' She faltered.

'What!' Then, resignedly, 'All right.'

She trembled as he embraced her, resisting him. He grimaced, lifting his eyes as if to the obscure god who ruled over such wayward provinces of human behaviour. But she did not see his expression, his face being over hers.

'My name is Douglas Bryan,' he said. She trembled less violently.

'I was born in nineteen forty-eight.'

'I was a painter in oils and tempera.'

In the flickering candlelight, vertically, between the bar counter and the fruit machine, they sought the only forgiveness there was left in the world.

Chapter Four

He woke to darkness, a darkness that had moved and become hostile. His hand crept to his knife and met only his naked ribs, and he remembered. His fingers, travelling on, touched the rumpled blanket and nothing more. There was a small noise a few feet away to his right and his night-seized brain worked urgently to locate itself. The noise had come from the direction of the bar counter—where his discarded windcheater lay. With his knife in it.

Then he was fully awake—and his fears, born of darkness, ebbed away. He had left the knife openly on the counter, put it into her hand, and she had not used it. After what had happened between them, there was even less cause for her to do so, surely. Or was that simply the old male vanity working?

There was a tiny click. A spark touched an edge of the darkness and caught. He raised himself on one elbow, grimacing the sleep from his face. 'What time is it? Stupid question. Is it morning?'

'Does it feel like morning?'

'It hasn't felt so much like morning for years.'

The floor was hard under his elbow. He went to get up.

'No,' she said. 'Wait till I've got breakfast.' Then, after a few seconds, 'I've got breakfast.'

He got up, put on his clothes and took a seat at the counter. An opened bag of potato crisps lay in front of him.

'Ah, cereal for breakfast.'

'Cheese flavour—if there's any flavour left in them.' She levered the cap from a bottle and emptied the contents into a glass.

'And tomato juice,' he said wonderingly.

She joined him at the counter.

'I woke up,' he told her, 'and didn't remember where I was. Then for a moment I thought you had got up to take the knife.' And, when she looked at him with a hurt expression, 'It was just old habit, old fears. But they're done with now. There's not going to be any fear between us any more. Is there?'

After a moment, she said, 'You've changed since last night.'

'Have I? How?'

'You—' she tilted her head—'you seem to be speaking more simply. More as if you meant what you said.'

'That was the drink last night.' He could feel the after-effects of it now, a slight ache, so long unfamiliar as to be almost pleasurable, behind his eyeballs. 'No, I always spoke like that. I told you, it was a kind of defence. It used to be a complicated world. Sometimes I thought that people made it a damn sight more complicated than necessary. Everybody had a vested interest in making it more complicated, in order to justify their occupation of their own little corner of it. Other times I'd think the opposite, that there were forces working to make it too simple, too black and white. But it was a case of both at once really, I suppose. Everybody trying to make a clearing in the jungle, but weaving a barrier round it that was even more complex than the jungle.' He chewed a crisp that had long since lost all right to the name. 'But you wouldn't understand. You chose a ready-made barrier.'

'Do you think it was so simple for me . . . for us? We had

our fears and feuds. Little things—they seem ridiculous now—but the convent was some kind of a model of the world outside, it must have been.'

'But you had a pattern of response. It was all a catechism with you. I suppose *we* did, come to that. Only we had a wider range. Of responses. Of fronts. But they all amounted to the same thing; they were all defences. I even wondered sometimes if my painting wasn't a defence. And you're the first person I ever admitted *that* to.'

'Was it? Only a defence?'

'I only thought so in the dark times. Sometimes when I'd just finished a painting and felt drained out. Or sometimes when I got mad at the whole phony art-world set-up. But you couldn't admit to things like that in that world. That would have been letting down the barriers. You had to play it cool. We said what we didn't mean, gave insults for compliments and compliments for insults—and expected it to be understood. And it *was* understood most of the time, because it was a kind of code.

'But in that code—inside the clearing—we could be tender . . . even true sometimes. Where there was most need for truth—between a man and a woman—that system of defences, that code of responses, ensured that there was a place for it. Perhaps that was what it was all in aid of. But not any more. People will have to write a new language—a much more primitive language than the old one.' He drained his glass. 'Here endeth the lesson.'

'Thank you,' she said simply.

'I thought I owed it to your thirst for knowledge.'

'Would you like a cigarette?' She lit one for him. 'You've changed too.'

'Have I? How?' She smiled to find herself echoing his own reaction.

'Oh, I don't know. Which only goes to show, I suppose, that women are more complicated than men.' The flippant tone dropped. 'Last night you said no bargains. But there is one between us, isn't there? Even if it's not in words.'

She nodded slowly.

'Then we've got work to do. First, either I move in here with you or you move in with me.'

'Where do you live?'

'Greenwich.'

'That's a long way away.'

'It's a longer way away than it used to be.'

'How long have you lived there?'

'Ever since it happened, more or less.'

'Then you must be more settled than me.'

'But my place isn't—' his eyes travelled beyond the bar—'so well upholstered as this.'

'You're sure it's me, not the drink, that you want? I'd better warn you there's not much left.'

'Now you're talking like me,' he said chidingly. 'Not, of course, that the booze isn't a small point in favour. But this place has its drawbacks. No natural light, for one thing. It's a typical womb. I'm a phallus man myself, but we can do something about it.'

'Womb? Phallus?'

'Everybody's either a womb or a phallus man nowadays. Nobody's taken a public opinion poll lately, but there's probably more of the former than the latter. But that may only be because there are more wombs around than phalluses.'

'I'm not sure you're not being obscene.'

'I hate people who talk in double negatives.'

'You do. You just did, when you were talking about the drink.'

'Did I? Well, I hate myself.' He grinned. 'To put it more simply, people either burrow into cellars or climb up into towers. Perhaps I've lived in my tower too long. This place—' he broke into discordant song—'*It isn't a phallus, but it's my everything*—'

'You're talking in the same old way again,' she said. 'The way you said you wouldn't any more.'

'Do you mind? I was singing.'

'There you go again! Don't you take it seriously about our having a home.'

'I'm sorry.' He put his arm around her. 'I told you it was ingrained, my defence mechanism. Just give me time. But I *have* changed since last night. I've been side-stepping my shadow for three years, just keeping alive. Now I'm no longer afraid of dying, because I've got something to live for at last. And—shall I tell you?—that something isn't just you.' She made to break away from his encircling arm. 'No, I'm not talking the same old way again. It isn't just you—but it's all you, because it's you and me and life and purposes, all of it. I'm going to break with the purposelessness of the past three years. Moving here will be a symbol of it, the start of a new future.'

'I wish I could understand you.'

'You will. You'll see.'

The daylight filtered in as they reached the end of the

sloping shaft. Even so, the light struck blindingly as they scrambled from its mouth. When his eyes adjusted he saw that he was standing on a rough parapet. He looked around him. It might have been something of a miracle that the club room had been preserved in the heart of chaos, but not that it had escaped discovery. Even by the standards of this world the surroundings looked unpromising. The hole they had emerged from might have been deliberately camouflaged. A jagged slab of masonry had fallen across it. The only side left unhidden was caged over by the rusted remains of concrete reinforcing. Odd, rust. It rotted and distorted, but added a strange substance to what it infested, to the eye at least. Like the jagged bloom of lines in the first proofs of an engraving. Except that one was the bloom of new creation, the other of decay and death.

He looked down. The mountain of rubble dropped sheer to the water. He felt, as if they moved in his bones, the tides that had eaten away at the base of it, the winds off the river that had scoured its slopes, slowly tilting hillside to cliff. The way up from the river to where he stood now, some fifteen feet above it, looked not so much impassable as too difficult, too unlikely to be rewarding. He looked at Vee, standing by his side. She must have been desperate to have been clambering over this bleak face in search of shelter.

He squinted over the river into the light of the early morning sun. This must be on the sweep of the Thames above Chelsea Reach, where the 'north' bank faced due east. He had hidden his boat almost opposite the ruins of Battersea power station, one of his landmarks. With two of its chimneys still standing it looked like a hand with two derisive fingers stuck up at the heavens. He realized how far

he had wandered off course the night before. This place was nearer Fulham than Chelsea. It must have been one of the blocks of flats that had been pushing up between the factories and the wharves in the seventies, not long before the crash. He had put the North Star over his right shoulder, but nobody could take a straight course through the desolation. Strangers to London had always cursed the waywardness of its streets. They were all strangers now. He shivered in the breeze off the river.

Vee broke in on his silence. 'What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing in particular.'

'Where's your boat?'

He pointed downriver. 'How do we get off this blasted cliff?'

'I'll show you.'

He followed after her, on a zigzagging path across and down it, admiring her agility but soon finding that it wasn't so difficult as it looked. Holds, whether projections or crevices, were firm to fingers and feet, clean of treacherous debris. The winds off the river had done their work. As the river had, trapping the airborne particles of decay, bearing them down to its bed.

But the river, for all that and for all the bodies and other rubbish that had been dumped into it since the crack-up, was cleaner now than it had been for centuries. With no ships discharging oil on its tides, no factories to poison it with excreta, the water had become clearer with each tide and season. Sometimes you could see fish moving fathoms down in it.

For the fish were coming back, perhaps not only up the Thames but into existence again. The catastrophe that had

all but wiped out mankind must have dealt just as cruelly with the creatures of the sea, the shock running and echoing through the waters. Though earth had cracked and reared and toppled, it had left a few meagre hollows where life could survive. But there could have been hardly any hiding place in the great squeezing rush of waters. He remembered how, after the first terrible noise—fully half an hour after, and dwarfing the lesser thunder of exploding gas-mains and collapsing buildings—had come that other noise, like a great wind gathering in the east, the shock wave of waters, the sea repaying in one terrible instalment the river's tribute of years.

He had watched it through the thickening smoke from the heights of Blackheath, roaring up from the estuary, toppling what riverside buildings had survived the shock of earth. Through his stunned mind had run the thought that if he had been Leonardo he would have been sketching furiously. But he was not Leonardo . . . and Leonardo had sketched it all five centuries before, that vision of apocalypse and deluge, of roaring sky and water.

His feet reached ground. A path—or a track of marginally clearer waste—skirted the water's edge. They set out along it. There was a slight haze over the waters, giving promise of a fine day. He felt suddenly, idiotically happy. Memories of the past would return to plague him. Nightmares couldn't be stopped by an act of will. But time would bury them over, as the river had buried its dead. He put his arm around Vee and they walked like lovers through an innocent landscape. But only for a little while. They had to separate to negotiate the remains of a dockside crane that lay across their path, half-in half-out of the water like a pterodactyl with its back broken, and the way was more difficult after that.

At length they reached the wharf where he had left his boat. It was still there, and he felt the illogical surprise he always felt, illogical because only madmen like him travelled far these days. If the old world had gone forever, its survivors still clung to the ruins of it. Having survived against all the odds, few seemed in any mood to face the lesser hazards of the river. He had seen one or two ramshackle houseboats with people living on them, but the last one had gone a long time ago. Perhaps they had gone up or down river on a tide, in quest of new moorings. More likely they had been plundered and sunk, or just foundered of their own accord, their rotting timbers giving up the struggle to stay afloat. His own boat was only a two-man skiff but it was in good repair. Finding himself a clumsy oarsman, he had unscrewed the rowlocks and cut down one oar to use as a paddle. Since then he had found a proper broad canoe paddle.

He helped Vee into the bow seat. She was obviously unused to boats, teetering the frail craft so violently that she would have fallen in but for his steadying arm. He got in after her, loosed the rope and pushed off. He let the swirling tide carry them out as he scanned the shore, first the near one, then the other as they drifted out toward midstream. There was no sign of life, except for a smudge or two of smoke from fires as the scattered dwellers of the ruins started another day. All well inshore. He picked up his paddle from the floor of the boat and began paddling. As he settled into an easy rhythmic stroke the skiff picked up speed and cut through the water. A pale green wave, laced with white spume, ran steadily back from the bow.

Vee's copper-coloured hair, too, streamed back, borne on the breeze. Bryan smiled, remembering a painting by one

of the post-Impressionists, of a man and a woman out on the river on some long-ago perfect Sunday. He wondered what day it was today. And who had painted that picture? Monet? Manet? He couldn't remember, and it didn't matter. The faint mist on the river meshed the sunlight in a prismatic haze. Life was still worth living. It was more than just having a woman again. Or was it? Was it no more than the old brute alchemy, as inevitable as the spring sun that warmed his shoulders waking life in rubble heap and crevice and, beyond, in the twisted fields and shocked forests? The sun on the green cells, the twitch in the red, triggering the same old reaction, however maimed the world?

No, there had to be more in it than that. There had been other women in these past three years. Few, and long months since the last one, but women. None had woken the same feelings in him. He had known moments of elation since the crack-up, bright moments against the darkness—and, strangely, those times with other women did not shine brightest among them, but rather moments like finding the boat, the knife.

But even those, total bright against total black, faded beside this. Did that mean that the darkness was lifting? No longer black and bright, two stark elements failing to react for want of a catalyst of impurity in them? Nothing had been pure in the old days.

He smiled at the vagaries of his thoughts. Vee turned at that moment, smiling too.

'Let's keep on,' she said. 'Until we reach the sea.'

'What then?'

'Just keep going on and on. It's a beautiful day. Let's follow it.'

'We're going in the wrong direction,' he told her. 'Not for the sea but for the day.'

'Of course.' But she looked around her happily, like a child on a day's outing. She pointed. 'Look at that building, how it shines in the sunlight!'

'That's the Tate Gallery. Or was.'

'Did you go there often?'

'Once or twice a year.'

'Do you know the names of all the buildings along the river?'

'Ruins, you mean.'

'Today they're buildings. Do you?'

'No, but I know that one. It's one of my landmarks. Any stone building has become cleaner and whiter these past years, with no soot or fumes in the air. The concrete ones merely go on getting dingier.'

'Why do you roam so far from your home? What are you looking for?'

'All sorts of things.'

'Why?'

'You ask too many questions,' he said, matching her child-like mood.

'Do I?' They were approaching something that looked like a giant burial mound. 'What's that?'

'More questions? It's a heap of rubble.'

'But what was it?'

'The Houses of Parliament.'

'Oh.'

He could guess what she was thinking. When he had first passed this place in his boat he had only recognised the vast ruin by its nearness to the stumps of what had once been

Westminster Bridge. In the old days it had been little more to him, with his contempt for politics, than an ugly building housing an empty ritual. Now it was a cold symbol of the fate that had overtaken this great city, the tradition of centuries buried in a flicker of time.

Neither of them spoke. They went on past the ruins of bridges—Hungerford, Waterloo—and approached Blackfriars. Blackfriars wasn't a total ruin. Its middle piers had collapsed, the bridge sagging into the river as if wearied of its load of years, but a man could still cross the river here on foot—the one place left that he could. Bryan pulled towards the north bank to avoid the jumble in the middle. When the boat was two hundred yards from the bridge he called to Vee: 'Here, take the paddle.'

She looked at him questioningly, but took it from him.

'Keep paddling,' he told her.

She did so, clumsily and without his rhythm, the boat lurching now through the water. But it kept going. He reached down and brought out a longbow from under his seat. He strung an arrow to it and held it at the ready, scanning the bridge through narrowed eyes as they came closer to it.

'Change sides!' he hollered as the tide carried them towards a pier. She threw a glance back over her shoulder and her eyes widened as she saw the bow in his hand. He gestured curtly with it. He sensed, more than saw, her stiffen and wrestle against the race of waters that swirled around the piers. His own attention was on the bridge and what it might harbour.

They missed the pier narrowly and shot through. He craned back. Nobody was on the bridge—but there was somebody on the bank beyond. Bryan's bow swung and levelled, but the man was only holding a rod and line. The man looked

startled for a moment, then lifted both hands, one still holding the rod. Bryan only recognized the mocking nature of the gesture when the man's laughter came echoing across the water.

Vee stopped paddling. 'You can put your toy away. What was it you said about not being afraid to die any more?'

'It's a danger point, that bridge,' he grumbled. 'I nearly got ambushed there once. He could afford to laugh anyway. He knew he was out of range.'

'*Well* then,' she said mockingly.

He stowed the bow and arrow away almost furtively, but not minding too greatly being the butt of her humour. The mood struck in her by the ruined Parliament buildings had been broken.

'You're a bloody fine canoeist,' he retaliated. 'You nearly wrecked the boat.'

'What do you do when you're on your own?'

'I manage.'

She laughed and handed the paddle back to him.

He laughed too as once again his blade struck water and on the broad face of the tide, uninterrupted now, the skiff shot forward. The north bank abruptly changed character. Between Westminster and Blackfriars the Victoria Embankment had once swept in a wide rampart. Even now, buckled and debris-littered, it kept the ruins one step back from the river. But now they were in an area of rotting wharves that crowded the water's edge. One could make out the different colours of the narrow warehouses above them, fragments of names spelled out in masonry still clinging to their ruins like tattered hoardings. Built cheek by jowl, they looked as if they had given each other mutual support in the moment of

disaster, like drunkards, their legs gone under them, still managing to hold each other up about the shoulders. It was here, by the wharves and in the streets of the City beyond, that he had taken his first sketchbooks as a boy. He shipped his paddle and leaned his chin on the butt-end.

'You know you said you used to lie awake and listen to the voice of the city and feel that it was God's purpose working in it? I used to feel something like that when I wandered through that part of it. I used to go to school there. But man's purpose, not God's. And not his purpose—almost the opposite, the way he scraped and sweated and connived and died and never knew what it was in aid of. That place was piled up by bankers and merchants, all for profit and power—or so they thought. When all the time they had really built it for *me*—a poor kid wandering spellbound through it all. The warehouses, the skyscrapers, the marble pillars and domes and fancy terrazzo . . . it was all for me.

'And, you know, I wasn't grateful, I was indignant! Can you understand that? As if they had no right to conspire against my emotions without knowing it! Or perhaps I was indignant because I sensed, even then, that I was just the same as them—that I would live and work and die and never know what I had really achieved.'

She had turned and was looking at him half tenderly, half puzzledly. It was an expression that was becoming familiar to him.

'That's why,' he said, 'I know that I have to go on. That nothing's really changed. I know I joked about that last night. But that was only because I've tried before to believe it, and failed. Maybe, before, I spat on the art world, but it was *something,* some kind of an audience. When this came there

was nothing. No purpose, no future any more. I tried to argue it out with myself, ask myself what kind of future or purpose cavemen had when they scrawled their drawings on cave walls. Trying to shame myself into painting again. But they *had* a purpose. Drawing an animal gave them a sense of power over it. Because they ritualised it in line, the animal would enter the ritual of sacrifice. The god-worshipping, god-eating, that's how it started. But—'

'Stop it! Why do you say such things to me?'

For a moment he couldn't understand what had upset her, his thoughts having ranged beyond his words as he uttered them. Then he realized.

'I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't think your faith meant anything to you any more. But, if it means anything at all, it has to go back to the beginning, doesn't it? That Catholic friend I told you about, he took me to the Easter Vigil. It was long, over three hours, and the words didn't mean much to me—but the *ritual!* New fire to light the candle . . . the priest used a Ronson, which I thought was cheating . . . but the rest of it, this great candle plunged into the water and marked with the plainest fertility symbol there is—the one like a broad-arrow turned upside down—and I said to my friend, "But it's all phallic symbolism" and he said, "Yes, isn't it marvellous!" You see, he could believe in it all despite that.'

'*Fertility . . . symbolism,*' she said witheringly, turning away and staring steadfastly over the water.

He craned forward and touched her shoulder. 'I was only trying to explain myself. That's what you said you wanted, isn't it?' She made no answer, but did not shrug his hand away. 'If it hadn't been for meeting you I wouldn't have

remembered such things. We can't help what comes back to us. And we still don't know what we fashion. We never did and we never will. But still we've got to go on. *That's* the act of faith.'

He took his hand away from her and lowered his paddle over the side. 'My faith may not mean much to you, but it's all I have.' He dug the blade savagely into the water. 'I'm going to start painting again.'

Chapter Five

The last stage of the journey was through a graveyard of ships. Most of the smaller craft of the river had been shattered to matchwood three years ago, their wreckage sucked away in the sea's retreat. The big ships that had once docked here below London Bridge, they too had been snatched from their moorings and dashed against the river walls and against each other, but most of them had beaten the terrible ebb tide. It had been a meaningless victory. Holed, ripped, broken-backed many of them, they had gone down to a last anchorage, clawing a hold in the river-bed against the tearing waters. Only a few had escaped foundering and they had been borne helplessly away. Two whole days after, Bryan thought he had seen a ship in the distance, steering a course downriver with smoke coming from its stack. But it had been a long way off and he could have been mistaken. There had been a lot of smoke in the sky those first few days.

Rusting, twisted hulks littered the waterway like smashed toys of an idiot child. It was a tortuous course, steering between them, but he was used to it by now. Only at first had it been really dangerous, such random shapes setting up strange currents and cross-currents. Then they had still been shifting, settling. But they had long since bedded down to their long night of disintegration. There was calmer water beyond and Bryan brought the boat in under the south bank.

Here, where it had taken the brunt of the sea's invasion,

the riverside was utterly shattered. The old piers had been swept away; jetties and walls—what was left of them—lay buckled and gaping over a desolate shore. But the destruction had opened up a part of the bank here where one of the streams that fed the Thames had once finished its journey in obscurity. Liberated now, it cascaded over the edge of the ruins and ran in an open channel to the withdrawn river. Bryan steered the nose of his craft up the channel.

He stopped beside the cascade in a little harbour that he had dug out for his boat. He beckoned. 'We're here.'

He helped her out, then hid the boat in a gap of the ruined wall, tying it up. He guided Vee up rough steps that he had made. He pointed. 'There's my castle.'

It was a tower, no more than a hundred yards from the bank, its top ending with jagged abruptness against the sky. He took her hand. They approached the tower across a hummocky tract of green. Vee noticed something in the tangle of weeds.

'A gravestone. Then this must have been a church.'

Only the topless belfry tower still stood, to a height of about fifty feet, the rest of it merely a mound of rubble against its side. The tower itself was so scarred that it would have been hard to distinguish it from the ruin of any other kind of building. Only here and there the fragmentary shape of a shattered window hinted at its original use.

'How do you get in?' she asked. 'I don't see any kind of door.'

'This way, madam. Just follow your guide.'

She followed him round the tower and through a cleft in the mound beyond. There was a clearing inside the ruin here, like a great rough-hewn chimney going up to the sky.

One side of it was piled with blocks of masonry. He clambered up, giving her a hand as she followed him. They came out on top of the mound, under the shadow of the tower and half of the way up it.

'I still don't see any door.'

He reached up. There was a discordant jangle of bells. Not church bells, but all kinds of smaller ones. As Vee's eyes caught the small movements against the stone she noticed the network of strings joining them. At the sound a flock of birds broke from the crannies of the ruin and went wheeling in startled circles in the sky. A few seconds later there was another sign of life. A man's head poked from the remains of a window at the top.

'*Bryan!* I thought—' He stopped short at sight of Vee standing in the shadows. 'Hello, what's this?'

'Shut up and chuck out the ladder. Or do I have to get my own?'

The head withdrew, then re-appeared momentarily. A rope ladder came snaking down.

'Right, you first,' said Bryan.

'But—'

'Go *on*.'

'WHO IS HE?'

'I'll introduce you.'

'But I—I'll be on my own up there with him. Suppose—'

Bryan gave a staccato laugh. 'What, pull up the ladder, Jack? You needn't worry on that account.'

She looked at him puzzledly. Then she shrugged and started climbing. He held the bottom of the ladder steady against her swaying, but even so the bells kept up an inter-

mittent jangling. She scrambled in. He climbed up after her and pulled the ladder up.

Vee was standing there in the tumbledown passage that ran round inside the tower like a gallery. The other man—short, youngish with tousled fair hair—stood a distance away from her, eyeing her uneasily.

'Well, Eddie boy,' Bryan said. 'Meet Vee.'

Eddie only looked flickeringly in her general direction. He turned back to Bryan. 'I want to see you,' he muttered. 'On your own, I mean.'

Bryan shrugged and paced a few steps along the passage.

Eddie followed him anxiously. 'You're not bringing her here, are you?' he whispered hoarsely.

'I've brought her here, haven't I?'

'You know what I mean. To live.'

'No. Does that put your mind at rest?'

Eddie shot him a suspicious look. 'You're cooking something up.'

'Well *now,* Eddie,' Bryan said in an assumed tone of affront. 'You really mustn't give way to those tortured thoughts of yours. She isn't going to live here. Nor am I any more. It's as simple as that.'

'You mean—you're *leaving?*'

'If you can tell me how I can cease living here without leaving, I'd be—'

'You bastard! You lousy stinking bastard!'

'I thought you wanted this conversation to be private? There's a lady present. Apart from that, none of those three words rank as insults any more.'

The other's manner changed abruptly. 'I'm sorry, Bryan. You know I don't mean it. If you only knew how I

worried about you when you didn't come home last night.'

'You don't owe me any concern. And I don't expect it.'

'But I can't help it. That's why you can't leave me now—not after all this time.'

'You watch me.'

'But you couldn't find a better place than this.'

Bryan grinned. 'Can't I?'

Eddie looked sullen. 'Oh, the woman. That's all it is, isn't it?' He seemed to come to a momentous decision. 'Well, bring her here, then, if you want to.'

'*Thanks.*'

'I don't mean you have to ask my permission—you know that. I mean, if that's what you want. I couldn't stay here on my own if you went.'

'*I* did before you came along. The best part of a year.'

'But hasn't it been better with me here sharing the tower? You used to have to take the ladder with you every time you went out and hide it and throw it up on grapples when you came back. And I did a lot of work fixing the place up, didn't I? It was like one big dark cave up here.'

'It suited me on my own.'

'But who rigged up the alarm system? And helped you drive off the mob that tried to invade us that night?'

'Mob? There were only three of them. But, all right, Eddie—*you* did. All that. But life moves on. So must I.'

'Where are you going?'

'About seven miles up-river. Now, if you don't mind, I've got things to do.'

'You—you . . .' Eddie almost choked with frustration. Then, turning in a movement like a spasm, he disappeared down the corridor. A door slammed behind him.

Bryan went back to Vee.

'You needn't have bothered to walk away,' she said. 'I heard every word. Who *is* he? You didn't tell me about him.'

'I didn't get around to it. He's just somebody I've shared the tower with these past couple of years. It's been useful having somebody to look after the place while I've been on expeditions.'

'Then why are you so beastly to him?'

He shrugged. 'Perhaps he does bring out a certain latent sadism in me. But you don't know Eddie.'

'You *are* sadistic. The longer I know you the more I can understand some of those books I read about people's minds. They didn't make much sense to me before.'

He glared at her. 'I'm not a sadist. I'm . . . I'm as I am. I talk to Eddie that way, *one*, out of self-defence—'

'Self-defence! You're twice his size.'

'I don't mean in that way. *Two*, because it's the best way to treat him for *his* sake. The same way I find myself speaking to you roughly sometimes. To save you getting hurt more.'

'That's what *you* say. It's only to feed your own ego.'

'Sure, why not? It's had precious little to feed on these past few years. Let's all browse on each other's egos. What do you want me to do, signal every word I speak like a bloody tic-tac man? I tell you, you don't know Eddie. I do.'

'I—I'm sorry. I suppose I'm as difficult as you are. But I don't want our being together to hurt anybody else.'

'Nor do I. But Eddie will get over it.'

'How can you be so sure? He seems so dependent on you.'

'Then it'll do him good. It'll be a shock cure.'

'Cure? For what?'

'You wouldn't want to know.'

'I wouldn't ask if I didn't.'

'All right, if you insist. Well, the big crash happened to catch Eddie at the most awkward time possible. Eddie's girl was killed. Messily.'

She looked at him blankly for a moment, then shivered, and clutched at disbelief to quell it. 'And *he* was unhurt?'

'Physically.' He answered her look of doubt. 'We're all walking accidents, aren't we? Why did you and the other nun survive and the rest get killed? Then you when she didn't? It was like a war, what happened. Maybe it *was* a war, for all we'll ever know. In wars, crazy things happen. My father was in World War Two. A shell came over and like a good soldier he fell flat. The man next to him was a better soldier and got down faster—and the shell splinters went right through him. They were standing on concrete and the shell splattered instead of digging in. My old man just got a scar across the chest. He was proud of that scar.' He paused. 'Eddie's not proud of *his*.'

'I thought you said he wasn't injured?'

'The one in his mind I'm talking about. Your lot didn't have the monopoly of guilt feelings. He was spared and his girl wasn't. And if he hadn't talked her into doing just what they *were* doing at that moment, she might possibly have escaped too. And quite likely she wouldn't, but try telling Eddie that. *You* couldn't tell Eddie anything, anyway. His attitude towards women got altered rather violently. In a brief space of time he was turned from, presumably, a normal enough young male into . . . well, something adjacent to a necrophile, I suppose. Quite by chance of course . . . but there again, try telling *him* that. Not that he talks about it much. Only when he's had a few drinks, which isn't very often these days. But it preys on his mind.'

'Then why are you so nasty to him?'

'I'm not like that all the time. Only when he gets emotional.'

'You were nasty to him first.'

'Nothing like being prepared. I knew he wouldn't take the news well.'

'Is he a—homosexual?' She pronounced the word by syllables.

He regarded her sardonically. 'You *are* remembering the books, aren't you? No, he didn't turn homosexual. He's just all mixed up. I've told him he's crazy to worry about it, in *this* world of all places. I've kidded him along. Sublimate, boy—I've told him—just like a bloody scoutmaster. Perhaps in time he'll be able to make some kind of adjustment. But until then he's got all his normal emotions twisted and blocked up inside him. So have the rest of us, maybe, but not as bad as him. Perhaps it would be a good thing for him if he went queer. For all the good it'd do him in this world, it might be the adjustment he's groping for. But not while I'm sharing a place with him. No thank *you*.

'Well, that's the way it is. Come on, I've got things to pack.'

He led the way down the corridor in the opposite direction from which Eddie had gone. He threw open a massive iron-studded door.

She followed after him—and stopped dead. It was a big room, lofty and raftered, and filled with—*objects*. That was the only word that came to her mind as her eyes travelled in a slow and fascinated circuit.

By the door stood a stuffed and mounted elephant's foot. Next to it was a lavatory bowl decorated with roses, a rusty angle-poise lamp, a tailor's dummy, a bicycle wheel . . . her eyes moved on . . . a tea trolley, a television set with a shat-

tered face, a beer barrel, a rocking chair, a Victorian hip-bath, a sundial, some kind of a machine, a large bird cage, a wickerwork garden seat. They were the more prominent items, many of them chipped or bent, but recognizable. The gaps between them, and any ledges they offered, were crammed with an equally bizarre assortment of smaller objects: clocks, vases, mirrors, an electric fire, a fireman's helmet. Only in the middle of the floor, in a clearing, were articles arranged in any intelligible order—a bed, a small cupboard, a table and two chairs.

She turned, wide-eyed, to Bryan. 'What *is* all this stuff?'

'My collection. Apart from the things in the middle. I use *them*.'

'You'd have a job to use the others, I should think.'

'They all had a use once.'

'But not now.' She suddenly burst out laughing. 'And you say Eddie's queer!'

He took a step towards her, but stopped, impaled on her laughter.

She stopped laughing. 'This is something else I remember from the books. Something else that I didn't understand before. I remember the author and the book's name. It was called *Disguises of Love* by Wilhelm Stekel.' She pronounced it in a phonetic English fashion.

'Veel-helm Shtaykl,' he corrected savagely.

Undeflected, she said, 'He wrote that all collecting was a sexual perversion. Fetichism, he called it. He should have seen you!'

'So what the hell? He was writing about a world that doesn't mean anything any more. Anyway, I never believed

in the psychoanalysts. They would have analysed the world away if the other thing hadn't got there first. I might have used their jargon—everybody did—but I didn't believe in them. To me they were like the bird that flies around in ever-decreasing circles till it disappears up its own—'

He shook his head, as if to shake away phantoms of the past flocking about it.

'You wouldn't understand. Nor would Herr Doktor Stekel. I'll tell you why I collected things. Because I'm an artist, because I'm a pair of eyes and a pair of hands and not much else. The same as other people are guts, or a calculating machine, or four wheels and an engine, or a hole in the belly, or—' he glared at her—'a pair of knees with callouses on them. Or they used to be. Well, I was an artist. All that mattered to me was the shape of things. Only suddenly there weren't any *things* left, or hardly any. And what was left didn't have much shape any more. Except just here and there you could find something buried under the ruins. Other people burrowed for food; I burrowed for things. Oh, I burrow for food too, like everyone else, but it was shape and form that I was hungrier for. To paint them. I was always going to paint them. But by the time I found brushes and paints—my studio on Blackheath had disappeared through a hole in the ground, just like your convent—by then finding things had become more important than painting. I'd sit for hours just gazing at the shape of a thing like that sundial or that fireman's helmet. Somehow now that was a creative act in itself. Perhaps that's what fetichism is, a love of the shape instead of the substance, the object instead of the deed. I don't care. Now I know it was only a stopgap, but it was one I needed.'

He stopped, breathing heavily. There was a silence that was broken by a knock on the door.

Bryan scowled. 'What is it?'

'It's me. Eddie.'

'I know it's you. At least, it had better be.' Somewhere, at the far end of a corridor, the memory of an old joke stirred and died. 'What do you want?'

'I'd like to see you.'

'Well, come in then.'

Eddie entered hesitantly. 'I just want to have a last talk with you. I brought this.' He held up a bottle of red wine.

'Bribery, eh?' Bryan squinted at the bottle. It was cheap ruby wine—he could tell from the evil glint of the stuff and the plastic screwcap—the kind of stuff that had once been called red biddy and tiger's blood and a few other things.

'I was keeping it for a celebration,' Eddie said.

'*Celebration?* You were crying your eyes out just now.'

'All right, a wake then. But we needn't part bad friends, need we?'

Bryan gave him a suspicious glance, but went over and got three chipped cups from a shelf. He wiped them on a rag and set them down on the table. He sat on the bed and gestured to the other two to take a seat.

'Well?' he said to Eddie.

Eddie licked his lips. 'Have a drink first.' He sloshed the thick red liquid into the cups. He lifted his. 'Well, all the best.'

'Cheers,' Bryan said laconically.

'Drink up and have another.'

Bryan drained his cup and held it out. But when it was refilled he set it down in front of him.

'Okay, Eddie. Give.'

'Well, I was wondering.' He hesitated. 'If you don't want to stay here . . . can I come along with you?'

'*What!*'

'Why not? If you've got room there for me. If you haven't I'll make room. You know I'm handy with things. I'll help you fit a new place up. I'd respect your privacy. I always have here, haven't I?'

'A nice cosy *ménage a trois,* eh?'

'A what? Oh, lay off. You know I wouldn't be any trouble that way. You—you can tell your friend about me if you like.'

'I already have.'

'Oh, have you?'

'What are you looking so annoyed about? You just said you didn't mind.'

Eddie shrugged, helplessly. 'All right. Then you both understand. You *can't* leave me. Not now, when I'm getting this thing beaten. I am. I'm sure I am.'

Bryan laughed and took a swig of the wine. 'That just about negatives your own reasoning, doesn't it? About not being any trouble *that* way?' Then seeing the expression on the other's face, 'All right, Eddie, I'm sorry. I don't want to be hard. But it just isn't going to be the way it was here. I'm going to make a fresh start.'

'What, painting?'

Bryan nodded.

'Great! I always wanted to see you start painting again.'

'Not painting the kind of pictures you wanted,' Bryan said caustically. Eddie had pestered him to paint male figures and, when he had refused, to bring home any such pictures he found. He had refused that one too—to good effect. It had forced Eddie to go out himself at a time when he

was going half crazy with frustration. He had come back with his pitiful trophies. The walls of his room were covered with pictures of men—fragments of posters, battered oil paintings, even a picture of Christ that he had salvaged from the ruins of the church below—sad images of the gap in his life, a gap that had to be filled with *some*thing. Perhaps it wasn't so different from his own collection in that respect, Bryan recognized now. But he was a free agent. Eddie wasn't. The other was hopelessly trapped in his own treadmill. Trapping *him* too in a behaviour pattern towards Eddie, that made him feel guilty often. He felt guilty now, and cursed himself, not Eddie, for it.

Eddie topped up Bryan's cup. 'What's the new place like?'

Bryan told him.

'A *club*? Then there must be enough room. Hey, why not start a new club? A kind of centre.'

'That was the general idea.'

'You want to make a fresh start. I want to make a fresh start. Somebody's got to give a lead. You with your painting, me with—' He faltered.

'You with what?'

'I'd find something.'

'You've been here for two years and I haven't noticed you being particularly creative, except for cobbling walls and rigging up gadgets.'

Vee broke in vehemently. 'Why are you so brutal? Why do you want to start painting again unless you want to give people some kind of hope for the future?'

Eddie did his best to look grateful toward her.

'I thought I explained that on the way here,' Bryan told her. 'Because I have to. It's as simple as that.'

'No, it's not as simple as that,' she countered. 'Do you think you can work in isolation? That's the trouble—everybody's so separated from one another.'

Bryan stared in front of him, as if seeing through the stone walls of the tower and out over the wilderness beyond. He wheeled back to them.

'Don't you think I know? Of course people have got to get together. But we can't do it by just wanting to. We've got to create—recreate—first. Do you think Eddie here's talking out of some lofty ideal? He's just trying to soften me up so that I'll let him come along with us. All right, do you want that?'

'I—I don't know.'

'There you are then.'

'All right,' she said defiantly. 'I do.'

Bryan drained his cup. 'We're forgetting one small detail. There isn't room in the boat.'

Eddie's look of dawning hope died abruptly.

'Wouldn't it take three?' Vee said.

'Not by the time I've got my few personal things aboard.'

'I'll make a raft for them,' Eddie said quickly.

'I should think so! My precious belongings getting drenched on a raft and you riding along like Cleopatra in her barge!'

'Then come back for me. I promise I'll—' Eddie started to plead, but Bryan cut across him, speaking to Vee. 'You say he should come. All right, but he'll have to find his own way.'

'Where would I get a boat from?' Eddie wailed.

'Then slog your way through the jungle. You want to help start a brave new world? Let getting to the starting point be a test. An initiation rite.'

'You don't mean to say you're going to have an initiation rite for everybody who wants to join.'

'I am for *you*. And you know why.'

Eddie gave up. 'All right,' he said finally. 'How will I find you?'

'The new place is a big heap of rubble on the north bank, about a mile past Battersea power station that was.'

'But how will I recognize the power station? It's years since I've seen it. Before the crash.'

'You'll recognize it. Just look for a building giving the two-fingers sign.'

'But your place. A heap of rubble? London's a million heaps of rubble.'

'This one's right on the water. Like a cliff. So you won't miss it I'll put a big sign over the entrance. What'll it be now?' A name came to him across the years, the name of a club. 'I'll call it The Womb With a View.'

Chapter Six

He sat brooding over the river, trying to paint. It was achingly hard, like trying to walk again after illness. Not because there were big gaps in his range of colours. He had the basic ones. Nor because all that he had for canvas were the backs of old paintings or scraps of hardboard. There had been times in the old days when he had been worse off. Once he had been down to a handful of tubes . . . he remembered them . . . black, sienna, white and rose madder . . . remembered them because the painting he had made out of that starved palette had been one of the few in his life that he had been satisfied with.

No—it was the subjects available, he tried to convince himself. He had had two styles in the old days. Mostly naturalistic, hard and naturalistic; that had been his main style, of people more than anything else. But then there had been millions of people in the world and you chose your own subject. Both choice and rejection. Even then, in front of your chosen subject, you had to isolate it from yourself before you could begin re-creating it. He had been obsessed with a girl once, painting, sketching her in every pose that came. Even that had been an act of detachment. He had painted her out of his life. You *had* to be detached. But it had to be an act of will, not events. He had tried to paint Vee and failed pitifully.

His other style had been like offcuts from his naturalistic work, made up of all the lines and colours that he had to

reject from that. Like the occasional poems of a novelist, a critic had said once, with more sense than most of his tribe. He was trying to make an abstract now—and it was hopeless. The pattern beneath his fingers was a meaningless jumble.

In the old days he would have relieved his feelings by tearing it up. Even poverty could afford that grand gesture. The next day something would turn up. Or the next week. It was a different kind of poverty now. He daubed a final scrawl, deliberately meaningless, over the ones that had failed to achieve meaning. Tomorrow he would white it over, and defer till the day after that the struggle to achieve meaning out of idiocy, utterance out of mutterance.

He got up and stretched in the sunlight. He grimaced sadly at sight of the signboard, *The Womb With A View*, staked above his domain. It was the first thing he had done here, in fulfilment of his promise to Eddie. That had been two months ago, but there had been no sign of him. Bryan could picture him gazing helplessly from the tower, as trapped in it as any dragon-besieged maiden of the middle ages. Or had he tried the journey, dared the dragons . . . and been bested?

Eddie would have been useful with all the work here, though. It had been hard going. He had dug out the ventilation tunnel into a passage tall enough to walk along, shoring it up as he went. He had cleared the mouth of it, digging it back to make a little patio safe from any intruder from above, and he had found and fixed a stout door. He had cut a path along the face of the cliff—wide enough for one person. And fixed a sign above: 'D. Bryan Painter Welcomes People of Good Will.' Anybody not hostile could approach singly and be counted. But nobody, hostile or not, had come on the

scene so far. The community remained a community of two.

Vee had planted flowers round the entrance. They were a bizarre array of wild flowers, stray survivors of garden blooms and weeds. But it was something done. Something beyond the mere need to survive.

He went in, bolting the door behind him. Vee was cooking on a stove he had found in the ruins. It was squat and black and old-fashioned, with scrolling over its face. He had prised a way through the roof and the rubble beyond for a stove-pipe.

'Think I'll go for a walk,' he said.

Vee turned from the stove. 'Collecting again?'

'Only ideas.'

She wiped her hands on the piece of sacking tied around her middle. 'What's wrong? Isn't the painting going right?'

He shrugged.

'But you can't expect it to go right immediately.'

'Do you think I don't know that? But if the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? That's out of your book, isn't it?'

'Nothing's ever lost. Be patient. You said we've got to learn a new language. Isn't that what you've got to do in your painting?'

He looked at her with quick affection. 'You're not so dumb as you look.'

'That's the old language.' But she smiled.

He took her in his arms. 'I'm trying,' he said.

'I know.'

'But it's terribly hard.'

'I know it must be.'

He kissed her. 'Why do I go on trying?' he murmured.

'Perhaps *this* is all that's left . . . all that's worth keeping.' His hands began to caress her.

She broke away and faced him indignantly. 'If you think that—'

'Why are you angry?'

'You *know* why. Because it's not true.'

'No?'

'Not true that you believe it.'

'I have a job not to sometimes.'

She turned back to the stove. He looked at her for a long time, then went out into the sunshine.

He headed northward, away from the river and all its memories. Why did he have to talk to her the way he did too often? Perhaps she was right—perhaps he *was* sadistic. All his life, until the crash, he had wrestled with form and colour, striving to bend them to his will. Had he been just the same with people?

He laughed hollowly and the sound echoed between the ruins. He muttered savagely: *'Let the message go forth—laughter conquers all. Not love . . . they tried that for twenty centuries and it didn't work. God isn't love . . . he's a red-nosed comic. It was all a big joke. I say I say I say, there was this world, see, and these three billion people. No, wait, don't laugh yet. I know it's funny, but I haven't come to the really funny part yet. Because suddenly this world just folded up. Kind of twitched, see. It was still there, only the people* weren't *any more.* Now *you can laugh. Why aren't you laughing? Perhaps you didn't get the point. What point? The fact that there* wasn't *any point. It's the new pointless humour. No? Well excuse me while I laugh again . . .*

The echoes died away to silence.

He shook himself and trudged on. The jagged horizon opened up to show something like a great rusty gallows. There was nothing else in the landscape. He headed towards it. It was not until he was almost under its stark shadow that he recognized it for what it for what it had been, and remembered this place. Once it had been regularly crowded with people, now only weeds covered it. Once all points of entry had been guarded. Now the only barriers were tumbled blocks of masonry. He clambered over them and came out on to the terraces. He looked down.

Somewhere in limbo a groundsman must be weeping. What had once been a smooth stretch of green was green still, but four feet tall and scattered with nettles and the grey heads of dandelions. The stands had collapsed. The other three floodlight standards spreadeagled the terraces, like cripples left to die where they had fallen. This was Stamford Bridge—1981. Once he had seen the fabulous Jimmy Greaves weave his patterns here. That was what the papers had called him . . . fabulous . . . the most overworked word of that decade. Fabulous, of fable, fabled. They were all fables now. Fables of a past that was lost more utterly than Greece or Rome. Or would be before long. When *they* had fallen, there had been little pockets left to contain the memory, to keep conjugating the empty words against the day when they would have meaning again. *Amo amas amat* . . . But now—

He suddenly remembered a pathetic Latin master at his school, how they had got him to conjugate an imaginary verb *cire*. 'But there isn't a verb *cire*.' 'But say there *was*, sir?' their voices sweetly pleading and the poor bastard pitifully grateful for their seeming interest—and he had done it. *Co cis cit, cimmus cittus cunt*. Perhaps a world that tortured such innocence deserved to die.

He was adrift on a sea of hopeless memories and associations. *Amo amas amat. Du beau . . . du bon . . . Dubonnet.* Climax! *Fabulous . . . fab . . . fa-a-a.* Anticlimax, like the fading cry of a crowd cheated of a goal. This was joke day all right. Chelsea football team had been a music hall joke for years. Then they had suddenly ceased to be a joke—what year was it they won the European Cup?—and then the end of everything, a real joke ending. But now he didn't laugh, huddled against his memories as once on winter Saturday afternoons here as a kid he had huddled against the biting wind.

He made his way slowly out of the deserted stadium and wandered on in the general direction of what had been Earls Court. *Earls Court . . . Shepherds Bush . . . Barons Court . . .* strange antique names for places that had become squares of plaster and concrete and the names just names that, even so, would become strange again if you repeated them over and over. Now they were just piles of plaster and concrete and if you repeated the names they stayed dead. For no reason he stopped at a ruin and peered into it.

It was only a shell, a shell staking out a pit. His eye caught the gleam of something in the dirt. He went in through a gaping doorway and scrambled down into the pit. He bent down and picked up the object. All it was was a broken piece of plastic. He went to throw it away but, his curiosity faintly stirred, he used it for a tool to dig at the earth. He came across something else. He dug round it and lifted it clear.

It took him a moment or two to detach it from the decayed remnants of what must have been its original packing. The covering of its umbilical flex was decayed too, but its flat metal and glass body shone brightly in the sunlight. He recognized it, after a period of puzzlement, as an electric

hotplate. Through its glass surface the intricate formal maze of a heating element showed through. His eyes followed the pattern bemusedly.

A shadow fell across it.

Bryan looked up. A man was standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the sun, looking down at him.

Reflex tensed Bryan's body. He was at a double disadvantage—at the bottom of a pit and with both hands occupied. Before he could free them and go for his knife the figure above could be on him. The man's shoulders were broad against the light.

But the stranger made no move. When he spoke his voice was flat. 'That's my pit you're standing in.'

'Is it?' said Bryan. 'I'll get out of it then.' Clutching his new-found object in one hand, he hauled himself to the top, away from the other man. But he kept his eyes on him all the time.

The man came a step in from the doorway. He was wearing a hat with a band of faded flowers. He was also wearing a double-breasted suit, a shirt and a tie. Bryan's gaze travelled down to the man's feet, to pointed yellow shoes, and returned to the face. It was sharp, dark-complexioned—not with a tan but with the kind of look men once got in smoky billiard halls and gambling clubs—a kind of kippered look. The man—his dress, his whole appearance—was an apparition out of the past.

Bryan relaxed slightly. Seen on the level, the man was short. And the shoulders belonged to the suit, not to him.

The man smiled crookedly.

'If you're thinking of jumping me, I wouldn't if I was you.' He reached in his jacket and pulled out a gun that

glinted blue in the sunlight. 'Just to let you know—' his bird-like eyes darted over Bryan's frame—'that size ain't everything. It never was and it certainly ain't now.' He put the gun away. 'Fair enough?"

'Fair enough,' Bryan muttered.

'You're a stranger round here, ain't you?"

Bryan shrugged.

'Thought so. You get a few strange faces round the outskirts of the manor.'

'The manor?"

'Barney's manor. There ain't no other, as far as I know.'

'Barney's manor, *your* pit. People seem to be rather proprietorial round here.'

The man squinted at him. Then he guffawed, showing long yellow teeth. 'I wouldn't use long words like that near Barney if I was you. It's his manor. And it's my pit. I dug it out yesterday.'

Bryan looked at the other's hands. They were smooth and well kept.

The man smiled the crooked smile again. 'One of my men dug it out.'

'He didn't dig far enough,' Bryan said evenly.

The man's hand reached in his jacket again, but came out only with a cigarette case. He took out a cigarette, lit it and put the case back, all without taking his eyes from Bryan.

'Going to hand it over?'

'No.'

'What use is it to you?'

'What use is to *you*?' Bryan felt, for a flickering moment, as if he were back at school again. Two kids squabbling over

a cricket ball or a roller skate. But they hadn't carried guns in their pockets then.

'Dunno. Might be able to use it. All right, pal. I don't want it for nothing. No harm in trying though, is there? Give you a pony for it.'

'A *what*?'

'A pony. Twenty five quid.'

Bryan burst out laughing. 'Pounds? They became useless three years ago.'

'That proves you're new round here.' The man reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a wad of notes. He peeled one off and held it out. Bryan stretched forward and took it.

It was about the size of an old pound note, but printed in black. Instead of the queen's head, it bore a blurred picture of a man's face; instead of a cashier's signature, the words *Barney Always Pays*. Large broken type across the top said *One Pound*. In one corner there was a serial number in red ink. The rest was filled with a jumble of printer's ornaments.

He handed it back to the sharp-faced man.

'Course, that's only a oncer,' the other said. 'Just to show you what Barney's money looks like. But I told you, I'll give you a pony.' He held up a note printed in mauve.

'And what would I do with a pony? What's a pony worth?'

'What you've got in your hand. Give or take a nicker or two. I'm not in this for my health, you know.'

'That doesn't exactly answer my question.'

'Don't it? All right.' The man raised his fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle. Shortly afterwards a shadow shuffled through the doorway, carrying a sack. It was an old man with a grey stubble of beard. Though the day was warm he wore a tattered overcoat that flapped round his ankles.

'Here, Charlie, wanna pony?'

Charlie's bleary eyes lit up. He nodded violently.

'Then get that sack filled up. And no rubbish, mind.' Charlie turned to go. 'No, hold on a minute.' Sharp-face turned back to Bryan. 'See? That's what a pony's worth.'

'To him maybe.'

'To anybody. Depends what you want. Always did, didn't it? Even before. Could've been a fistful of torn-up tickets after the first race at White City, or a pricy bit of skirt up West, or a week's booze-up.' He looked at Bryan speculatively. 'Or it might be the price of a bullet these days.'

Bryan laughed suddenly.

The other looked at him through narrowed eyes. 'Think I wouldn't?'

'No. I just recognized that we're getting somewhere at last. So that's the price you charge for a bullet?'

'I don't sell bullets. Except to Barney. Barney don't like people having guns. Only his own men.'

'Then you're one of Barney's men?'

'Don't ask too many questions, mister.'

'Where would I find Barney?'

'What for?'

'To cash his money.'

'You don't have to find Barney for that. His money's currency anywhere in the manor.'

'And just where is that?'

'If you've heard of Barney you're in Barney's manor.'

'If it's a place it must have a centre.'

'You could try round the Lane.'

'The Lane?' Memory stirred. 'Portobello Road, you mean?'

The other looked up at him from under the brim of his hat. 'I thought you said you were a stranger?'

'I lived there once in the old days.'

'Huh-huh. Well, Barney's headquarters ain't far from the Lane. Ask anybody.'

Anybody? He made it sound as populated as one-time Piccadilly in the rush hour. He didn't pursue the point. He could find out for himself.

'All right,' he said. He held out the hotplate, feeling that he ought to have bargained over it. But what he had found out was more important to him.

Sharp-face nodded to the still-waiting Charlie. 'Put that in your sack.' He put the mauve scrap of paper in Bryan's hand and turned to go. He turned back.

'The name's Gus, any time you got a deal. I'm always around.'

Chapter Seven

Notting Hill reared up before him. He had not realized, remembering it from the old days, just how much of a hill it was. Buildings and winding streets had once obscured its height. Now they were gone. What looked like a stump of the old water tower was still standing at the top. But there was no sign of the skyscraper blocks of flats that had jutted up beyond the crown of the hill.

He had never, since the crash, ventured as far as this. The radius of a day's exploring had been limited by his distance from base, and this was a long way from Greenwich. His furthest in this direction must have been on the trip which had ended with his meeting with Vee. He might well have been on the outskirts of Barney's manor that day without knowing it, the men he had hidden from have been Barney's men.

The sun was still far from its peak. The year was approaching the summer solstice. He had told Vee nothing of his encounter in the ruins the day before, and this morning had only told her that he would be away all day. She had not questioned him. She was used to his restlessness and accepted it.

But which way to take now? Holland Park was a jungle. The big trees that had marched up to its summit were all toppled. Only here and there a ruined head showed above rank grass. It would take him hours to toil up to the summit

that way. If he ever reached it, for the place must be alive with snakes.

That left the roads, or what was left of them. Those to the east, around Church Street, had been narrow and flanked with tall buildings, which meant that they would be more choked with rubble. The roads to the west had been wider—what house agents would have once called a 'select residential district.' And that way would skirt the hill less steeply, though it would mean a detour to get to the Portobello Road area.

He chose the west route, turning his footsteps north whenever he could, wherever he saw an opening in the general chaos. He came at length to what he thought was Holland Park Avenue. There hadn't been another road running east-west here that would have been so clearly discernible as this. *Clearly!* He grimaced. Everything was comparative. In the old days they used to take photographs from the air and map out the lines of old Roman roads, still showing as a fractionally darker strip under fields that had covered them for centuries. It was like that now. If you could make out a gash in the ruins straight enough and long enough, the odds were that it had once been a road.

This one stretched westwards up to the hill, its northern edge piled in a long mound of debris like the curled lip of a wound. It was beyond that wall that the old market area of Portobello Road lay. But the way looked forbidding. He looked eastwards towards Shepherds Bush. About three hundred yards away there was a gap in the rubble.

He made for it, turned into the shadow of the gap—and stopped dead.

For here, in the bright sunlight—lay a road. A rough one of bricks and slabs of stone, but a road nonetheless. It was that, not the presence of several people here, that made him

blink his eyes against the first shocked suspicion that this was a mirage.

The men, a half dozen of them, were workmen. Two were bent over the jagged end of the road. Two more were carting chunks of stone in their hands. The other pair were trundling a large old garden roller across the road several yards in the road. They toiled silently, like zombies. Over them stood a man with a blue armband. The armband bore a white B. Another man with an armband was sitting on an upturned crate under a faded red-yellow-and-green beach umbrella. There was another crate in front of him.

As Bryan stood there, fascinated, one or two of the workmen looked up, but returned to their work incuriously. The two men in armbands saw him and stayed looking. The seated man gestured to him curtly. Bryan walked towards him. The man's right hand went to his belt. Only as Bryan got closer did he see the gun resting in a rough holster. But the man did not unship it as he stood up.

'Pass?'

Bryan stared at him.

'Pass,' the man repeated, no query in his voice this time.

'I don't know what you're talking about?'

The man looked past him. 'Jonesy.' The other man with the armband came over. The first man nodded at Bryan.

Jonesy advanced on Bryan, his hands out. But they held no weapon, nor were they clenched in fists. Bryan didn't resist. The other obviously hadn't expected him to. His hands ran over Bryan's body, gesturing once for him to lift his arms higher. Bryan lifted his arms.

Jonesy stopped abruptly and reached inside Bryan's shirt. He brought out the knife, glinting in the sunlight. He whistled, tried the point on his palm, then ran his thumb along the

razor-sharp edge. He grunted and handed it to his mate.

'Nasty bit of cutlery,' his mate said, turning it over in his hand. 'What kind of knife is this?'

Bryan told him.

'A *throwing* knife, eh? Who do you aim to go throwing at?'

'Nobody. Unless somebody starts something first. I haven't used it on anybody for a year or two.'

'Yeah? What happened then?'

'Somebody jumped me. I killed him.'

'Where?'

'Does it matter?'

'It matters if you want to move around Barney's manor.'

Bryan shrugged. 'Round Rotherhithe way. Is that far enough away for you?'

'All right, feller. But Barney don't like carving each other up.'

Jonesy snickered and started to say something. The words faded under a glare from the other, who was evidently his superior, though Bryan could see no mark of rank on the armbands. Perhaps the gun was a mark of rank; Jonesy wasn't carrying one.

'So do you mind giving me my knife back?'

'Hold on, feller. We ain't finished yet. Where you headed for?'

Bryan reached in his pocket and held up the mauve note.

Before he could say anything, the man said, 'Now why didn't you say you'd got money? That'll be two quid. Road toll.'

'Say I don't want to use your road?'

'You already have, ain't you? But we won't count that, seeing as you're new here. You can turn right back and go out the way you came in. Please yourself. Any other way in's

not exactly barricaded. But—' he flicked his thumbnail under his teeth, eyeing Bryan cagily—'it ain't exactly clear, neither.'

'I get the point. But this note is all the change I've got.'

'We got change.'

'Do I get my knife back?'

'Course you get your knife back,' the other said almost painedly. 'That's another good reason for taking the road. Try another way in and you might get stopped and get your knife confiscated.'

Bryan shrugged and paid over the note. The man pulled a wad from his pocket and gave him two red and three black ones in change. He kept the wad in his hand.

'Give you a pony for the knife.'

'I got a pony for something much less useful.'

'All right, forty then. Top offer. And only because it's a bit different. There's plenty of knives knocking about the manor.'

Bryan wondered whether that was a haggling point or a plain statement of fact. 'Nothing doing. I'll have it back.'

'Please yourself.' The man handed it back, keeping his free hand on his gun until Bryan had shipped the knife. 'Put your left hand on the table.' He pointed to the crate and reached under it. He stamped something in mauve ink on Bryan's wrist.

Bryan looked at it. It said *14 June 1981*. So somebody had kept the dates up? It was more than he had done. Once, back at the tower, he had wound up all the clocks in his collection that worked . . . and within a short time had found himself waiting desperately for them to wind out, their inane ticking making his fingers itch to smash them. He had gone out cursing into a grey drizzle to get away from them. One could tell the hours without clocks and the days had lost meaning. But not here evidently.

'What does this signify?'

'It gives you free passage on this road till sunrise tomorrow. You don't have to pay any more, so don't listen to anyone who might tell you different. We've got the concession for this road.'

'From Barney?'

The man glared. 'Who else?'

'And what about any other roads?'

'The ones inside the manor are free. It's only roads going in and out you got to pay on.'

'Neat arrangement.'

'Somebody's got to pay for building 'em, ain't they?' The man turned away. Jonesy went back to the workmen. Bryan passed on.

The road was banked high on either side, probably with the rubble cleared in its making. It would have been difficult to head in this direction without taking the road. Difficult, but surely not impossible. Who—in this world—paid to use roads? Or was it only a protection racket? If so, it had its own discipline. The two men back there could have stolen his knife. Or killed him. Simple economics? Like Gus and the hotplate—one knife not being worth one bullet in the exchange rate of this place?

He got the answer to one question before he had gone very far. The road had other users. In the shadow of rubble was a horse. Harnessed to a ramshackle cart, it stood calmly cropping the grass sprouting from a ruined wall. A man with a sack was rummaging on a nearby mound. He straightened at sound of Bryan's footsteps and squinted at him.

Bryan waited until he was well past before looking back. The man was bent over his work again. Bryan went on, feeling strangely elated, like an ornithologist who had come across a rare bird long given up for extinct.

This area had been a strange one even before the crash. Now, ruined as it was, it did not seem so drastically changed as the rest of London. It had always looked half-ruined, half-completed. Curious about the place when he lived here, he had read something of its history.

It had started out as a would-be fashionable area back in the early eighteen hundreds. The project had failed; the site had been too close to the brickfields and shanty town of Shepherds Bush. The money had run out and the half-finished houses had been jobbed off to small builders who had rushed to finish the houses before they went broke too. The scramble had had some bizarre results. He remembered one house like a surrealist's castle, crammed into a road junction and stuccoed bright salmon-pink. He had tried to paint it once; its utter improbability had defeated him. Other houses, from chaste foundations, rioted out in nineteenth-century builders' job lines—scrolls, sphinxes, cornucopias, spidery balconies, plaster fruit, flutings of stone. Or withered upwards from solidly ornate bases into blank masks of cement. Houses intended for the residences of barristers, tea importers, fashionable doctors, became tenements and brothels. The intended occupants moved into Kensington and Knightsbridge instead. Another race of men had taken over here, beyond Notting Hill. The junkmen—the totters.

Men like the one on the mound, with a horse and cart or a van, they brought their loads back to the scrapyards of the area, disposing of rags and scrap metal at the day's price, keeping back anything of hopefully greater value—the vase or copper coal scuttle or bag of books—to sell in Portobello Road—the Lane—on Saturdays.

Bryan remembered the Lane with a pang of nostalgia, that mile of road winding from the Hill itself to the gasworks

in the north. It was the Notting Hill end that the tourists had known—the world of antique silver and boutiques. But beyond where they finished, beyond the meat and produce stalls, beyond the motorway and the bridge where the Met line trains clattered overhead, had been the real market. Carts used to start clustering there at an hour when the tourists were still in their hotel beds. That had been the time and the place to find bargains. Many of them turned up later in the day—at inflated prices—at the other end.

He was abruptly aware of more people. A man was perched halfway up a jumbled cube of masonry, hacking away at it. Another was stitching bits of canvas into some kind of tent. Bryan turned a bend of the road and two men were standing talking. They stopped as he approached and looked at him with faint, unhostile curiosity. As he passed they resumed talking.

He came to a road junction—and he recognized it. It was the junction of . . . he sought in the fading regions of memory and remembered one of them . . . Latimer Road, but not the other. A pub had stood on this corner once. Gone now, beyond was a wilderness with a few shanties planted on it. The area hadn't changed much. Even before the crash it had been a desolate region of carbreakers' yards, small dingy factories, a few houses straggling northward.

The other road went on only a few yards before stopping at a vast wall of ruin. But a narrow road turned right, skirting it. A long-jawed man with an armband lolled against a wall. He shifted off the wall as Bryan approached. Bryan held back his left sleeve. The man looked at the stamp and grunted. Bryan passed on, crazily congratulating himself.

There were more people about here. He remembered Gus's

words—'ask anybody'—and his own reaction to them. It wasn't exactly as populated as Piccadilly Circus in the rush hour; there couldn't have been more than a dozen people scattered along the stretch of road in front of him. But, after the desolation of every other part of London he had wandered through, it was heartbreakingly busy. Smoke came from openings here and there in the ruins.

People looked at him as he passed, probably noting him as a stranger but showing no disquiet at the fact. Most were men, but there were a couple of women. One had a boy of three or four clutching at her ragged skirt, and a baby in her arms. One man was standing with a pathetic array of odds-and-ends spread at his feet. That was like something else Bryan recalled from the old days—when a few, without the price of a market pitch, had scratched some kind of a living out of what even the totters discarded as useless.

He came to . . . Lancaster Road? Hadn't that been the name of one of the four or five roads that had joined here? Now only one ran through the ruins. On the corners had been a junkyard, a pub, a public baths, he thought he remembered. Only one of them remained.

The junkyard was fenced with corrugated iron. A few houses were standing next to it. The houses looked as if they had been recently painted, but there was no sign of life. A roughly painted board ran across the top of them: BARNEY'S STORES. TOP VALUE CHEAPEST PRICES. There was another board on the corrugated iron fence:

XLCR BUYERS
WE BUY ANYTHING
BEST PRICES GIVEN
(Prop. Barney Smith)

A gate was set in the fence. It was closed. Bryan tried it. It

was locked. He shrugged and battered on it and waited.

No answer came. He battered louder and the din echoed away into the surrounding ruins. Then he heard a door slam beyond the fence. A bolt drew back and a young-old face thrust itself into his.

'Whaddya want? We're closed.'

'I'm looking for Barney.'

'So you're looking for Barney.' The voice mimicked Bryan's, then hardened. 'Beat it.'

'Look, I only—'

The man turned and gave a low whistle. The next moment he was holding a snarling beast by the collar. It looked like a cross between a chow and a dobermann pinscher. Bryan stopped arguing. As he turned away bolts shot back behind him.

A bundle of rags stopped and addressed him wheezily.

'It's all closed round here on a Saturday, son.'

Bryan blinked.

'It's all going on up the Lane.' The apparition shuffled on.

Bryan closed his eyes against unreality, the ghost of a dead reality. *Saturday? The Lane?* Had the past three years been a dream? He took the first steps in the direction of the Lane with his eyes still closed.

Chapter Eight

He heard the place before he came to it. When he did, turning a corner, he stopped dead.

The railway and motorway bridges had collapsed, but the street had been cut out and resurrected between the two towering banks. Apart from that and the disappearance of the small shops that had lined the road, the scene could have been any market day of old. There were even substitutes for the shops in caverns set in the rubble, with scrawled signs above them.

There weren't as many pitches as in the old days, and more handbarrows than carts. Some pitches were only a littered space on the ground. And it wasn't, inevitably, as crowded. But where had all these people come from? There must have been several hundred of them. Some were in rags, but others were pathetically neat. One youth was strutting around in a red military tunic and jodhpurs. Once back in the sixties, he remembered, that had been a brief fad with kids of his age. Necessity and chance had turned the wheel. Children darted in and out between the pitches, one catching a cuff from a stallholder as Bryan stood there, watching bemusedly.

One thing was missing, he realized with a chill. All the faces were white ones. On an old Saturday here only half would have been. Earth had moved against man three years ago and had had allies among men. It must have had sinister ones here. His reaction was duller than it might have been; too many

people had died that day and in the days after, and all insanely. Fire, frenzy, plague . . . where did bigotry come in that scale? On a barbecue somebody was turning pigmy chickens on a spit. Pigeons? Starlings?

From a baby carriage beyond, a man was offering what a chalked notice announced to be sarsparilla—at a pound a glass. The pound appeared to be the smallest unit here, corresponding to—what?—a twopenny, a fivepenny piece, of the old days? He passed a man holding up a threadbare scrap of lino and asking a pound for it in a loud voice. If it was the rock-bottom unit how did you haggle on that? Bargain for a few rusty tacks to go with it? For people were haggling at every other stall—something else straight out of the past—for old clothes, bits of hardboard, rusty tins of paint, scraps of bent iron, dented food cans. The ornaments and knick-knacks—the kind of thing that had been the staple trade of the old market—were getting a few bids, he noticed. But a bicycle with a buckled wheel had a scrap of board propped up against it scrawled £75.

There had been convent walls along each side of the Lane at this point. It had been a rich area for convents and relief missions with its mixed poor. Many faiths had found homes here, from a synagogue to a Salvation Army hall, from a Serbian Orthodox church to a chapel of the Elim Brotherhood. All gone now, probably, as here the convent walls and the buildings beyond were gone, only two long banks of rubble flanking the stalls.

But on the corner, at the end of the stalls, one other remembered building still stood. A pub. And it was open for business. Through the open doors came a sound that he had almost forgotten—the pub noise of people chattering and laughing. He went in.

It looked like any scruffy pub of the old days. There were fading brewers' signs round the walls, a few battered tables and chairs. There was no covering on the floor except sawdust. He pushed his way to the bar and called for a beer.

There were two servers behind the bar. One, a squat man with black bushy eyebrows that ran into each other, grunted and drew a murky liquid from a barrel into a chipped tumbler.

'How much?' Bryan asked.

The man gave him a suspicious glance. 'How much d'you think? Two quid.'

Bryan reached in his pocket and handed over two blank notes. The man took them but didn't move away. He seemed to be waiting for something. *A tip?* Bryan wondered.

The man gestured with finger and thumb. 'Another oncer for the glass. Deposit.'

Bryan handed over the extra note. (It was a reasonable enough demand in a world like this.) He raised the glass to his lips. It was a hot day and he had come a long way, but his nostrils wrinkled over the drink checking his gulp to a dubious sip. He took another sip and wondered what the stuff could be made of. It had a raw yeasty taste like home-made wine.

He grabbed the barman's sleeve as he passed to serve somebody else. 'What do you call this rot-gut?'

The man's eyebrows lowered. 'It's what you asked for, ain't it? Beer. We got the McCoy if you wannit.'

'How much?'

'Standard price. A fiver.'

'All right.'

The man went to remove the dark drink from the counter. A skinny hand got there first, snatching up the glass and emptying the contents into a jug in one sweep.

'Thanks, son,' a shrill voice said. An old woman went scuttling back to a table. The barman glared after her, but Bryan only watched with a pitying smile as she sank her gums into the brew.

The barman came up with a dented rusty can, levered it open and poured it. This one was better. Drinkable, anyway. Bryan took a long draught and looked about him. Most of the men in the place looked like totters. They stood about in twos and threes. One pair were having a heated argument, but the words were lost in the general noise of the place. In one corner a middle-aged man in glasses sat reading a tattered magazine with a bleached nude on its cover. He might have been a clerk or storekeeper who had just stopped off from the train after his morning's work—only the trains had stopped running three years ago. And his shoes were gaping at the toes.

How had *he* survived? And the old woman who had swiped his drink? And the bundle of rags that had directed him to the Lane? How had they escaped when so many of the young and strong, the gifted and the beautiful, had perished? Simply because they were none of these? So that the jagged wheels of Juggernaut had passed them over? Having no goods to be killed for, no strength to fear, no beauty to madden . . . nothing?

His eyes travelled on and registered the fact that there was another bar in this place, on the other side of the counter—that while he had been looking around, somebody had been looking at him. Somebody he knew.

Gus grinned fractionally. He was with another man—a big man in a big-shouldered brown suit, standing with his back to the counter so that Bryan could see little of his face. But it was enough to make him reach for his pocket and pull out

one of the notes. The image on it was blurred, so that he could not be sure. When he raised his head he saw that Gus's lips were moving. The big man turned unhurriedly.

Bryan was sure then.

Barney must have been about the same age as himself. His face was round, cherubic almost, slightly florid, sandy hair thinning slightly, eyes a pale blue. The eyes locked with Bryan's, regarding him with a gaze that was devoid of curiosity or hostility —or anything else. And Bryan wondered for a moment why he found it unsettling. Then he recognized it. It was the cold gaze of a buyer looking at a lot of junk.

'I knew then that I was looking into the face of the enemy,' he said.

'The enemy!' Vee said scathingly. 'All your talk about people having to make a start again! As soon as you find people who are trying to, you start talking of them as enemies.'

'I'm talking about Barney and his stooges, not the rest of the people there. It was always tough in that area, a struggle to survive. Perhaps it didn't make so much difference to them, what happened, as it did to people in the more so-called civilized parts. It's a junk world now, isn't it? They were dealers in junk already. In a world turned to junk the junkman is king.'

'But what have you got against this man—Barney, did you call him?'

'Because Barney is the type who comes out on top in that kind of world. He never soiled his hands with junk. He got other people to do it for him. A typical spiv.'

'Spiv?'

'That was slang for somebody who made his living without working.'

'Some sort of criminal, you mean?'

'No—not technically. I couldn't give you an exact definition, but you couldn't mistake a member of the species once you knew it. He owned a scrap yard, or a few lorries, or a place where they remoulded car tyres. Or a betting shop; that seems to have been Barney's main racket before, going by what's printed on his money. The spiv always found an easy way to make a living, but just on the right side of the law. If anyone got caught it was one of his stooges. He administered his own internal justice, and the Law was usually glad to leave him alone. It was easier all round that way. He ruled over his manor—' He broke off. 'Before you ask me what a spiv's manor was, it was the district where people knew better than to argue with him.'

'Well, all right. We're not in his manor, are we? Forget about him. You say that painting's the only real thing to you. It may be hard now, but it will come back.'

'Maybe it will, maybe it won't. It's the kind of world I'll be painting in that concerns me.'

'You said you wouldn't let it concern you.'

'When did I?'

'That first day on the river.'

'I meant if there was no world, no future. If we had to make our own. But not if we've got to live in somebody else's—a Barney's world. In the old days a spiv's manor was limited by the other spivs' manors bordering his. But I've roamed over a lot of London and I haven't seen any other place like Notting Hill that's survived. So there's no limit on somebody like Barney now. He gets people to build roads for him and lets them exact tolls. That means his empire is stretching out all the time. That pub I told you about is only in business by courtesy of Barney, you can bet your life. And anything

else there. I lived in that place once; I know what I'm talking about. Sure, you could live there and never be bothered whose manor it was. Unless your way of life touched any sector of his operations. It didn't have to concern you. But now it does, because in this junk world everything's a part of his operations. We may not be in his manor yet, but if we stay here and do nothing about it we're likely to wake up tomorrow—or in three months time—and find we are.'

'What do you mean . . . *if* we stay here? You don't mean you want us to move, after getting this place fixed up?'

'That's exactly what I mean.'

She sighed heavily. 'All right, if you say so. We'll find somewhere else. Better that than you getting tangled with this Barney.'

'I'm glad you agree to the move. But I don't think you quite understand. I mean, we're moving right into Barney's manor.'

'You tricked me!' she howled. 'Talking about moving out and then—'

'Please *listen!* What do you think I'm going to do—go in there head down and fists flying? That's not the way to beat him. We'll start a resistance movement. Right inside his empire. We'll render unto Barney while it suits us, but we'll build up a counterworld to his. Don't you see, I can't do anything without people. And up there in Notting Hill, by some miracle, a few hundred souls have kept going. It might be the only community left in the whole world, do you realize that?'

'*Miracle? Souls?* They're the kind of words *I* used to use. You said that language was dead. Oh, I'm afraid.'

He took her in his arms.

'You needn't be afraid. I've looked after you so far, haven't I? I won't let any harm come to you.'

'I don't mean afraid just for me.'

'I can take care of myself. I can take care of both of us. You'll see.'

'No, I don't mean only for you, either. I mean for the people there where you've been. Leave them alone. They're making their own way. Maybe it's not your kind of way but—'

'It's not their way, either. It's Barney's way—and that's to nowhere in the end. I'm going to change that. Barney may be tough, but I'm tough too.'

She trembled in his arms. 'You're so sure. But—'

His hands moved over her. Normally she would resist if he tried to close an argument this way. She had adjusted to this world—in her own way and one no more odd than anybody else's—and to him. That first time she had insisted that he keep speaking to her, but only that once. Since then she had kept that part of life separate from everything else. Like a kind of ritual, or substitute for one. But now she accepted him without protest. Out of some last hope that he would change his mind about taking on the enemy? He had to put her right on that.

'Tomorrow—' he murmured. He smiled grimly. 'No, we'll let Barney enjoy his Sabbath in peace. The next day—we move in.'

Chapter Nine

Dawn was a smear of pink on the skyline as they left the Womb. Bryan locked the door behind them and held the key in his hand for a moment. Vee took it from him and hid it behind a rock. She looked at him with a sad smile, then they took up their burdens and made their way along the cliff path, cooking pots clanking from Vee's waist. The last thing Bryan did was to turn the marker post—*D. Bryan Painter Welcomes People of Goodwill*—to point northward. He led in the direction where it pointed. He didn't look back.

'You can rest here,' he said, stopping at the doorway of the pub. Vee started to complain as he ushered her inside. It was dark after the sunlight. He located a table.

'What were you saying?'

'You said *I* could rest. What do you mean? You're not leaving me in this place on my own?' There were four other people in the place—all men—besides the black-brown character behind the bar.

Bryan straightened from unhoisting the heavy load from his back. 'I may not have to. You'll be all right, anyway.'

'It's the people. I can't get used to people again.' She trembled.

'I know how you feel. You'll get over it.' He grinned darkly

and raised his voice. 'I'll carve the guts out of anyone who bothers you.' He went up to the bar.

The man behind it looked reproachful. 'There's no need to talk like that. This is a respectable place.'

'It had better be.' Bryan looked him in the eye. He ordered Vee a beer and took it to her. He licked his lips. It had been a long and heavy-laden journey since sunrise. But he had more important things to do before this day was out. He bent over his pack and unstrapped the fruit machine. He hoisted it onto the table. He put a coin in and pulled the handle. He had to put a couple more in before a payout came. The coins clinked into the cup. The men in the place looked at him, faintly curious.

'How much?' he called out to the man behind the bar.

The man shrugged. 'Who says I want to buy it?'

'Customer attraction.'

'I can sell all the beer I get without that.'

'Profit then.'

The man guffawed. 'I saw what you put in it—a toodie. Fat lot of profit in *them* these days! There's an arcade down the road—'

'So *somebody's* making a profit out of them.'

'They work on their own discs. You got to get the machine altered.'

'Who do I see about altering it?'

'You wanna lot of information for the price of one drink. There's only one bloke, and he don't work for nobody else.'

'I'll try the arcade then.'

'He don't work for the arcade.'

'Who for then?'

'For Barney.'

'Surprise! And the arcade gets its machines from Barney, right?'

'Right.'

Bryan grimaced and hoisted the machine on to his back with the straps he had fixed to it. 'I won't be long,' he said to Vee, and when she started to protest, 'Now don't worry. You'll be all right.' He went out of the bar and made his way along rough streets to the XLCR junkyard.

It was open. He went in and crossed the yard to where a sign said *Receiving Office*. There was a counter inside. He recognized the face behind it. This time the dog was chained to a bracket in the wall. It bared its teeth as Bryan went past. Bryan dumped the machine on the counter.

The young-old face looked at Bryan, down to the machine, then back to Bryan.

'Well?'

'I want to sell this.'

'Does it work?'

Bryan put a coin in and pulled the handle.

'I'll give you thirty-five for it.'

'And the rest.'

'It'd have to be altered to take discs. Otherwise anyone could get free goes. That's skilled work. And they got to be special made discs, or people could still get free goes.'

'I didn't come here for a technical handout. I want two hundred for it.'

'You're joking! I'll stretch a point and make it fifty.'

Another face had emerged from the shadows. Gus sidled

forward. 'Make it seventy-five, Ollie. You want to scare customers away?'

'Mind your own bleedin' business,' said Ollie. 'I'm the manager here.'

'I said I wanted two hundred,' Bryan repeated.

Gus shook his head sadly. 'You don't know the market, so why go butting your head against a wall? I've known Barney give a century for one, but that was top whack. And he's got enough for the time being. I'm doing you a favour. You can take it or leave it.'

'In other words it's a monopoly, is that it?'

'Tschk tschk—I wouldn't use that word too much near Barney, if I was you. This is a free country. They always used to say that, the poor bastards, didn't they? Well, now it's true. You can take it or you can leave it, just like I said. As simple as that. You can set it up anywhere you can find, and start your own arcade. Course, you'd have to get the machine altered. Or sell people marked coins for real money—but then you'd have to watch over everyone to make sure they wasn't slipping their own coins in, wouldn't you? You never know in this world with nothing. People keep on turning things up. Somebody might come across a bloody great store of machines somewhere. Me, I'd take the seventy-five while I could get it.'

'Nobody's offering anybody seventy-five!' Ollie protested. *'I'm not paying any more than fifty.'*

Gus turned to give him a pitying look. 'You can take it up with Barney if you want to. I told him about this feller.' He hoisted the padding in his shoulders and turned back to Bryan. 'Now, Mr. what's-your-name—seventy-five?'

'All right. Seventy-five.'

'That's *better*. A willing buyer, a willing seller. Ollie, give the gentleman three ponies.' Ollie handed the money over, scowling, and grunted as he carted the machine off into the shadows beyond.

Gus tapped his teeth, eyeing Bryan. 'Did you hear what I said? I told Barney about you.'

'Did you now? You don't know anything about me. What could you tell him?'

'Let's say I warned him about you.'

'That was thoughtful of you.'

Gus snickered. 'It's my living. Or part of it, putting people right.' He looked Bryan up and down. 'Especially the clever ones.'

'You're a regular peoples' friend.'

'I can tell the way you talk. And don't take that as any compliment. Clever people can be the biggest fools. That was true in the old world and it's still true now—only there ain't so many of them around any more. Which only proves my point, don't it? I'm giving you a friendly warning, that's all. If you use what brains you've got in the right way, you can make out here. Otherwise I wouldn't give a pinch of shit for your chances.'

'Why are you telling me?'

'Because you're new around here. Because this place can do with all the people it can get and I wouldn't want to see you or anybody else lose their citizenship. That's likely to be a nasty process. It don't happen very often because, like I say, I make it a point to put people clear on things. Makes life easier all round.'

'Especially for you, I imagine. Do you charge for your services or are you the official welcomer?'

Gus squinted at him. 'Barney looks after me. He looks after anyone who looks after him. Do you want to see him or don't you?'

Bryan controlled his tone to a laconic, 'Sure, why not?'

Gus went away. Ollie, who had returned to the counter, looked bleakly in his wake.

'You could've asked me,' he said to Bryan. 'I'm in charge here. I could've arranged it.'

'I asked you on Saturday, remember?'

'Barney wasn't here then. He never is on a Saturday.'

'You mean he's here now?'

'He looks in most days. He—'

He stopped talking as Gus reappeared. Gus lifted a flap in the countertop and beckoned.

Bryan followed him, past racks stuffed ceiling-high with things, through a doorway into a small office.

Barney sat at a desk, his feet up on it. He didn't move as Bryan entered but looked up at him in the same cold, appraising way that he had in the pub.

'Gus says I might be able to use you.' His voice was flat, slightly nasal—and higher pitched than Bryan had somehow expected. Then he remembered where he had heard a voice like this before—when he was kid, Rocky Marciano's on television just after clubbing his latest challenger to the canvas. 'What can you do?'

'I'm a painter.'

'Two a penny. I got painters. Or do you mean one of the fancy kind?'

'Probably what you, for want of a better word, would call the fancy kind.'

Barney lowered his feet from the desk. 'You talk smart. Gus said you talked smart.'

'Did he? That's something else I can do, then.'

Barney laughed curtly. 'You've got nerve too.' He got up and came round the desk. He stopped, looking Bryan down and up once. Then his fist moved, without his looking at it and without any backswing.

Bryan found the bare time from somewhere to flex his stomach muscles. Only a short wince of breath escaped his teeth.

Barney stepped back and grunted. 'Yeah, I might be able to use you. Come with me.'

'Another time. I've got somebody waiting for me.'

'You got *what*?' Barney's pale eyebrows lowered and Gus jittered in the background. 'I don't like people telling *me* another time.'

'A woman. My woman.'

'That's different. Where's she waiting?'

'In the pub at the top of the Lane.'

'What's she like?'

'She's got red hair.'

'All right. Gus, slope off and tell the lady that her friend's been detained on business. And mind your manners. Tell Harry to give her a drink with my compliments and anything else she needs. Then report back to my place.'

Gus twitched his shoulder padding and departed. Barney nodded to Bryan and gestured him through the other door of the office. A passageway opened on to the street. The store entrance was next door. A woman came out pushing a rickety pram.

'Always a slack day Mondays,' Barney said. Bryan wasn't listening. He was looking at the apparition across the road.

Standing in the sunlight, in all its pearl and grey improbability, was a Rolls-Royce. A man in a shiny black chauffeur's

uniform lolling against it straightened as Barney came out.

'Get in,' said Barney. He muttered something to the driver and leaned back in the cushioned seat. The car pulled away. 'About time I got this road resurfaced,' he growled. 'What's the use of running a Rolls over a cart track like this?'

Before they had gone more than a few hundred yards the car pulled up. Wrought-iron gates were set in a high wall. The chauffeur gave a one-two on the horn. An old woman in black hobbled out and opened the gates. The Rolls swept in.

'Mother of one of my men,' said Barney. 'He got killed.'

The Rolls stopped in front of a house. Barney got out. Bryan got out too. He looked up.

He had never seen a house like it. There certainly hadn't been one like it even in this area before. It looked as if somebody had put it together out of pictures from a heap of glossy magazines. It was like some Englishman's fantasy of a Texas oil millionaire's home—and the Texas millionaire's idea of an English castle, plus bits of a Spanish villa and something out of the plusher commuter belts of dead memory. One half of it was like a castle keep, with slits in its stone walls instead of windows. The other half, lower, was brick-built, and this side of it was nearly all window. The expanse was made up of a thousand pieces of glass of different sizes, shapes and colours, set in a cement web. A chimney piece, as outsize as the window, reared up from the far end.

Barney unlocked a carved door. Bryan followed him through a stone-paved hall into a large room. It was the room with the big window. Its multi-coloured cathedral light fell upon furnishings—the pick of how many junkmen's loads?—in as mad a jumble of styles as the house itself. There was a massive sofa covered in orange plastic, a table

that looked as if it had come out of a boardroom, a bulbous sideboard in chequerboard veneers, a green marble coffee table. In one corner there was a larger-than-life-size white statue of a nude female holding a torch. Barney went over and switched it on.

'Generators,' he said laconically. 'I got things organized—if you didn't notice already.' He turned the light off. 'You wanna work for me?'

'It's early days. I only just arrived here. I've got to find a place to live yet.'

'I can take care of that. I own a few places.'

'Own?'

Barney's eyes narrowed. 'What are you trying to say? That I ain't got the right to own places?'

'You've got as much right as anyone else.'

'You bet your life I have. You, me or anybody. You find anything before anybody else, it's yours. You've had a place of your own before, ain't you?'

'I had a couple. But at different times.'

'You trying to say now that nobody's got a right to own more than one place?'

'It was never a crime. And nobody's writing the laws these days.'

'Nobody don't have to write any laws any more. Look at all them laws before. The old bastards who made them were only out for what they could get. Same as the coppers and beaks. It was all one big racket, complicating things up. There ain't no need for laws. There's only right and wrong, ain't there?'

'Depends what you call right and wrong.'

'What's right is that a man's got a claim to live and breathe without doing harm to nobody else. Without having nobody to tell him what's right and wrong.'

'And you never did harm to anyone,' Bryan said ironically.

'Only if they did harm to me first. Or threatened to. And it's the same for everybody here. If anybody's got any complaint against anybody else they can come to me. I'll sort it out for them.'

'That's a pretty rough-and-ready kind of justice.'

'I don't get no complaints.'

I wouldn't imagine you would, Bryan thought.

'There ain't no need for all that old bollocks about laws and whereas this and wherefor that. There's only one law—and that says that a man looks after his own. If he don't put a lock on his door he can't complain if some of his things get missing, can he? Same as if a man can't look after himself, one way or another. If two fellers have a disagreement and do themselves up, it's none of my business. Depends how far they go. My men have got orders to step in if they get really rough and it looks as if they might kill each other.'

'You don't like losing customers, is that it?'

Barney looked at him coldly. 'Depends who they are. They need me more than I need them. I grew up round here; I don't wanna see people making fools of themselves. I look after people, see? If anybody picks on some old geezer or a kid or someone like that, they soon learn it don't pay. Same as if a feller takes up with some other feller's woman. I get the three of 'em brought here, and the bird can speak her mind and say which one of the two she wants. Or if she's had a bellyful of both of them she can go her own way. And she'll know that it's more than it's worth for either of them to try and threaten her back. Everybody gets a chance in this manor. It's only the ones—' his pale blue eyes fixed Bryan—'that don't learn that have to watch out.

'But I didn't get you here to talk about how I run things. You'll find out soon enough. Come with me.'

He led the way downstairs to a big bare-bricked room. He switched on a light. 'Take your shirt off.'

Bryan hesitated, then obeyed. Barney stripped off his own jacket and shirt. He threw Bryan a pair of boxing gloves. 'Try them on for size. Don't look for the laces. One or two of the boys only ever learned to use that part. All right, let's see how you shape.'

Bryan looked at him. The other's body looked rock-hard under the cold cherubic face. It wasn't the only thing about Barney that didn't go with the shape of his face.

'What you waiting for?' Barney moved in and gave Bryan a tap under the ribs that made him wince. He danced in front of Bryan with his hands weaving low down. Bryan moved. He showed his left and drove his right into Barney's middle. Barney grunted and moved away quickly, then came jigging back. He poked his left into Bryan's face three times.

Bryan shuffled away to his right, cursing. The punches hadn't been hard ones but they had brought involuntary tears to his eyes. He blinked them away, then led with his own left, shaped to bring over his right and slammed in a left hook to the head. Barney staggered and recovered. But there was a smear of blood by his mouth and Bryan rejoiced.

Barney came back, bobbing and weaving in front of him. Bryan stuck out his left, but that meant going forward on his left leg, the bad one, and he missed. He tried again and this time he connected, but Barney threw a left counter that was twice as hard. Bryan switched stance quickly and threw a hard southpaw right. It caught Barney high up. As he backed away Bryan went after him, grimly elated. What had he

said to Vee—'*Do you think I'm going in with head down and fists flying?*' Well, his head wasn't down. He took a hard left but got in two rights himself, a lead and a sharp hook. Barney winced, then grinned.

'What's wrong with your leg, feller?'

Bryan looked down for a fraction of a second. It was too long a time. He saw the right uppercut coming straight up at him and could only start to sway away from it. It missed his chin but caught him full in the mouth. The brute impact of the blow stunned him and he felt his legs buckling.

And Barney was propping him up. He smelt the other's sweat. 'Okay, feller, that'll do for now.'

Bryan's head cleared. 'You don't need the laces in,' he said between cracked and bloody lips.

'No law against talking to your opponent, is there?'

Somebody cackled. Gus had re-appeared. Barney wheeled and glared. He stuck his fist under Gus's chin. '*You* fancy a couple of rounds?'

'Do me a favour!'

'Well, shut your face, and go get the bag.' He turned back to Bryan. 'You shaped all right. I can do with a regular sparring partner. And some of my boys could do with training. They're getting too bloody soft.' Gus came up with a duffel bag. 'Like Gus here. Here, put some of this on your mouth.'

Bryan took the proffered bottle. The stuff stung his lips, but the pain in them started to ebb.

'It's not my line. But I might come and take you on some time, for pleasure.'

Barney smiled thinly. 'Any time. Hey, Gus, did you see the lady was taken care of?'

'Like you told me. And I looked in at Jacko's on the way back. The old fool's still having trouble.'

Barney turned to Bryan. 'Know anything about printing presses?'

'A bit.' It had been a part of his training at one stage, years ago, learning the rudiments of the various processes.

'Okay. See me here tomorrow morning at eight o'clock.'

Bryan finished buttoning his shirt. He put his windcheater on. 'I'll try and make it.'

'Independent, eh? Suit yourself. But I owe you something for the workout.' He gestured curtly.

Bryan followed him up the stairs. Barney went to a safe and dialled a combination. 'Take this. Number three Blagrove Road. Gawd knows what number it was once, but it's number three now, and it's marked.' He held up a key on a ring with a brass tag.

Bryan thought of Vee and took it.

'Don't think this buys me. You'll get it back as soon as I find a place of my own.'

'It's a free country, feller,' said Barney, closing the safe.

Chapter Ten

The next morning he left Vee doing things at the house—or half house, for the top storeys had gone, and it was propped up by the debris of what had once been its neighbours. But somebody had made a patchwork roof that looked as if it might be weatherproof.

He had spent the rest of the previous day furnishing the place roughly. The main outlay had been on a mattress, a foam rubber one, crumbling and leaking from its cover. Vee had said she could stitch the cover. She had started to say so, in too loud and nervous a voice, at the hole in the wall where they had bought it, before he had stopped her and taken her to one side. He had got it for thirty-five, after haggling hard. A card table with one leg missing had cost fifteen and he had found a piece of timber to replace the missing leg. He had had to pay twenty for a rickety chair, but got a wooden crate thrown in for the price. He had wondered briefly at the comparative prices of these things and what Gus had given him twenty-five for, and surmised that the latter had probably wound up at Barney's. Nobody else seemed to have electricity. Or perhaps, stripped down, the parts had some use in this makeshift world. He had a lot to learn about this place yet.

He had spent twelve on a pair of rusty cans from a take-your-pick pile. He had been lucky enough; one had contained steak. The other had held a paste that smelled industrial and

he had chucked it out of the window into the ruins beyond.

And now he had four of Barney's pounds left to face Barney's world with—and did not feel naked.

The Rolls was standing outside Barney's fantastic chateau. Barney grunted a greeting. Bryan got in. The Rolls drove back in the direction that he had come, turning off left before the Lane. It stopped at a low building in the shadow of tracery-like trees fossilized in midwinter. The gasworks, Bryan remembered, must have been hereabouts. He followed Barney in.

An old face looked up from a machine that Bryan recognized as a platen printing press. It was a gaunt face, the skin propped up by the sharp bones beneath and glistening at cheekbone and temple with a crazy light like one of Breughel's peasants.

'What the hell's all this about trouble?' Barney demanded.

'It's the ink.' The old man's voice was querulous. 'It won't dry.' He held out a piece of paper. 'I printed that two days ago.' Bryan saw that it was a half-tone of tennis players. Barney drew his thumb across it, making an orange smear. He wiped his thumb carefully on a white handkerchief and looked at Bryan.

'Can you do anything about it?'

Bryan looked at it. Tennis players and Barney Smith—it was a grotesque conjunction. He rubbed the print with his own finger and felt tackiness.

'Where did you get the ink?' he asked the old man.

'Don't ask *me*. I have to work with what I'm given. It came in a batch with some others.'

'This doesn't smell like printers' ink. Where's the tin—or whatever it came in?'

The tin was rusted and anonymous. Bryan smelt at it. 'This is *paint*. Why do you have to use orange, anyway?'

The old man started to say something, but Barney cut across his speech. 'Because I say so. You got to have different colours for different notes. I want fifties printed. Things are expanding all the time. There's a demand for fifties.'

'With tennis players printed on them?'

Barney's lips crooked. 'Do you think I leave the money blocks lying around this place? That's an operation I supervise personally.'

'You couldn't print money—or anything else—with this.'

'I can see that for myself. I thought you said you knew something about these things?'

Bryan went to the shelf where the old man had got the tin of orange paint and went hunting along it, not very hopefully. But he found a pearly paste in one tin that looked and smelled right. And a mangled tube oozed forth a dribble of contents that might be driers. He stirred them and a dollop of the orange plate together, with a piece of plastic. He sniffed at a big can, reached for a rag and swabbed off the platen and the forme. When it was dry he applied his own mixture.

'Try that.'

The old man glared at him, but worked at the treadle to spread the colour. He took an impression and handed it to Barney.

'We'll give it a minute,' said Barney. He held out a gold-coloured cigarette case to Bryan. Bryan took one. It tasted good. He remembered the tin of cigarettes that first night with Vee. This one didn't taste so good, and he felt a meagre triumph, that all the good things in the world didn't reach

Barney. But it still tasted better than any he had tasted before then—or since.

Barney used his thumb again. This time there was no ritual with the handkerchief. He grunted.

'If you get any more trouble with drying,' Bryan said, 'use some talc on the prints. Or any dry white powder you might have around.'

'Next time,' Barney said to the old man, 'solve your own problems. What do you think I pay you for? And get that machine lined up for the money job. I'll bring the blocks up this afternoon.'

He waved Bryan outside and peeled off a couple of notes. They were twenty-fives. Bryan took them.

'I always pay for what anybody does for me. What else do you know?'

'Depends what you want.'

Barney scowled. 'You said you was a painter, didn't you? Maybe I can use a painter.'

He gestured Bryan back into the car. It headed toward the market and then along it, travelling south. It pulled up at a square red-brick building. Barney beckoned inside.

It was completely bare, from concrete floor to plastered walls. The plastering looked recent, so did parts of the floor.

'Thinking of opening a place here,' said Barney. 'With music. How'd you like to decorate the walls? Pictures, I mean.'

Bryan looked at the large expanse hungrily.

'I haven't got enough paints to cover a hundredth part of that.'

'I'll supply the paints.'

'It'll cost you five hundred on top.'

'Come off it, feller! I don't know what you paint like. I don't even know you *can* paint. I've only got your word for that.'

'It was your idea. Get somebody else if my terms don't suit you.'

'I'll give you two hundred and fifty. And if you don't make a proper job of it look out for your neck. And none of that jumbled-up stuff either, the kind of crap your kind used to get away with in the old days. You were as bad as the old queers that made the laws, complicating things up for what you could get out of it. There's plenty of people round here who'd be glad to earn a few quid chucking pots of paint at a wall, without me paying fancy prices.'

'I can put your mind to rest on that point, anyway. I use brushes. But if you want me to paint this place, you take the risk, not me. Four hundred and no comebacks.'

'I'll give you three.'

'Done. But half now.'

Barney reached into his hip pocket. He peeled off four mauve notes, but kept them in his hand. 'When you going to start it?'

'Tomorrow morning, all being well. Get the paints brought up. As many different colours as you've got. And I'll need planks and trestles, or a ladder at least. I'll supply my own brushes.'

Barney handed over the notes. 'You'll get the rest when you've finished the job. I might have some more work for you if I like it, so you'd better make it good.'

Bryan walked back along the Lane, and beyond to the printing shop.

The old man looked at him warily as he entered. 'What do *you* want?'

'Thought I'd come to say hello without Barney being around. You're Jacko, aren't you?'

The old man snorted. 'My name's Jackson. And don't try and give me any old schmooze. You're one of Barney's men, come to spy on me.'

'I hope you'll learn otherwise. The name's Bryan, and it'll be a cold day when I become one of Barney's men. And I certainly haven't come to spy on you. I just wanted to say that I hoped I didn't put you in the wrong with Barney over the ink.'

'It's all the same to me if you did. He has to come to me for what he wants.'

'All right, then. And you needn't have any suspicions about me being after your job. I'm not a printer.'

'*That*.' The old man said contemptuously. 'That's only one of the things I do for Barney. I wasn't a printer either, but I know a lot of things.' He tapped his head. 'It's what's in there that Mister Lord Barney has to come to me for.'

Bryan humoured him. 'Good luck to you. I just happen to know a few things about paints and inks. I'm an artist.'

'Are you now? We're all bloody artists. Even Barney's an artist in his own particular line.' But the old man's manner had become less suspicious.

'If he is, that's one art form I want to see die an early death.'

Jackson cackled. He crooked an elbow. Bryan followed him into a room beyond the workshop. It was crammed with books, set out along rough timber shelves and piled on the floor.

'See that lot? Take a good look. It might be the last library

left in the world—all that's left of the wisdom of the ages. It used to be my job, hunting books. Up the Lane every Saturday morning. Then up to Edgware Road and the Angel —Sunday morning down Club Row. The rest of the week I'd go round the suburbs—Merton, Leyton, New Cross, Tottenham.' He made it sound like a litany.

'Did you have a bookshop of your own?'

'Tried it once, but it was too much of a tie. That and the overheads. I used to sell books to the booksellers and let *them* worry about the overheads. There were always times when a bookseller would want a book for a customer so badly that you could push up the price. Tales of the Left Bank by Jean Rhys, a pamphlet by John Wesley, an odd volume of Bartlett's Canadian Scenery.' He seemed to shake titles from his grey head like dandruff.

'It was a hard way to make a living. And it was bloody hard on the feet. But sometimes you'd have a find and live like a lord for a couple of weeks. For forty years I made a living out of books, and I always used to dream of the big find—the *really* big find.'

His watery eyes seemed about to overflow. He hobbled over to the shelves and brought back a small leatherbound volume. He handed it to Bryan. 'Handle it carefully. *Ach,* force of habit. It doesn't matter much now whether you do or not, I suppose.'

Bryan opened it. It was a religious book. It was ancient—seventeenth century—but books like this had seemed to clutter the stalls in the old days.

'Not much of a book, you're thinking?' said Jackson. 'Well, it happens to be a copy of the first book printed in America in English—the Bay Psalm Book. You know how much that

would have been worth? About a hundred thousand pounds. I found it under a heap of old rags on a barrow, a stone's throw from here—just a couple of days before the crash. I was sitting indoors, cleaning it up and thinking about how I was going to sell it. Thinking about going abroad, so I wouldn't have to pay any income tax, and what I'd do with all the money. Dreaming about all the places I'd be able to go to. The covered market in Istanbul, the Italian monasteries, Alexandria . . .'

Bryan thought that there must have been better places to weave exotic dreams about. Or . . . he glanced at Jackson . . . Italian monasteries, Alexandria? . . . were those the fantasies of a repressed old satyr?

Jackson answered the unspoken query.

'Think of the books I might have found in places like that! The manuscripts! But, next thing, the bloody world came crashing down. The maniacs had their war at last and finished everything off.'

'Hard luck. But I wouldn't be too sure about it being a war.'

'You wouldn't, wouldn't you? Well, I know it was.'

'There weren't any bomb craters.'

'Bomb craters? Didn't you ever see pictures of Hiroshima? There weren't any bomb craters there, either.'

'No, but what happened three years ago wasn't anything like a nuclear attack. I've never come across anybody who looked like a radiation victim.'

'Maybe you haven't. But did *you* know what kind of bombs they'd got cooked up since Hiroshima? Did anybody? They'd had nearly forty years experience since then. I *know* it was a war. I can prove it to you. Come with me.'

He took a jacket from a nail and ushered Bryan out of the place, locking the door behind them. 'This way,' he said.

Bryan shrugged and went along with him. Jackson hobbled at a surprising pace along the rough road.

After fifteen minutes or so they came to a wide expanse of green, stretching away to an horizon punctuated with the skeletal ruins of factories. It didn't need his sense of direction and his dim memories of the streets that had once warrened the area to tell Bryan what this place was. There had been no other tract of green as big as this for miles around. This was Wormwood Scrubs.

Wormwood Scrubs . . . the name still provoked a shiver even if wilderness lay all around it now and one was inured to wilderness. It carried sinister connotations—of gall, Golgotha, the fumes of absinthe. The walls of the prison that had stood here had been the colour of dried blood. Even on Sundays the footballers carrying their goalposts, the Irish exiles with their hurling sticks, had looked, crossing that landscape, like gallowsmen and gravediggers tricked out in bright colours for some obscure joke.

There were people about now on the Scrubs, working, tending rows of crops. Bryan was no botanist, but he recognized potatoes and cabbage plants. There was another plant with spiky leaves that looked foreign yet vaguely familiar to him from pictures. A plantation of them was wired around, and a man sat in the doorway of a hut with a gun across his knees.

'What's that stuff?'

'Indian hemp. You can guess who owns that plot.'

'And the rest?'

'Anyone who wants one. There's plenty of room here.'

The cultivated patches went only a short way up the slope before grassland took over.

Jackson led him to one of the plots and picked up a potato. It was shaped freakishly, like the ones magazines in the old days used to print pictures of because they looked like a horse or somebody famous.

'They're all like that,' said Jackson. 'All the crops here. Barney had me come here and find out why. I knew why as soon as I looked at them.'

'What, a case of reverting to nature? People didn't start growing crops again straight away, did they?'

Jackson snorted. 'Even wild things don't grow like that, nine out of ten of 'em deformed. No, there's only one answer. *Radiation*.' His voice was triumphant. '*See*, I told you, didn't I?'

Bryan looked at him sadly. The other had been cheated out of his big find by what had happened, but they had all been cheated, hadn't they? 'Why does it bother you so much what it was?'

'Why? *Why?* Because—' The old man quivered in the sunlight. 'What the hell's it to do with you why?'

'Nothing at all,' said Bryan. 'Sorry I asked. Come on, I'll buy you a drink.'

It was only afterwards, in the pub in Portobello Road, that a memory stirred. He started to speak, then stopped. What Jackson wanted to believe in was none of his business. Everybody needed something to hold on to in this world.

'What did you say?' said Jackson.

'Nothing.' Then he changed his mind. The old man wanted to *know*, didn't he? It was no use believing in a proof that wasn't a proof. 'Only something about the Scrubs.'

'What about the Scrubs?'

'There used to be a hospital and medical school there, next to the prison. I did a job there once.' It had been one of the few commercial commissions he had taken on—a painting for a drug company to decorate a piece of prestige propaganda.

'Well?'

'There was a big isotopes building there.'

'Why are you telling me?'

'*Radioactive* isotopes?'

For a while he thought Jackson was going to cry in his beer.

Chapter Eleven

Hanging in space, he sent a brushload of bright yellow emulsion flying into the top right-hand corner. To hell with Barney and chucking paint at a wall! It was how it was chucked that was the art. *You give it a twist, a flick of the wrist*—he caught up the excess and stubbed it into the surrounding smoky green—*that's what the showman said*. He scuttled down from his plank and readjusted it lower between the trestles. He hopped back on to the plank and made great swathes of blue. Then he took a damp rag and rubbed away. Shapes began to emerge. He took up a smaller brush and, with oil colours now, began to see what they would bring forth from the shadowed outlines.

Dusk and the shadows falling, he sang, preoccupied by his task but a part of his mind straying away over the landscape of memory, prompted by the words and aware that they weren't the right ones but not caring. His father had loved such old Victorian songs, with his collection of scratchy 78s and his ancient gramophone, singing to them in a sweet quavery tenor. He hadn't inherited much from him, and certainly not his voice. The old man hadn't had an easy life. He had died before the big crash, so he had been spared that, at least. But thought of catastrophe only flickered in and out of Bryan's brain. He was creating again.

Somewhere a voice is calling, calling to me . . . the figures began to take shape. He went on singing tunelessly, his voice echoing in the empty hall and he all but unconscious of the

fact or of anything else but his painting. Only when he turned to reach for another colour did he notice Vee. She was standing at the foot of one of the trestles, looking up at him.

'Hey! Your first time out on your own!' He jumped down and went to embrace her. She put out her hands and he was aware of his own paint-daubed ones and grinned. 'People didn't bother you?'

She smiled slightly and shook her head.

'Well, you couldn't have arrived at a better time!' He wiped his hands on a rag and moved her limbs, ignoring her protests. '*Stay* as I put you.' He went back up on the plank. 'No, too much foreshortening. Come on up here.' He reached out a hand. 'Lean against the trestle.' The structure rocked and she looked alarmed. 'It's all right. It'll take our weight.' He rearranged the pose. '*Ach* no, that's not good enough. Take your blouse off.'

'*What!* If you think for one moment—'

'*Please*. And hurry. It's going right for me.'

'I'm not going to take my clothes off here, for you or anybody else.'

'Why not? You let me try to paint you once.'

'That was different. There was nobody about.'

'There's nobody about here, either. Come *on*.' He fumbled at the buttons. She sighed heavily and pushed his hands away and took off the blouse herself. But her hands fluttered immediately to her breasts to cover them.

He raised his eyes to heaven and pulled her hands away, placing them as he wanted them. He picked up the oil paints and resumed painting furiously.

Once, stopping to clean a brush, he said, 'What are you scowling for?'

'I'm not scowling.'

'You're not exactly laughing. Aren't you glad I'm painting again?'

'I suppose so.'

'What do you mean you suppose so? Either you are or you're not.'

'It's what you're painting. Who you're doing it for.'

'I don't give a monkey's.'

'Painting nudes on a wall!' she said scathingly.

'So that's it!' He laughed. 'Have no fear, my dear, I won't paint a likeness of you. See, I've even changed the colour of your hair. As for painting on walls—Michelangelo painted on walls, didn't he? And on ceilings. Come to that—' He looked up, but buckled girders spanned the roof. 'No, I'll content myself with the walls. They all painted on walls. Leonardo, *The Last Supper*—'

'That was different.'

'Was it? He didn't just paint for bishops. He took commissions where he could find them. He'd have decorated a whorehouse if—'

'Is that what this place is going to be?'

'A what?' he said teasingly.

'What you said.'

'I don't know exactly what Barney's got in mind. And I don't care. I said I'd render unto Barney while it suited my purposes. And this does suit them. *Hell,* you've moved! Tilt your head to the left. And bring your right hand up. That's it.'

He picked up his paints and went on working. He started singing again. He didn't hear anything, and the light from the opened door fell first upon Vee and her nakedness. She

snatched at her blouse, hanging on the trestle beside her, but it fell from her startled fingers to the floor. She gave a little cry and covered her breasts with her hands.

Bryan jumped down and handed the blouse up to her. She turned away, trembling with shame, to put it on.

It was Gus who had entered. He ogled Vee, grinned at Bryan, then turned away to holler at somebody outside. Two men heaved their way in, manhandling something bulky on rollers. It was a battered upright piano.

'Up the far end,' Gus shouted. 'Mind them trestles. *Gawd*, you nearly 'ad it off the bleedin' rollers.'

In the wake of the piano came a baldheaded man gravely carrying a chair, and after him came Jackson, with a tattered book in one hand and a tool bag in the other. Jackson looked at Bryan with a disgusted expression. 'Bloody piano tuning now!' He hobbled on to where Gus was getting the piano located to his satisfaction.

That achieved, the baldheaded man placed his chair precisely in front of it and seated himself. He lifted the lid, cracked his knuckles and started to play. The piano sounded as if it had been out of use for far longer than the three years since the crash. Vee, who had got down from the plank, recovered from her embarrassment under the shield of the music. She turned on Bryan.

'You told me there wouldn't be anybody about. You—'

'*Please*. How was I to know this lot was coming here? I'll make sure the door is barred next time.'

'Next time? There won't *be* a next time.'

He sighed and looked away. The music was becoming distinguishable, if with an effort, as *Greensleeves*. Gus, leaning on the piano, his faded-flowered hat pushed back, was looking pained.

'Gawd, can't you play anything jazzier than that?'

The baldheaded man glowered, but broke off and started to play a dance tune. It sounded like a dead march played offkey. After a short while Gus lifted the top lid and slammed it down. 'Knock it off! You call that piano playing?'

'How do you expect me to get music out of this thing?' the baldheaded man complained.

'All right, so it's the piano. We'll see.' He turned to Jackson. 'Jacko. Get it straightened out.'

The old man didn't move.

'What've we got now then? First a paralytic pianist and now a deaf piano tuner? Aw, I get it.' He bowed mockingly. 'Mr. Jackson sir, would you kindly give your expert attention to the instrument.'

Jackson *harumphed,* but fished some tools from his bag and started consulting his book. Gus strolled over to Bryan and Vee. She turned away at his approach as if she were still naked.

Gus halted and surveyed the half-painted wall.

'Not *bad.*'

'How would you know?' Bryan said.

'I know what I like,' Gus retorted, oblivious to any unoriginality in the remark. 'Course, you got a good model there.' Vee turned to glare at him. 'Any time you and her—you know what I mean—' he made a rocking gesture with a palm-downward hand—'don't forget I'm always in the market.'

Bryan brandished a four-inch brush laden with red paint. 'How would you like a new colour suit?'

Gus backed away hastily. 'Hew, watch it! It was only a friendly business offer.'

Bryan laughed. Gus went back to the piano and shouted

at the two workmen. 'All right! What you hanging around for? Beat it!' They went away. Jackson was thumping the keys now and ferreting in the piano's innards.

'Come on,' Bryan said to Vee. 'Back to work.'

'Didn't you hear what I said? I'm not going to do any more.'

'No you didn't. You only said there wouldn't be a next time. It's still *this* time. That was just an intermission.'

'I know what I mean.' She glanced in the direction of Gus. 'You saw how that horrible little man looked at me.'

'And you saw how I handled him, didn't you? Now, come on, *please*. It's all right, you can keep your blouse on. I'd *insist* on you keeping it on.'

She looked sulky, but went back up on the plank. Bryan followed her and resumed his attack on the wall. Some time later, the door was flung back and a fat blonde in a shiny black dress and wobbly heels marched in.

Bryan took brief note of her, reflected that a few bottles of bleach must have survived in the ruins, and carried on painting. He heard, as if from far off, janglings from the keyboard and voices raised in argument while he sloshed on ochre, brushed in green, awakened flesh tones. The tone of the piano seemed, improbably, to improve under Jackson's ministrations. The blonde started to execute *Some of These Days* in a voice that matched her hair.

Bryan went on painting happily. Then, looking up once at Vee, he saw that her head was turned, but not so far as to hide the almost comical look of appalment on her face. He followed her gaze. The blonde had just stepped out of her dress. She was clad only in ragged panties.

Vee turned back to him, her face flaming.

'What did you say? You and Leonardo!' She thrust past him, nearly upsetting him from the plank. She descended to the floor and stalked out.

Bryan shook his head, then laughed quietly and got on with his work. Poor Vee! *Ach,* but to hell with touchy females. She'd learn. He completed the section he was on and got down to have a stand-back view of it. The music had stopped. He hadn't noticed. The blonde teetered over to him, her larger breasts still naked. Then he did notice.

'What, your model gone and left you, ducky?' the blonde said. 'How about me? Won't I do?' She struck a stripper's pose, with her hips thrust forward.

Bryan looked at her. *She's got square breasts,* he thought. The pectorals—no, it had nothing to do with muscles, merely the conflict of all that mammary flesh with the flesh beneath. He had never painted square breasts before. There was room in the foreground there. He hurriedly moved the trestles out of the way.

'Look up. No, *down*. Turn a bit to the left. That's it. Now *hold* it.'

Chapter Twelve

He threw open the doors wide. Vee had resisted coming. The incident of her revealed nakedness still rankled. But he had won her over finally to come and see the finished work. He led her into the building with the sunlight streaming past them. And she stood stockstill.

As he did too. He had put in the final strokes the evening before by the last rays of the sun. By then, after three weeks of work, every hour of daylight, he had become almost colour-blind. Or blind with colour. He had cleaned his brushes, wrapped them in a cloth and walked out without turning back. Now he could see his work whole.

And he felt content with it.

The light struck from the back wall, which was to be the stage end and which he had painted in pale colours, on to the side walls, picking up the highlights there from the more sombre background, scattering them round the hall. Even the drab concrete floor was suffused now with reflected colour. And Vee's pale face as she turned slowly.

She turned full circle and faced him.

'Well?' he said. He wasn't, he knew as he asked, interested in her reactions as a witness to a work of art. Perhaps it wasn't a work of art, anyway. He wasn't worried. It was something achieved, and that was all he wanted to show her.

'It's . . . it's horrible,' she said at last. 'It's like something out of hell.'

He started to laugh, then stopped, feeling anger rise in him.

'*Hell?* I thought you'd forgotten all that stuff. But it's bred in you, I suppose. Haven't you realized yet? Hell is *here*. It always was. Screaming machines, car accidents, twenty-four hour television, hydrogen bombs, cancer.' He broke off, aware of the stupidity of his invective. She couldn't help being as she was. And his reaction to her words was futile. Futile and dead, like the world he had started raging at. There was only one world, the world of the present. But the only way you could give *that* momentum and any meaning was by creating something new. Otherwise you killed it. For three years and three months he and everybody else who had survived had killed it, killed the present. *That* was hell. Creation was all, working against a dying universe.

'All *right*. I have to paint the way I see things—and people. It's the only way I can.'

'People? They look more like monsters. That one there—' She pointed.

It was *her*, he realized after a moment—or his transmutation of her face and body as he had seen it. She had obviously forgotten . . . perhaps she had wanted to forget . . . losing the memory in all that colour. He couldn't tell her. And he couldn't feel guilty about it, only amused. It came back to what he had thought a moment ago, that she couldn't help being as she was. Not only her—everybody. Everybody put a barrier up between themselves and a work of art, making a false relation between art and actuality. They couldn't be blamed for that; they did the same with themselves and actuality, after all, and needed to.

A shadow had fallen across his view, a shadow larger

than reality, splashed out by the sunlight. He turned. The reality was large enough.

'Gus told me you were nearly finished,' said Barney. 'About time. I want to get some seats moved in here.' He scowled round at the walls. 'This what you call painting?' He finished looking. 'Better than bare plaster, I suppose.' He reached for his hip pocket and held out some notes.

Bryan took them. They were four orange ones and they were dry between his fingers. He led Vee out of the place.

'Was that Barney?' she said.

He realized that she hadn't seen him before. 'In the flesh.' They passed the Rolls-Royce. 'That's the enemy.'

'Will you stop talking like that! If we've got to live here why can't you learn to live in peace?'

'We haven't got to live here. Make up your own mind. Do you want to go back to living cut off from everybody?'

She hesitated. 'No,' she said quietly.

'Good. Does that mean you're getting used to people?'

'Yes. No, more than than that. It's—it's good to be a part of a world again, *any* world.'

'I know how you feel. But get this straight—Barney *is* my enemy. Your enemy—everybody's, apart from Gus and his other stooges. I thought you understood that before we came here. And be consistent. You don't like me calling him the enemy, yet you resent my working for him.'

'There's a middle way, isn't there? You can manage without working for him and without making trouble.'

'Who's making trouble? I can manage without working for Barney, you're right there. But nobody can live at peace in his world. Sure I worked for him, because I needed the money to make a start here. And I'd work for him again if I

needed more. But I don't think that will be necessary. I've got other plans. I'll see you home, then I've got work to do.'

He had passed the place every morning on the way to his painting job. Now he set out to find the owner, somebody called R. Lee, according to the board stuck on it. The rest of the board said, *Barrows for Hire, Safe Storage Space to Let*. He tracked the owner down to a stall in the market. It was a woman, a fat woman with great red arms, presiding over an array of twisted and deformed vegetables. Chalked signs said *Best King Edwards, Fresh Cabbages*.

'That's right. I'm R. Lee. The name's Rosie. What can I do for you?'

'I see you own a building up the road. At least, the board says you do.'

'What, the old chapel, you mean?' Her eyes narrowed. 'Yeh, that belongs to me. The board says so and that's the way it is. It belonged to my old man—gawd rest his soul—before. Before you know what.'

'Want to sell it?'

'*Sell* it? It ain't for sale. You can rent a bit of it if you like. Market people put their barrows away there—and their stock, most of them. They know anything's safe there. Nobody takes liberties with Rosie.'

Bryan, looking at her, could well imagine they didn't. 'Well, let me know if you change your mind.' He turned away and had taken a few paces when she called out, 'Wait, son.' He went back to the stall.

'What d'you want it for?'

'Does that matter?'

'None of my business, I suppose. I might consider selling it. But it'd cost you.'

'How much?'

'Twelve hundred.'

'Can I see round it?'

She looked at him suspiciously. 'You got that kind of money?'

'I might have.'

'All right.' She called to a neighbour. 'Look after the pitch for ten minutes, Fred.'

The place was in good repair, by the standards of the time. A half-dozen barrows were lined up against one wall. Today was—what day was it?—certainly not a Saturday, for only a handful of barrows were open along the Lane.

'Doesn't seem as if you do a lot of trade, letting out space.'

She sighed mountainously. 'Well, it ain't exactly like the old days, I got to admit. But what is? That's why I might think about selling it.' She looked at him cagily. 'But it's a valuable property, and it'll get more valuable all the time. There's more and more barrows up the market every day. I won't say you could make a living out of it right away, but give it a year or two and—'

'I wouldn't want to carry on letting it out. I'll give you eight hundred.'

'*What!* Don't you get funny with Rosie! I'm losing business down the Lane talking to you.'

'You don't get the first price you ask for down there either, do you?'

'Maybe I don't, but I don't knock off that kind of percentage on anything. Besides, I'd have to find alternative accom-

modation for my present clients. I've got agreements with 'em. A round thousand.'

'Sorry, love.'

'I'm bleedin' sorry too, mister. You ask me a favour and finish up wasting my time. Clear out and let me lock this place up again.'

He wandered away from the building. She was right, he *had* been wasting her time. Eight hundred, a thousand, they were equally remote figures. He thought of the mass of stuff he had, stored up in the tower at Greenwich. Or had had once. But Eddie had never turned up, and if he knew him Eddie would be there still and the collection safe, predictably. There'd be a lot of items there that would fetch a price here in the market.

There . . . here. He grimaced; that was the size of it. He could shift the stuff, a load at a time, by river. But the nearest point of the river was several miles from here. He couldn't cart much at a time over that distance, over ruins.

His footsteps led him near the tangled wreckage of the gasworks. Somebody called out to him. It was Jackson. The old man was sitting out in the sun. He stood up and beckoned to Bryan. Bryan went over to him. He had nothing better to do.

'I got it!' Jackson said. 'I've been thinking over what you said about those isotopes. All right, maybe that does wash out the idea of a nuclear war. At least, round these parts. But I've been thinking about it, and last night it came to me. It *was* nuclear bombs. Didn't they have this pact about underground tests? And weren't both sides—'

'*Both* sides?' Bryan murmured.

'Well, the three sides, then—weren't they always checking up on each other? So they were going deeper all the time

to get out of the range of the other sides' instruments. And one day they went a bit too far and touched off something down there. I've been going through my books.' He sniffed. 'Just my luck—I haven't got a single one on the structure of the earth. Books on railways, venereal disease, Chinese porcelain, Jane Austen—but not one on something important like this. But I know I'm right. It's all molten down there, isn't it? . . . terrific pressures . . . can't you imagine what one H-bomb could have caused down there? You don't have to imagine. It's what happened, I know.'

Bryan felt a twinge of pity for the old man, but couldn't stand too much of his crazy, futile reasoning in his own present mood. He headed away.

'Don't forget,' Jackson called after him. 'If you come across a book anywhere on that subject, I'd be glad to—'

His words trailed away in the distance as Bryan walked on. A rough road led towards the gasworks, then stopped abruptly at a long wall of ruin. This must mark the northern limit of Barney's manor—at least, as presently constituted. No new roads had been made in this direction; no men in blue armbands loitered here. He was taken by a sudden curiosity to see what lay beyond the mound.

He found a place where jumbled masonry appeared to afford foothold. He climbed up, and was reminded of the way up to his old tower. The second time in a short space that he had been reminded of it. He hadn't thought about the place for weeks. There had been no reason to; it was in the past, the dead past.

He reached the crest of the mound without difficulty. He looked down.

The glint of water took him by surprise. *The canal.* It was

one feature of this area as he had known it that he had completely forgotten. That was hardly to be wondered at. It had already been almost an anachronism in a world that had itself suddenly become one. Very few barges had travelled along it any more. Its main users had seemed to be kids swimming in its black waters, and forlorn-looking fishermen. Nobody was fishing or swimming in it now. It was covered with vivid green algae and weeds were encroaching from each bank. And it smelt. It probably always had, but in the old days any smell would have been blanketed by the fiercer eternal reek from the gasworks. The smell now didn't bother him. He scrambled down to the canal bank.

There was a breeze, but no ripples spread over the soupy surface. He knelt down and stuck a hand into it. The water was clear just under the surface. The algae wouldn't impede anybody's progress too much, he judged. Anyway, it might not cover all the canal, but only be local.

He got to his feet and looked along the stretch of water. To the west it soon curved away out of sight. He was more interested in its course in the other direction. It was unbroken. At several points buildings had collapsed into the water, but the channel remained open. The whole stretch in his view was only about half a mile—but surely, if the course of the canal had been dammed, it would have dried up after more than three years, or have visibly begun to. He came to a sudden decision.

He went scrambling back over the bank. The day was early yet. He strode out in the direction of the Lane, stopping only at the house to tell Vee that he would be gone for a little time. She started to protest, then stopped herself. He kissed her, then went back to big Rosie.

She scowled at sight of him. He spoke in her ear. 'I'll give you nine hundred for it.'

'*Listen*—didn't I tell you—'

He took out the orange notes from his pocket and held them under her nose.

'There's two hundred here. I'll give you the rest within a month. Make up your mind. You've got nothing to lose. If I don't come through with the rest inside a month, you keep this.'

She looked at him for only a moment before reaching out for the notes and stuffing them into the cleft of her large bosom.

Chapter Thirteen

The going southward was easier this time. By now—the fourth time he had made this trek, one direction or the other—he knew the places to avoid, the detours to take. Even so, it took him four hours to reach the river. When he did he saw smoke rising from the stovepipe of his late home, and he was immediately on his guard.

As he came closer he could see no more direct sign of life. He went down to the track that led to the door. The sign he had painted was gone. Probably used by the new tenants to feed the stove. They were welcome to it; its purpose had never been served. What kind of purpose had it had, anyway? He must have been crazy. Things were different now. Life had started to have meaning again.

He was a dozen yards from the doorway when a man stepped out of it, pointing a shotgun. Bryan halted.

'Who you looking for?' The man was thin, redbearded. Under the brusque words there was a trace of an over-refined accent that sounded incongruous in this world.

'Nobody. Just looking for something of mine I left lying around here.'

'Anything that might be lying around here belongs to me. I've taken possession of this place.'

'How long ago?'

'Three days. What's that to do with you?'

'Nothing, only this used to be my place. I put it in good

shape. I made the doorway you're standing in.' Bryan's lips crooked. 'I made this nice narrow pathway.'

The gun barrel jerked. 'What's your game? Why are you telling me this? What do you expect me to say—thank you and help yourself to anything you want. I don't know you ever lived here anyway. That's just your story.'

'There used to be a sign over the place—*The Womb with a View*.'

'*That?* What kind of crazy name was that? I took it down straight away.' For a moment a clerk's affronted morality seemed to struggle to assert itself, then died. It must have had worse affronts in the past three years. 'That doesn't prove you ever lived here. You could have passed by some time and seen it.'

'I could have. All right, something I couldn't have passed by and seen. You've got a stove in there. It's got the brand name on it in big curly lettering—*Invicta*.'

The man hesitated. 'All right, you've had your fun. Now beat it. You don't have a right to anything here.'

'What I want isn't inside your place. It may not even be where I left it. I just want to find out. To do that I have to pass where you're standing. If you'll step aside there won't be any trouble.'

'There *won't* be any trouble, I'll see to that.' But the gun barrel wavered slightly. A woman's face, hair unkempt about it, looked out from the doorway, then retreated.

Bryan took a step forward.

The redbearded man didn't pull the trigger. The odds were, Bryan estimated, that the gun wasn't loaded. Guns, like anything else, were something you might come across in the ruins. And you could be lucky and find one loaded, or with

ammunition to hand, like the pistol Vee's late partner had given her. But ammunition was small and less likely trove. Even if the gun were loaded, he would gamble that the man wouldn't use it lightly. He himself hadn't acted hostilely. They had exchanged words, established some kind of communication, however precarious. If the gun *was* loaded, the other would surely want to keep it for greater emergencies.

He lifted his arms and walked slowly forward, praying that the man hadn't come across an arms cache somewhere and have a regular ammunition store in there.

But when he was almost up to him, the man twitched away. Bryan passed by and went to the spot where there was a way down to the river. He heard the door slam at the back of him, and he smiled to himself.

The smile broadened when he reached the water's edge and found that his boat was still there where he had concealed it. It looked in as good shape as ever. He got in, cast off and pushed away from the shore. He took a look back. The door was still shut. He began paddling.

The tide was running against him. It took hours of hard pulling to reach Greenwich. He tied up at his old anchorage and headed for the tower. He traversed the cleft and climbed to the top of the mound. He looked up. All was silent.

He held debate with himself, realizing that he had not planned this venture at all. His mind seized by an idea, he had parted with most of his capital in Barney's world and set off on a harebrained expedition that had all the odds stacked aganst it. One small detail—of what he should do at this moment—pointed his own foolhardiness. If he shouted, it would advertise his presence for half a mile

around to anybody who might be lurking in the ruins. This had become alien country since he had left it, just as that other part of London had become once. The tower, like the Womb, might well have new occupants. The bells, if he used them, would echo just as dangerously in the silence.

Reaching a decision, he gave the nearest string of the network of bells the gentlest of shakes. Anybody within, friendly or hostile, would be alerted, but the sound would not carry far. And whatever the nature of the occupants, he would be able to take appropriate action at first sight of them.

He waited a full minute. Nothing stirred, except for a few birds which had gone back to their roosts by the time he rang again. This time not even the birds stirred. He waited another minute, then went to the place where he had always kept his spare—his first—rope ladder. It was there, in a cranny of the ruins. He hurled it up and missed. And missed three times more before the grapples found hold. He had got out of practice. Or the muscles of his arms had become stiffened up after his hard journey.

He scaled the ladder and poked his head cautiously through the gap of the window, listening. It was as silent within as without. He climbed in.

He went to the room that Eddie had occupied. The door was ajar. He flung it wide and went in, crouching, wheeling. But there was nobody behind the door. Or anywhere else in the room. The clothes were thrown back in disarray on Eddie's bed, but there was no sign of a struggle. It looked like a room abandoned on a sudden decision. Eddie must have taken his life in his hands and left the tower. How long since? he wondered. He cursed himself now for not having asked the redbearded man if he had seen anybody. But

hadn't he said that he had been there only three days? And this room had the smell of a place unlived in for weeks, though he couldn't have sworn to that. He began to feel old patterns of guilt take shape inside him. To hell with it! That was all in the past and had never been his responsibility anyway. He strode from the room and along the passage to his own.

It looked the same as the day he had left it. For a moment, as he scanned his collection, he felt a nostalgia for old hungers. To hell with that too. That was something else that was in the past. Only one thing in the room—his bed—had allure for him now. It had been a hard day, the trek from Notting Hill to the river, the long pull against the tide.

He turned away from the bed. There was still an hour or so of daylight left and he had to make use of them. He began gathering stuff to take back with him. Tools, clocks, paraffin stoves, kitchen utensils, small items of furniture—things that ought to fetch the best prices in Portobello Road.

After making two scant-laden arm-racking descents of the ladder, he decided that there were better means. He found a hook and fixed it to the end of a rope. That way he could lower things to the ground, then with a slackening of the rope and a jerk, detach the hook for hauling up for the next item. It made things much easier.

But many things had no purchase point for a hook. He lashed together a rough cradle of rope to accommodate those. But, by the time he had finished making it, the light was fading rapidly from the sky. He pulled in the rope and threw down the ladder. He descended it and gathered up the things he had lowered so far and stowed them away for the night. He went back up and pulled the ladder in.

He lay down on his bed. The breeze that had blown gently

all day had risen to a gusty wind with the coming of night. He lay there, listening to it, hearing behind it the faint tinkling of the bells, remembering the years he had spent here, thinking again of Eddie, of Vee, of . . .

He awoke, knowing that he had had dreams, his mind reaching out for them. But they broke up and fled into the retreating shadows of the night that had bred them. He stretched and got up.

He opened the door into the passage. The grey light of dawn was seeping in. He ran his fingers through his hair and beard and set to work again.

He had his cargo ready before the sun had cleared the horizon. He toted the first backload of it down to his boat and something out of his dream stirred. An image of Eddie poling a frail raft across a vast and stormy expanse of water, the mountainous waves engulfing him . . . the image dissolved. A memory replaced it, of how Eddie had suggested making a raft, that day when he had come to the tower with Vee before leaving it for good. He had scorned the idea then, but now—

Among the first load he had brought to the water's edge were tools. He hunted around for timber and began to knock together a rough platform.

The job did not take him long, but when he straightened and looked down on his handiwork, he knew that it was not enough. The raft would have little chance, loaded, upon the river. Buoyancy was imperative.

Then he remembered some oil drums he had in the tower. He had given them only scant thought as cargo, rejecting them for their bulk. But they were watertight and had their

screw caps—and they would still be merchandise after they had served their purpose.

The sun was well up in the sky by the time he had finished wiring the drums to the raft and had lowered the additional freight that the raft made possible. He lashed everything tight, tethered the raft to the boat by a short rope and set off.

His muscles started to ache again. Sleep had not entirely made good the hard toil of yesterday. The raft was cumbersome and square, dragging against the waters as he paddled into midstream. And tiredness brought back the hopelessness of it all. The odds were all against the canal being open all the way down to the river. He was crazy ever to have attempted it. The odds were stacked too high.

The sun had not reached its high point when he spotted the cleft in the northern bank. He headed his waterborne caravan toward it. He had only once tried exploring this region since the crackup—and that early on—tempted by thought of the warehouses there and what they might yield. He hadn't got far. The stench of ruined food, with the ice plants fractured and dead, had been unbearable. The stench had long since gone, but the thought of disease had stopped him from ever going back. His nostrils, even now, wrinkled as he paddle-steered his craft into the gap in the ruins.

It opened into a wider stretch of water, littered with hulks, and he rejoiced—for all the odds against him—knowing at least that he had found the right place. The hulks were all of a size. These—apart from the old jagged smoke stack sticking up from the water—had been barges. They had been scattered by catastrophe and there was enough clear water between them. He headed for an opening beyond, to the north-west.

He had overcome his weariness by now, but now doubts came thronging back. What did he know of the canal? There had been locks in it, hadn't there? Unless they had been flooded away he might as well give up now. He didn't even know if this was the right one. Canals had been something a Londoner had taken for granted in the old days, knowing they were there but never being reminded of them often enough for them to become a part of one's consciousness. Only subconsciously—for most people, he supposed, and certainly for him—had they registered on the mind; as one travelled alongside them for a short distance before highway and waterway parted, or crossed the hump of a road and realized that it was too short or too shallow to be a bridge over a railway; something one passed by and took as little notice of as one would the faint lines of old tram tracks under the tarmac.

But this one was his only reality now. He entered a tunnel. There was no sign of light ahead, and he cursed his ignorance of the canal system. Then clutched at his ignorance for comfort. If he had known that this was a short tunnel he would have been deterred by the blackness beyond, knowing that it could mean only one thing, that the tunnel had collapsed somewhere ahead of him.

Somewhere . . . *here?* . . . no, he was still moving on . . . but it must come soon. Earth had buckled and brought down the buildings that had stood on it; why should the tunnels burrowed through it have survived? But some buildings had. Perhaps the pressure of water here, the upsurge of the river had helped balance the pressures of earth. He was still moving forward.

But he was in total darkness now. Fantasise as he might a

glimmer of light ahead to take the place of the speck of light that had died behind him, it failed to materialize. The darkness fed on the silence, the silence on the solitary splashing of his paddle. What had he said to Vee . . . that hell was here? It was *here* now. Its shadows had closed in on him. He was Charon ferrying the waters of the Styx. He was in worse plight; at least that other doomed soul had known that there was another side. There was no limit at all to this darkness.

He cried out when a faint star of light became visible in front of him, and the sound richocheted from the dank walls like the flutterings of a lost bat. Despite the chill of the tunnel, he was sweating far more than when he had entered it when he came out at last into the day. He shivered. But next time he would know—know that it had a further limit. If he should ever make this trip again. If he should complete this one. He still had a long way to go. But his luck had held so far.

It ran out a mile or so beyond. Here buildings had engulfed the canal utterly in their collapse, and the water came to an end against a blank wall of rubble. He had kept weariness at bay; now he felt despair invade him with a like agony. It was as much as he could do to bring his boat into the bank. He got up and surveyed the ruin that confronted him.

And he knew that the hopeless venture came to a deadend right here. His cargo would have to be left to rot or be plundered. Perhaps he could tote a scrap or two of it on his back while he found his way back home across country—but the meagre proceeds would not advance his plans a fraction. Those plans now looked as crazy and unattainable of success as this expedition had been from the beginning.

There was a gap in the ruin fifty yards to his right, or

the beginning of one; he could not see if it traversed the mound entirely. If it didn't he would have to scale the mound or make a long detour to start the trek back to Notting Hill, miles to the west of it.

He came to the gap—and saw that it held. He went through it—and beyond it water glinted in the sunlight. *The canal resumed its existence, running away to the west.* The water must have found its way under and through the ruin. Or have found sustenance for its separate parts from the underground springs, that, he supposed, had always fed the canal.

A phrase came back to him from school books far away in the past . . . *making portage*. What Canadian trappers had done, he could do. The thought drove the weariness back from his limbs. He stumbled back to his boat.

All the weariness had seeped back by the time he had finished. His last freight was the boat itself, borne on his shoulders, bleeding now, and back. The raft he had dragged, upside down, across the hummocky terrain.

He set off again, zombie-like, into the declining light of the sun, dipping into the water with slow, shallow strokes.

He passed through a wider stretch of water and came to an expanse of green on his left. Ruins in the near distance passed slowly by him, freakish shapes—even for this world—of metal and masonry, and he wondered what this place was . . . had been. And then realized. The Zoo. He wondered what had happened to the creatures it had housed. Not having been this way since the crash, he had never thought about it before. Some must have survived, as a few men had survived. But he had never seen any strange creatures since then, except once a bright flash against the sky that might

have been a parrot. Even then, he had thought that it had been a private pet, liberated by catastrophe. Any creatures who had survived here must have scattered, too fearful and dispersed for mating, to die among the ruins like most of the race who had been their captors.

He paddled on, out of range of questions that, unimportant as they were now, taxed a brain that was being dragged by its body close to the point of ultimate exhaustion. Another tunnel loomed up, gaping, in front of him and he was too weary even to fear it. He passed into it and there had been no cause for fear in any case. He never lost sight of daylight and came out into a straight stretch of water. Where could he be now? Somewhere north of Baker Street? No, further on than that, surely. Darkness seized him again, and the relief of light that was becoming little relief by now. Had he reached Paddington—the tunnel behind him the one under Edgware Road. Had it been a tunnel, or only darkness in his mind? Had there *been* a tunnel under Edgware Road in the old days? Had there been wharves hereabouts somewhere? His mind was wandering now, throwing up questions without answer.

But surely, after all this time, he couldn't be far from home now . . . unless he had taken the wrong canal in the first place. The sun, though swollen now, was ahead of him. That's how it should be. *Home* . . . he repeated the word, muttering through cracked lips. This trip, this crazy trip, he had visited both his previous refuges, and neither had ever meant so much to him as the prospect of returning to his present one. A new strength came to him and he dug his blade into the water with quicker, deeper strokes.

The lower rim of the sun had crossed into the horizon.

Jagged patterns were black against its blood red and only as they grew larger, slowly, jerkily, did they make sense to him. The ruins of the gasworks . . . and he was underneath them. He tried to raise himself to get out of the boat and fell face downwards on to the bank

The temptation to lie there, to give way to his exhaustion and the gathering night, was very strong. But after a minute, feeling a little strength ebb back into his limbs, he got to his feet and felt the muscles of his face pulling it into a weary smile. Whatever had happened to the world, it was still merciful to madmen.

But what was he to do with his cargo, at this hour and singlehanded? It would be truly crazy, not challenging but mocking the odds, to leave it here until morning. People had learned to live with each other again here in this one part of London, but there were more of them here than anywhere else, more chances of somebody coming across his store. And he suddenly recalled that he had not seen a soul the past day and a half, except the couple who had taken over the Womb.

And he realized that he had not eaten in all that space of time, either. He *must* have been mad; the odds were bound to run out soon. He forced his legs to carry him to the top of the bank.

Somebody was walking along the road in the distance, grey in the twilight. Bryan cupped his hands and called out to him. His voice sounded cracked and thin. But the man stopped and looked about him. Bryan waved wildly. The man went to walk on, then stopped again and turned and started to walk in Bryan's direction.

He stopped below the mound, looking up.

'Want to earn twenty quid?' Bryan said.

The man nodded eagerly.

'You know Rosie Lee,' The man nodded again. 'Go and get a barrow from her.'

'I'll need money for that.'

'Tell her it's for the bloke who's buying her place off her. Tell her she can come and check if she doesn't believe you. And tell her—tell her that he's going to settle well inside the time. Got that?' The man nodded, but looked perplexed and started to say something. 'You don't have to understand. She will. Just tell her—and be quick. And don't think you get the twenty just for that. There'll be an hour's work for you after you get back.'

The man gave a fleeting glance at the crimson-and-purple sky, then went hurrying away.

Bryan stretched, propping his body up against his fatigue. But he knew now that he would see the day out. He flopped down on the bank on a carpet of scant ruin-nurtured grass, and lit a cigarette. He was back among people again. *His* people. They might be Barney's people now, but the world was going to start changing. Very soon now.

Chapter Fourteen

He threw down his brush and cursed loudly.

Vee looked up from hammering a nail into an upturned bench. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. I've just finished another panel.'

'Well?' She put down her hammer and came over to him. She looked down at the painting. It was a design of jagged leaves and lyres. 'It looks very nice.'

'*Nice!*'

She grimaced. 'One day perhaps I'll understand you. Didn't you just say that nothing was wrong?'

'Only because I'd finished the damn thing. What was wrong was ever starting it.' He looked at the others standing against the far wall. Flying books, tree forms, formalised shapes of people reaching up to the light—*Christ, they looked like designs for a spring number of the Listener.* 'Starting any of them.'

She looked at him sadly, wistfully. 'You're a strange man.'

'I remember you saying that the first time we met. You've said it a few times since as well.'

'Well, aren't you? You're happy working for someone you call your enemy, yet you're dissatisfied with something you do for what you say is a right cause.'

'Perhaps I always created best out of anger.' He didn't know if that was true, and didn't care. He didn't want to

argue about it. 'I was going to paint a dozen of the things. I've done eight. I'll call it quits. We'll just space them out more round the walls.'

Somebody coughed. Bryan turned. A man with a long apologetic face was standing there, holding something wrapped in sacking.

'Yes?' Bryan said.

'I'm the banjo player, Mr. Bryan. Don't you remember? I was playing in the Lane and you told me to come and see you this morning.'

'So I did.' His sight—or his mind—was always out of focus after painting, even after such shallow work as he had just finished. 'Forget the Mister. The name's just Bryan. And I *asked* you to come. You're a creative artist. Or you're going to be one. So we've got to have the dignity of our calling. What's your name?"

'Sam.'

'Sam what? For the handouts.'

'Fowler.'

Bryan made a note on a piece of paper on the table. He located another piece of paper there. 'Do you know a song called *The Times They are A'Changin'?*'

'Wasn't that one of them protest songs? That was a bit out of my line.'

I bet it was, Bryan thought, looking at the other's lugubrious face, the long lines from nose to mouth meeting finally and circuitously at the chin. His appearance, and his doleful voice, reminded Bryan of some film cartoon character of a dog from his boyhood; he couldn't remember the name.

'I always had to play cheerful music,' Sam went on, 'or people wouldn't put so much in my hat. But I think I know

the tune you mean.' He unsheathed his instrument from the sacking and plunked out a few notes.

'That's the one,' Bryan said. 'Here are some new words I've written for it. Well, an adaptation of the old ones. The old ones didn't seem so appropriate for this world.'

'You want me to play it through now?'

'And sing it, if you don't mind.'

'All right. But you'll have to hold the words up for me.'

Sam sang the first two lines haltingly, squinting at the paper, then stopped. 'Sorry, I can't help jigging around while I'm playing. And my eyes ain't so good, to tell the truth. I'll have to learn the words first.'

'*Damn*. I want to hear how it sounds. I've got to get a programme ready.' Barney's place was opening in two days' time. He had no hope of getting this place opened by then, but he wanted it to be achieved as soon as humanly possible.

'How about you singing the words,' Sam suggested, 'and me providing the accompaniment?'

'That'll have to do for now, I suppose. I've got no voice, but we'll see how it goes.'

'I'll play a four-bar introduction. Like this. And you come in—' Sam chanted a countdown to his strumming—'*here*. No, wait a minute, that doesn't sound right. We'll try a six-bar.' He started the introduction again. Bryan missed the beat, but caught it up again and began to sing in his discordant voice:

Come all you good people wherever you roam
And see how dark forces around you have grown,
And accept it that soon you'll be skinned to the bone.
If your time to you is worth saving
Then you'd better join forces or die all alone,

For the times they are a'changin'
Come workers and builders and all honest men
And keep

He stopped. 'Hold it, Sam. Stop! You're putting too many curlicues in. You're not busking down the Lane now. I'm no bloody musician, but do you know what I mean? You're putting in bits between every line as if you were doing *The Old Folks at Home*.'

'Sorry, Mr. Bryan, I—'

'The name's *Bryan!*'

'Sorry. It's force of habit. Playing the way I do, I mean. People always expected it. They still do. The fancier you make it—'

'Forget about people. I told you, you're a creative artist now.'

'I'll try—Bryan.' He said the plain name hesitantly. 'How do those first couple of lines go?' He strummed at his banjo, singing the words in a whining tenor.

Come all you good people wherever you roam
And see how dark—

'What was it?' He stopped playing. 'I'll get it. But is that any better?'

Bryan sighed heavily. 'It's better, but it's not right yet. All you need is a chord on the beat between the lines. *Stark*—that's the keyword. We're trying to alert people, not to set their feet tapping. Take the words away with you and see if you can work something out.'

Sam took the paper, but hesitated.

'What is it?'

'Well—I got a living to make. If you want me to—'

'All right, you don't have to spell it out.' Bryan reached in

his pocket and handed him two tens of Barney's money. 'I'll let you have more later if you need it.'

Sam went shuffling out. Bryan raised his eyes to heaven for a moment, then went out too. He stopped to look up at the sign he had painted. It read, simply: CENTRE. Time was short; he hadn't had enough of it to spare to paint anything more grandiloquent. Maybe as well; the word expressed everything he wanted to say, everything he wanted this place to stand for. From a centre things could grow. He headed for Jackson's workshop.

He found him poring myopically over blueprints and a jumble of wires and components on a bench.

'It'll never fly,' Bryan said.

Jackson looked up and *harumphed*. 'Barney's latest whim. He's taken it into his head that he wants a public address system. Perhaps he wants it for that new place of his. Or it could be the birth of a propaganda machine.'

'But you're doing it for him.'

'He gave me fifty and promised me a hundred more if I got it sorted out. Render unto Barney the things that are Barney's.'

'Funny, that's a phrase I use.'

'There used to be another part to that, but it doesn't apply any more.'

'Maybe we could find a new ending for it.'

The old man regarded him, his eyes as beady and unwinking as a tortoise's.

'You're planning to set up some kind of opposition, aren't you? I've heard rumours. Heard you've established headquarters. Barney—Bryan . . . what's the difference who anybody renders to? Even your names aren't that much different, like anagrams of each other. You'd be as bad as he is, maybe worse. Anyway, you haven't got a chance in hell.'

'I don't want to take over from Barney. I want the people to take over from Barney.'

'Fine words. How do you aim to bring that about?'

'Not overnight. But I'm making a start. I want you to print some handbills for me, and a few posters. Think you can do that?'

'What—a revolutionary manifesto?'

'No. Just the announcement of—well, a kind of concert.'

'*Concert?*' The old man cackled. 'You think you can fight Barney with concerts? You're crazy!'

'I told you—this is only a start. I just want to show people that there's another way than Barney's.'

Jackson squinted at him. 'The saints preserve us . . . you're not a salvationist, are you?'

'Maybe I am. *Throw out the lifeline* and all that. Maybe that's just what I am. Only not with a capital S. People have got to know that there are a few right values left in the world.'

'Do you believe there are? They weren't all that easy to find before. How many people bothered about values? They only bothered about getting by in the world. And it hasn't changed much.'

'All right! And maybe *I* wasn't concerned overmuch. I was never one to bother about anything but my work. I left the protest songs to others, and the demonstrations outside the embassies. My work was my only protest against the world. When they talked about an artist having to be committed I put a couple of coins in the collecting box and looked the other way. But we're all committed now. We've all got to realize that. We'll set up a commune—'

'Commune? I'd be careful about words like that. Once you start reviving people's memories—'

'Commune, cell cadre, call it what you like. Better, a nucleus, and we'll keep any old-world connotations out of it. The important thing is that we start creating again. I don't mean just my own particular form of creation, though that too. I mean getting machines working again, getting the world working again. Don't you realize?—Barney is just the kingpin in a world that's living in the past. *On* the past. A huckster's world. We all exist out of what we scratch from the ruins. We're like savages strayed into the ruins of a superior civilization. But we're not savages. Two generations of tyrants like Barney, though, and we will be, if we don't do something about it.'

Jackson looked at him sadly. 'And you come to me, begging me to print your propaganda on Barney's press?'

'Why not? It wouldn't be the first time that revolutionary propaganda was printed on the presses of the power that it was dedicated to overthrow. And I'm not begging you for anything. I've got a printing press of my own. It's a few miles away, but I can get it here.' He had had to take it to pieces to get it to his tower. It had taken him two days to reassemble it—a treadle platen like the one here—and all just to recreate a moveable shape. He could do the same again, only this time it would move to a purpose. 'But I'm in a hurry now. I'll pay you for what I want.'

'If I did it I wouldn't want money.'

'So there are some values left in the world?'

'I said *if* I did it. Why should I help you dig your own grave? There are few enough people in this world that I can talk to. That apart, do you think Barney would stand by and watch you undermining his cosy little empire?'

'I don't think he'll have any choice. I don't think he'll even know what's happening. By the time he does there'll

be too many of us. There's something else I want from you now, something that isn't Barney's. Can I look over your library and borrow any books I need?'

'Help yourself.' Jackson waved a hand and returned to his circuits.

Bryan went through to the room beyond and started to hunt along the shelves. He didn't know what he was looking for. He would only know when he found it.

After an hour he had found several things. The poem of Auden's that contained the line, *We must love one another or die;* Donne's piece containing *No Man is an Island,* a couple of old ballads. None of them entirely right for now—inevitably; they had been written in another world, a world that had only been threatened with destruction. But one of them fitted the present state of things:

Could not predict
What might have grown,
But had I picked
What I had sown
There may have been
Lush fruit to taste,
Would not have seen
My land grow waste:
But I am glad
The leaves turned black.
The seed was bad.
I ploughed it back.

It was a poem of this century—the same century, whatever had happened between, and the thought was oddly comforting—a poet of his own generation or, barely, of the one before, somebody called Ted Walker. The name would be read out with the others, however meaningless the names

of any of them were now. The audience would have to be reminded that there had been people before them who had taken the responsibility, who had signed their names.

He went back to Jackson, a pile of books in his hands. Jackson looked up.

'Since I last saw you I found a book on the structure of the Earth. I don't think I was right. They'd have had to go a hell of a way down with a hell of a big bomb.'

'Maybe they each detonated one at the same time,' Bryan said, humouring him.

'Could have been, but somehow I don't think so.' And Bryan got a contrary impression from before—that the other didn't really want to know why it had happened, that he needed the quest, not the finding, to support him, to see his days out. Or perhaps he didn't himself know which.

'Oh yes,' said Jackson. 'Let me have the copy for that job some time.'

Chapter Fifteen

—I sing the coming day
Of the marriage of man to Man
When he shall walk unafraid
In his own created noonday.
There shall be Man,
There shall be Man.

Sam plunked out chords as Bryan intoned the words, looking out over the candlelit hall. Only six people had turned up. Jackson wasn't among them. And they sat scattered singly on the benches. Bryan came to the end of the poem. Sam hit out something that sounded horribly like *tum-tiddy-um-tum-tumtum* and Bryan glared at him. That hadn't been how they had rehearsed it. Sam lifted apologetic shoulders.

'That concludes the first half,' Bryan announced. 'Coffee will be served in the interval.' He had wondered what to charge, or whether to charge at all. He had decided to charge three pounds; that way he would know who was genuinely interested. Well, six people were. Not many, less than he had hoped for, but it was a start. He got down from the platform.

Sam followed him down. 'Sorry about that last bit, Bryan. It just seemed to happen. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again.'

'Don't worry about it, Sam. You did all right.'

'Not many people, are there? After all those handbills and

posters I distributed. I get more of an audience when I play in the Lane.'

'Cheer up, Sam. This is something different. And this is only the first time. We're going on from here. And so are you. You made a good setting of that Ted Walker poem.'

'Did I? I wasn't sure. It was something new for me.'

A little greyhaired man came up to them. His double-breasted suit was too big for him, but his shirt was almost white and he was wearing a tie.

'I can't say how much I'm enjoying your programme. I only wish my dear late wife could have been here. In the old days in Vienna—' it was only then that Bryan detected a faint middle-European accent—'she used to enjoy such affairs as much as I. We were always progressive, you know. We always went to the latest plays and recitals.'

Bryan blinked. Well, all were welcome—as the board outside this place had probably said when it had been a chapel. He had long since given up wondering at the improbable types who had survived. They had survived; that was enough.

'I'm glad you like it,' he said, and steered him and Sam towards the table where Vee was dispensing coffee. He felt pleased enough.

But when he went back on to the platform for the restart he realized that half of his audience was missing. They must have settled for a cup of coffee in return for their admission fee and called it quits. Or had he set a time too late in the day? The candles burned more yellow now against the gathering dark visible through the two small windows that he had been able to reglaze. People could still be excused for fearing the night. He nodded to Sam.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;
I call to the earth—

He had had to cut this one, and felt a twinge of conscience as he read it. But time and circumstance, not he, had been the censor.

Part way through the second half he noticed the door open and Vee go to usher in a latecomer. He couldn't see who it was; it was shadowy at the back of the hall. There seemed to be some slight disturbance, but he did not allow it to deflect him and it was only momentary.

He came to the last item on the programme. It had also been the first. Sam had sung it then; now it was his turn. His chanting voice in the first verse sounded better than he had feared it would. He went on:

'Come workers and builders and all honest men
And keep your eyes wise, the chance won't come again.
Don't yield to despair as the wheels spin and spin,
The chance will come round for the taking
And the loser now will later to win,
For the times they are a'changin'.

He thanked his sparse audience and saw them to the door. Only then did he see who the latecomer was.

Gus grinned at him. 'Wondered if I'd be able to get in, coming late. I see I needn't have worried.'

'We're closing up now.'

'Hold on—that's no way to talk to a cash customer. I didn't argue about missing most of the show. I paid the full admission price. Though your lady assistant didn't seem exactly eager to let me in.'

'I can understand that.'

'You've got the wrong approach, pal. Down at Barney's place we make people feel at home, as long as they behave themselves. That's why I couldn't get here any earlier, we were too busy. Which demonstrates my point, don't it? Or maybe it's because we put on a better show. Or again, maybe it's because our advertising's better.'

He put a piece of paper into Bryan's hand, tipped his hat mockingly and sauntered out.

Bryan looked down at the paper. He took it nearer to one of the candles to read it. It said: *Barney's Barn. Grand Gala Nite Wednesdas 5 August—6 p.m. to Midnite! Special Attractions, New Girls!! Admission and First Drink FREE! ! !*

He crumpled it up savagely. Why hadn't Jackson told him? It must have been printed on the same press that the old man had used for his own handbills. Judas Jackson! And hadn't Sam seen one of these while he had been out distributing propaganda for the Centre? He himself hadn't been out for these past few days, preparing for today. Had they both kept quiet about it to spare his feelings?

He looked up at Vee. 'Come on, we're going out on the town.'

He heard the music and the hubbub long before they got to Barney's Barn. They found a crowd clustered round the entrance. A line of coloured lamps was strung above it. Barney must have had cables brought from his castle, or have installed another generator here.

Protecting Vee, and unmindful of her protests, he pushed his way through the crowd. Inside a big thug pushed a palm into the face of the man in front of them. 'Beat it! You've

had your free drink.' He gave a parody of a bow to Bryan. 'There's room inside.'

Bryan ushered Vee to a table. The air was raucous. The baldheaded pianist had accomplices: a trumpet player and a spotty youth lashing away at drums.

Bryan took note of his decorations. They still looked pretty good. They looked even better in artificial light. Had he consciously intended it that way?

A man in a stained apron brought over two glasses of beer to their table. Bryan sniffed at it.

'Keep it. Bring me a bottle of decent stuff.'

'These two are on the house.'

'I said keep them and bring me a bottle. Or haven't you got any better?'

The man scowled and went away. When he came back Barney was with him.

'Welcome to our humble house of pleasure,' Barney said. 'A bottle of wine with my compliments.'

'You're out of character. And you can keep your compliments. I'll pay.'

'What—have our tame artist genius pay? I wouldn't hear of it.' Barney nodded to the waiter and took a seat at the table, straddling the chair with one arm hanging negligently over the back of it.

'How did your show go tonight? Not so well, I hear.'

'It satisfied me.'

'Depends what you're satisfied with. You'd do better working for me. I've thought of a few jobs you could do.'

'There's one job I might do for you. And for myself. That's coming down to your place and taking up where we left it last time.'

Barney straightened in his chair. 'You're welcome to

that job any time you like. I'd pay well for the pleasure.'

'I don't want your pay. And there's something else of yours that I won't have any more need of.' He reached in his pocket and flung a key on the table. A couple of days ago he and Vee had moved into a room behind the hall.

Barney picked up the key and got to his feet. He looked at Vee. 'Perhaps the lady isn't so fussy. Gus is always looking for new talent.' His big shoulders moved away through the crowd.

'Let's get away from here,' Vee said urgently.

'What! Didn't you say we've got to live in this world? Drink up your wine. You heard what Barney said, it's on the house. We're going to celebrate.'

'Celebrate?' she said emptily. 'What have we got to celebrate?'

'Everything. For one thing, we'll celebrate that this bottle is the last thing I'll ever take from Barney. I may not have much money left, but I can always put that right. But we'll celebrate something much more important. We may have put on a pretty pitiful show this evening. But it was a start, wasn't it? And don't you realize?—Barney sprung this free night to coincide with it. That can only mean one thing—that he's worried. Maybe not much yet, but something's started that he doesn't understand. *That's* what we've got to celebrate.'

Chapter Sixteen

He brought his cargo into the gasworks bank. This time, leaving before daybreak and going both ways by canal instead of having to make the first overland trek to the river, he had hoped to make it in a day. And this time he had had the raft, the sling, made. He had been ahead of schedule on the downward trip. But the fine summer had broken at last and a violent thunderstorm had raged all yesterday afternoon. He had had to hole up again in the still tenantless tower for the night.

This morning it had been raining too, which had slowed his work, with the need to protect the articles of his cargo. He had lashed them under plastic sheets, canvas, whatever he could find, but there had been no such protection for himself. He had barely started on the return journey through the canal when his bad leg had been seized with agonizing cramp and he had had to rest for hours.

The rain had long since stopped. A watery sun had emerged but was dying greyly now on the horizon. His leg still ached, but only slightly worse now than the rest of his body. Thank Christ he wouldn't have to make that journey again! There was plenty of junk left at the tower, but nothing worth his making a third trip for.

He had told Sam to be waiting here from five o'clock yesterday afternoon with a barrow, but that had been yesterday. He would have to trust to luck this time that nobody would

come upon his cargo. If someone did, and looted it, he felt confident of being able to track him down. He knew this area better now—and the people knew him. They might take him for a crazy artist, but they had a certain healthy respect for him, he felt.

He climbed up the mound—and Sam was propped up against a barrow below. Bryan hallooed and slithered down the slope to him.

'Sam! You haven't been here since yesterday?'

Sam's long face attempted a smile. 'I sheltered nearby through the storm, just in case you'd been crazy enough to come through it. I went home at midnight. I came up here again at sunrise.' He nodded at the sacking-wrapped shape on the barrow. 'I've had my banjo to keep me company.'

Bryan clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good for you!' Sam might be still a distance away from becoming a creative artist, but he was dependable, one ally in the battle. A barrow load should just about do it. 'Fit?'

They reached the Centre with the load. He knocked at the side entrance. A last gleam of light glistened on the painted word CENTRE. Upon the ruined horizon black clouds were massed, themselves like ruins. There was no answer from within.

'It's me—Bryan,' he called out, and thumped more loudly on the door. Still no answer came. He turned the knob. The door gave—and he felt disquiet seep icily into him. Vee knew better than to leave the door unlocked while he was away. No light shone from within. She must have gone out—but where would she have gone to, with nightfall approaching, on her own?

'Wait here,' he said to Sam and went cautiously down the

short passage to what must have once been the vestry of the chapel. He struck his lighter. The door beyond was ajar.

'*Vee?*'

All was silence. He was conscious of a horrible smell in the air. He pushed the door wide and went in. He stopped dead, barely over the threshold, looking at the sight revealed by the flickering flame of his lighter.

Vee lay sprawled. Though her clothes were disarrayed, covering her face, it could not be anyone else but her. He knew her body too well by now. And now the legs were splayed, unmoving, like a broken puppet's. But puppets, in the innocent world of puppets, didn't have sexual parts, and Vee's were revealed, shockingly, her coppery pubic hair as dark as blood in the meagre light. With trembling hand he touched the lighter-flame to a candle, and felt as if he were in a nightmare, coming back full circle to another meeting in darkness, candlelight.

He knew now what the smell was. It was the smell of sexual assault and violent death. He bent over her. She was cold, her pulse gone. He pulled down her cothes. Her neck was black, her face twisted and discoloured. He shuddered and slowly straightened.

'*Bryan* . . . what's the matter?' It was Sam's voice from beyond the doorway.

'I thought I told you to stay outside.'

'You shouted out. It was more like a scream.'

'Did I?' he said.

Sam came into the room.

'God! What happened? Is she—'

'Yes, she's dead. And there's only one person who could have done it. I'm going to kill the bastard.'

'Bryan—wait!' Sam laid a hand on his arm. 'Don't do anything hasty.'

Bryan knocked his hand away and lunged out of the room. He heard Sam's footsteps following him. 'Bryan—come back!' He broke into a lurching run. The footsteps behind him faltered. 'I don't see so well . . . *Bry-y* . . .' Sam's despairing voice faded away into the darkness.

He went to the pub. It was the nearest place to seek out his quarry. He limped in and up to the counter. He grabbed the barman by the scruff of his shirt.

'Is Gus here?'

'What the hell do you think you're—' The black-browed man looked tough, but his eyes were suddenly fearful as they looked into Bryan's face. 'Gu—Gus ain't been here. He ain't been here all day.'

'You'd better be telling the truth, or when I've done for him I'll settle with you.'

'Honest to God, mister—'

Bryan let go of him and raged out of the place. He headed down the Lane. The night was dark but he knew his way. The lights of Barney's Barn illumined the last stumbling steps of his trail. He lurched in. Somebody got in his way—the same big thug who had been here the night he had come with Vee. He drove his fist into his guts and went on.

A girl was on the stage, taking her clothes off to discordant music. Gus was sitting at a table, with a bottle in front of him. Bryan shambled across the room, grabbed him by the lapels and jerked him to his feet.

'All right, Gus. Did you think you'd get away with it?'

The other's face looked up, pale and twitching. 'Get away with what? Have you gone crazy?'

'I might well have. When did you do it, Gus? She's lying out all cold up there.'

'*Who* is? Your woman, you mean?'

'You guessed quickly.' He had his knife out at the other's throat now. The music had stopped. The girl on the stage stood stockstill, looking bizarrely coy now.

'I—I—' Gus could hardly speak for trembling. 'You didn't have any other—'

The knife went up and to the left, poised for a backhand slash across Gus's throat.

It was suddenly wrenched back. A big hand clamped over Bryan's wrist, gouging it, twisting. The knife clattered to the floor. Two of Barney's men—the one from the entrance, still wheezing, and another—had him pinioned tight.

Gus twitched inside his crumpled suit and straightened his tie with fingers that were shaking violently.

'I'll see you dead for this, pal. You wait till Barney hears about it.'

'He'd better hear about it right away,' said the one who had helped the big thug. 'Come on, we're all going to Barney's place.' He took out a gun and nodded to his mate. 'Get a lantern.' To Bryan he said, 'One move out of you, mister, and I'll shoot you without thinking twice about it.'

Barney sat in a carved chair in the middle of one long side of the big table, leaning back with his hands on the top of it like a feudal baron.

'Okay—what's all this in aid of?' He looked at Bryan. 'You're the one who seems to have started it. What've you got to say?'

Bryan glared back at him. 'I don't want your justice. He's one of your men.'

'So what? If Gus has done you a wrong he'll get what he asked for, same as anybody else.'

'I haven't done anything to him, the crazy bastard,' said Gus.

'That remains to be seen. And watch your language. This is a court of law.' Barney spoke the words sardonically, his cold eyes gleaming. 'All right, let's have your version.'

Gus hitched his shoulders. 'I was sitting in the Barn, having a quiet drink on my own, when this character comes bursting in threatening to kill me. He would have if Ollie and Sid here hadn't stepped in. He pulled a knife on me.'

'Did he give you any idea why?'

'He reckoned I'd killed his girl friend.'

'Did you?'

'Do me a favour, Barney! You know me. I wouldn't—'

'I know you. I know you for a randy little git. You fancied her. You told me so yourself.'

'Only in the line of business. All right, maybe I did fancy her for myself. But only if it was ever going spare. If I fancied her would I go and kill her?'

Despite himself, despite knowing that he wanted nothing from any travesty of justice meted out here, Bryan found himself speaking.

'She was raped first, then killed.'

'How do you know?' Gus jeered. 'Were you there? It might have been the other way round. There was a character round these parts once, when I was a kid, called Christie. Perhaps he had a few disciples.'

Bryan lunged toward him. He didn't need a knife. He

could break him in his bare hands. Barney's man leaped between them, gun in hand.

'Any more of that,' Barney said to him, 'and I'll have you chucked out of court. If you keep on threatening Gus I might have you put out of the way for good. On the other hand, if I find Gus guilty I'll have *him* put out of the way. Make up your mind what you want. And you'd better talk, because if you don't—if I get the idea that you might have been causing what they used to call a public mischief—I might decide to put you out of the way anyway.'

Bryan looked down the barrel of the gun pointing at him.

'You know the facts. I've been away for the best part of two days. I came back to find my girl dead.'

'How was she killed?'

Bryan told him.

'Strangled?' Gus put in. 'Christ, I couldn't strangle anybody. My fingers ain't strong enough, and that's a fact.'

'I don't know if you could or you couldn't,' Barney said. 'I wouldn't like to say what anybody was capable of.' He turned back to Bryan. 'What time d'you reckon this took place?'

'I don't know,' Bryan muttered.

'I've never been near his place,' Gus said. 'In the last coupla days, I mean, I ain't been there since I went to that crazy show of his.'

'Can you account for every minute of the last forty-eight hours? With witnesses?'

'I dunno. Reckon I could. All I know is that he's crazy. I never went near his place.'

Another of Barney's men had been in the room all the time. Now he bent down and spoke in Barney's ear. Bryan couldn't

catch a word. Barney nodded. The henchman departed. Barney looked up.

'What makes you so sure it was Gus? You got any direct proof?'

'I don't need any. She detested him. She would have told me if anyone else had bothered her.'

'We'll see. One of my men just told me that they picked up somebody wandering round the manor. We're going to wait awhile till he's brought here.' He took out a cigarette and lit it.

After a time the man who had left came back, prodding a handcuffed figure in dirty jeans. The handcuffed man was short, bearded, both his fair hair and his beard matted. His eyes were rolling and he was babbling.

'What's your name?' Barney demanded.

The man's words might have been in another language. What sounded like 'I don't remember' broke partly clear for a moment, and then he was mumbling again.

Barney glared up at his henchman. 'What the hell did you bring *him* here for?'

'You told me to, boss. I didn't know he was as bad as this.'

'We'll never get any sense out of him. When he was picked up, was he doing anything wrong?'

'Only buttonholing people and raving away at them.'

'What was he saying to them? Did it make any sense?'

'One man said that he said "I didn't mean to do it. It was somebody else." '

Barney's head jerked up. 'Who did he say that to? Did you take any names?'

'I—well, no. Maybe I could trace them.'

'*Maybe!*' Barney looked disgusted. 'Take him to the boundary. Give him a hard kick in the arse and tell him not to come back.'

The henchman turned and prodded the bearded man. It had no effect. The bearded man was talking again. And now his words were clear for a moment. 'I found her! I found her! But what went wrong? I—' The words jumbled up again.

And Bryan suddenly recognized the voice. Up to then it had been too obscured by its own raving. Even had it been normal, it was a voice he would not have expected ever to hear again. It belonged to a dead past. And the beard had fooled him. He cried out, in a shocked voice:

'Eddie!'

The bearded man's eyes widened and strayed in his direction.

'Who's that? Is that you, Bryan?'

'Of course it's me. What did you do to me, Eddie?'

Words came, distinct words—

'To *you*, Bryan. I didn't do anything to you. It was you who . . . You left me all alone there, in that dark tower. It was horrible. But I didn't mind, because it drove me out. Because I found my girl again in the end. No, it wasn't my girl. Somebody I met since then. I forget her name. But it was like my girl all over again. I came a long way to find her, miles and miles and . . .'

His head jerked to one side; saliva dribbled from his mouth.

'It was all mixed up, Bryan. I could hear her calling me, leading me on—and then it would turn out to be your voice. I asked after you. All the time I asked after you. I never found your place on the river. The river scared me. And then—when was it?—I asked after you and somebody said they knew you, knew where you lived. And *she* was there. She asked me in. It was just like the old days. And everything was all right. And then—'

Eddie covered his face with his handcuffed hands.

'And *then*?' Bryan prompted, his mouth dry and bitter.

Eddie slowly lowered his hands.

'It started happening again. Everything breaking up and her screaming. I had to do something, I—'

Eddie sank to his knees, sobbing.

Barney looked at Bryan for a long moment. 'Perhaps the next time you won't jump to conclusions. Except there'd better not be a next time.'

He reached to a drawer under the tabletop. He held out a pistol to Bryan.

'It's loaded. The safety catch is on.' His eyes flickered to the man who still had his pistol trained on Bryan, then back again. 'Just in case you get any silly ideas about who to aim it at, let me tell you that if your aim strays one inch off that character there, Ollie will drop you in your tracks.

'Well, what are you waiting for? You were ready enough to kill Gus, weren't you? You've got justice. You can be the executioner, which is more than anybody got offered the chance of in the old days. Take it!' He leaned across the table and thrust the pistol into Bryan's hand.

Bryan slipped off the safety catch. He looked at Eddie. Eddie was still huddled on his knees, babbling to himself.

Bryan thumbed back the catch. 'I can't do it. He's insane.' He laid the pistol on the table, turned and walked out of the room.

He heard the noise of laughter, hooting and derisive, come from the room. The front door slammed shut behind him. On the heels of the sound, like an echo, came the sound of a single shot.

Chapter Seventeen

He had stripped the stupid panels from the walls and had made a bonfire of them, here in the middle of the floor. They had served a purpose after all. Autumn was here now, with chill days and chillier nights. *I saw old Autumn in the misty morn Stand shadowless like Silence, listening to silence* . . .

To hell with the past! Let it all burn. All of it . . . all of them . . . the dead past . . . the past of the walking dead . . . that other brief, recent, hopeful past. Let them all burn . . . pasts, poems, panels. He hadn't bothered to fill in the holes where he had wrenched the panels from the walls. Paint would fill them. Paint could fill any void. But blast this Nonconformist wall and its pious grey paint! The believers had moved on but the paint had endured. Paint always endured, even pious paint like this. Pious? *Unctuous* was the word. His brush skittered over it. Just smack it on heavier there! Any artist had to wrestle with the imperfections of his material, didn't he? Nothing was perfect, thank God. That's something I bet was never uttered between these walls before! Thank you, God, for the imperfection of your creation. Not *us*—we took the blame too long. No—the rest of it. All of it. All flawed. All a challenge. That's the only thing to glory in. *Glory Glory hallelujah*—

He reached for the wine bottle and tilted it to his mouth. There was only one swig left in it. He hurled it across the

room. It hit the opposite wall, shattering, its dregs spattering redly. That'd be something else to come to in due season to work into the design. There's a season for everything, didn't the man say? A season for building, a season for—Forget it now, put it out of your mind. Let me come to it unknowing, unremembering. *New every morning is the love*—It isn't so difficult to forget things. By day. And the night can be held at bay. We still have candles. We still have wine. When all is gone we can always dig under the ruins. The fruits of the earth and fulness thereof . . .

Why did bits out of the Bible, scraps of hymns, come into his head? Must be this blasted place. Deconsecrated once. Then desecrated. He would reconsecrate it, make day out of night. Paintings in the cave, lit by a torch . . . by the flame of a candle. Christ, why did memories have to come back? We'd all had to forget a world of them once, or try to. Why should new ones come to plague us now? Wine! WINE!

In a miracle it came down to him. *Up* to him. By thine hand, Sam. Good old Sam. Give us a song, Sam. A new song for the brave new world.

'You really shouldn't drink like this, Mister—'

'Bryan's the name. *Bryan*. One name, like Picasso or God. Creators Synonymous.' He hurled paint at the Nonconformist wall.

'You'll kill yourself,' Sam said.

'What—on wine?'

'You've been drinking anything you can get hold of.'

'What *you* can get hold of, you mean.' He took a drink and held the bottle out. Sam shook his head. Bryan took another swig.

'Maybe I'd better not bring you any more. I only did

what you told me. The way you've been, I didn't say anything, I thought it might help. But now—'

'Don't bleed for me! Come on, let's have a song. You got your banjo with you? An artist should never be found without his tools.'

Sam started to strum softly and to sing.

'I hate to see the evening sun go down.
'I hate to see that evening sun go down.
Because my baby—'

He stopped. 'I'll play something else.'

'Why something else? That sounds fine. You're becoming an artist, Sam my boy. Go on, I tell you!'

'Because my baby she done left this town.
If it wasn't for—'

'Who the hell's choking here? Crying? Why's it gone so dark suddenly? Light some candles. *Light some candles, blast you!'*

He had to get down and grope for some and light them himself. There was nobody there.

Other people came to him. Jackson. Judas Jackson. 'Sorry, comrade—did I say Judas? Just a slip of the tongue. What's new?'

'Everything's new, Bryan! I worked it out at last. I know what happened.'

'Bully for you.'

'It came out of the blue, the only possible answer. So did what happened, didn't it? *We* couldn't have done it.'

'Well, I couldn't have done it, I know that. Creation's my line not demolition.' Ultramarine had to go in there somewhere—*there*.

'All right, be clever, mister clever bloody artist.'

Feet went stomping away, came back.

'Listen to me, Bryan. I'm telling you. You're the first person I've told. It must have come from *outside*.'

Bryan went on painting in great calm strokes.

'It must have been some creatures from outer space—in a great ship. Don't you see?—the gravitational pull drawing up the Earth's crust like a big tidal wave.'

'A very interesting theory.'

'Do you think so? Do you really think so? And they're going to land here. You mark my words. I've heard some strange noises up there lately.'

'I've heard lots of strange noises. Now do you mind letting me get on with my work?'

Other people came to him. A little greyhaired man who asked in a funny accent, 'When is the next meeting, Mr. Bryan? I so much enjoyed the last one.' And then something happened to alarm him—perhaps he saw the painting—and he left hurriedly.

And a blonde with square breasts, asking how he was and sorry to hear about—

'About what?' he had snarled. But he was in a dead period when the brush in his hands seemed to be guided by some force intent on destroying him and his work and his hold on sanity. He put it down and responded. But that had been dead too. Life, and creation, only came back later, some unmeasured time later.

And a voice he knew coming to him in the night, saying, 'Bryan, come quickly!'

'Sam?' he muttered. But it wasn't Sam. It was Judas Jackson again.

'What did I tell you. They've come!'

He propped himself on an elbow, clutching a blanket around him. He had gone to sleep, sometime in the night, in the middle of the floor. All round him stretched his painting, three walls and three-quarters of a wall of painting. 'Go away. I'm tired. Sleep—must have some sleep. Tomorrow I'm going to finish it.'

'Tomorrow? It's daylight already. They came at dawn, just as I said they would.'

'You said that. So they've come. Don't look too hard and they might go away.' He went to turn back to sleep but Jackson shook him vigorously by the shoulder.

'Get up! We've got to go to meet them. They just dropped out of the sky!'

Bryan gave in and pulled himself to his feet. There was a pitcher nearby. He sluiced his face.

'There's no time to lose,' Jackson cried. 'Follow me.'

Jackson led the way down the Lane, to a vacant plot. It was a space where destruction three years ago had been total, or people had long since picked it clean; he had seen kids playing kickabout football on it. Now people were gathered here, clutching their rags to them against the cold breath of early morning. More people were joining the crowd every moment, emerging from holes in the ruins.

Beyond the crowd, backed against a ruined wall, black gun barrels turned outwards. A loud hailer was speaking words that Bryan, the state he was in, couldn't understand. They were metallic and alien.

They cleared suddenly, or his head did.

'We are Operation Rebirth. We are the new order. We shall shortly be giving you news of great importance. You have nothing to fear from us—you have everything to gain

—as long as you obey our instructions. Any man who moves against us we shall shoot, but we shall try not to kill.

'We are Operation Rebirth—'

Bryan was aware that Jackson had left his side and was running across the hummocky ground towards the newcomers. They were all wearing green uniforms.

'You've come! You've come!' Jackson stumbled and fell before he got halfway to the line of uniforms. The guns levelled on Jackson. Bryan found himself running across the open ground. No guns fired, but two men detached themselves from the armed company and headed towards Jackson.

The old man had raised himself to his knees, and looked now exactly as if he were praying. And his voice, though cracked, was reverent.

'Tell us the truth, O great masters! Where have you come from? Speak to us!'

A silence had fallen on the crowd. The loud hailer had stopped. The two men, guns levelled, were advancing on the kneeling figure. Bryan lurched on, then stopped.

A vehicle was turning into the open space, sending up a small spray of dust. It came to a halt. There was a glint of sunlight as the door opened. The gun butts lifted.

'*Stop!*' Bryan shouted. 'There's your enemy!' He pointed at Barney as he stepped from the Rolls-Royce.

'That's the man who—'

The gun butts descended, but not on Jackson.

Chapter Eighteen

He was propped upright in a chair. His head was aching dully. Across from him a man in a green uniform was seated, looking at him through steel-rimmed glasses.

'Well?' The single word was quiet, the man's manner unhostile.

'Well what?'

'How do you feel?'

'I've felt better.' His mouth was horribly dry. 'Can I have some water?'

The man nodded to another green-uniformed man in the room. Bryan looked blearily around him. It was an ordinary shabby room. A glass of water was brought to him. His thirst, his lust to slake it, delayed his reaction to the small pain in the crook of his arm as he lifted the glass. He felt it again as he lowered it.

'What have you done! Injected me?'

The man across from him smiled slightly. His lips were red and fleshy.

'The reverse in fact. While you were unconscious, and having received certain information about you by then, we took a sample of your blood. You've got enough alcohol in your system to kill you.' The man smiled again. 'We shall have to see that that doesn't happen.'

Bryan suddenly felt heartened. They had clubbed him down—he remembered now—but they couldn't be blamed

for that. He had acted crazily. They had probably thought he was attacking them. He was lucky they hadn't shot him. But everything was all right. They would be getting things sorted out—whoever these people were—finding who was on the right side.

'How long have I been out?'

'Two hours and seven minutes. As I mentioned, we've been checking up on you in the meantime. I was particularly interested in your painting in that building just up the road from here. *Very* interesting.'

'I'm glad you think so.'

'Yes—for what it reveals. Crucifixion scenes, dismemberment, monstrous shapes. Do you always paint like that?'

'I don't always know just how I paint. I'm not interested in the *how*.' He drew a hand across his forehead. 'But I meant that painting to evolve into something else. I wanted to make what the art critics once would have called a synthesis out of those fragments. An apotheosis. But—' he found himself giggling, and cursed inwardly—'I ran out of wall.'

'You ran out of wall? Perhaps you *wanted* to run out of wall?' The man made a note on a pad.

Bryan glared at him. 'What do you know about it? I had run out of practically everything else when I started that painting. All I knew was that there was a wall, four walls. I just started to paint.'

The man in the steel-rimmed glasses made another note.

'All very interesting. And all very useful to us in our programme for you. We don't subscribe to Freudian theories. Freud, like any other theorist, was a product of his society and prescribed for its ills. There was nothing objective or of eternal truth about his findings. But we respect him for that—we too

are only concerned with things as they are—and we find that we can use part of his theories, even though his society and the conditions that shaped it are dead. We have new rules, new plans for the world as it is.'

'Who are you? Just where have you come from?'

The man smiled again. 'We're not from Proxima Centauri or Sirius, as your friend Jackson seems to think.'

'*Jackson!* What happened to him? What have you done with him?'

'*Done* with him? Only questioned him. We're still questioning him. He's in the next room. These various patterns of response to our coming are very interesting. But I'm afraid that Jackson is showing all the signs of non-acceptance. He persists very stubbornly in his notion that we come from another world. Unless he can rid himself of it, he may prove to have a high liability factor. And his age is against him. His only salvation may lie in a sperm test—we hate giving *any*-body up as useless—but that will have to be carefully evaluated against all other factors.'

'What are you talking about? Where *are* you from?'

'Somewhere much nearer home than the fantasies of Jackson. From Durham, in fact. We were a group of scientists, at a conference there, when the event came.'

'Event?'

'We refer to what happened as the event,' the man said primly. 'The word avoids all emotive connections. We have started to compile a checklist of other names that survivors use; such things are useful to us for our analysis of response factors, but to us it is just a dividing point. We refer only to B.E. and A.E.—Before the Event and After the Event.

'When the event came, with all its random effects it so

happened that we were preserved. The conference was a seminar in communication between all branches of science, so that we numbered a hundred of the best minds in almost as many specialities. We were uniquely equipped to make a new beginning.'

'Then you know what happened? What caused the—the event?'

'Are you worried about what caused it? Is that what makes you drink heavily and paint wild pictures?' The pen poised over its pad.

'Not at all. I only asked because of Jackson. *He's* been worried over it. If you could tell him, it might—'

'We don't know. And we're not interested. Being concerned about such questions is negative. We have forged our own philosophy. The main credo of it is reason—dealing with facts as they are, not as they were. I must correct myself. The main credo stems from the past, but only that one—that we, as scientists, allowed ourselves to be used. That will not be allowed to happen again. We call our philosophy Neopragmatism. We have built up a new society in the city of Durham. We have indoctrinated the people who survived there. And we have started to send our men out over the rest of the country. Secretly, using gliders. And our conviction that we were to be the builders of the new society has been fully borne out.

'London has been our great disappointment. It was our main objective, of course. But we were surprised that so little has been done by the survivors here. We had expected to find more than one community started up again.'

'Then you've found others in other parts of the country?'

'Indeed. A few. People struggling to get things started

again. Pitiful often, but making our arrival all the more to be welcomed.'

'With characters like Barney Smith battening on them?'

The man looked at him curiously. He made a note, then looked up.

'You seemed to be protesting against Smith when my men brought you down. What exactly have you got against him?'

'What have *I* got against him! What has *everybody*—' He stopped himself. 'You'll find out soon enough.'

'But we *have* found out about Barney Smith. He was the first person we contacted here. We send our undercover men in first. Barney Smith has been appointed head man here under the new order.'

'*What!*'

'We always find that one individual has come to the top in surviving communities. Here the pattern *is* rather unusual, being based on a junk community. Of course, a retrieval factor is inevitably found in all re-emergent societies, but the more usual pattern is of an agricultural collective, or people starting up a basic manufacture again—'

'That's what *I* wanted to do. Ask Jackson.'

The man looked at him sadly. 'Jackson? Find a better witness than that and I might enter it into your analysis data—for what use it would be. We are not interested in aspirations, only in facts. And the cardinal fact is that here it was Barney Smith who organized the survivors.'

'Organised? He only took his cut out of everything. He's a parasite.'

'That is merely your subjective view. We find a high revival quotient here, and Barney Smith is the dominant figure in

this community—so a correspondingly high quotient goes to his credit.'

'*Revival quotients . . . retrieval factors.*' Bryan laughed hollowly. 'Anybody can tell that you lot are scientists! You still use the same old kind of gobbledygook.'

'What you call gobbledygook is no more than necessary phraseology for our evaluation of a situation. Revival is the next stage after survival. And here we find a high number of revival factors. A currency system—'

'Run by Barney for his own profit.'

'Electricity—'

'For himself only.'

'No matter. The start has been made. Order has been established. A rough-and-ready order, but order nonetheless. A base on which it will be that much easier to establish our own new order. But we also find other factors operating in every community we come across. Just as revival patterns differ, so do the negative factors that we find. But, like them, they have a certain generic identity. Not all persons with negative revival factors are identical with your case, but—'

'*Me! Negative!* Bryan stared at him. 'Ever since I've been in this place I've been struggling to achieve a proper system.'

'Have you? Is that your assessment of your activities? Setting up some crazy place you call a Centre with revolting paintings daubed on its walls?'

The light of anger died from Bryan's eyes, leaving them empty and dull. 'Things you say are things I've said—about the need to forget the past, the need to start creating again. But from you they sound different. They sound the exact opposite. And I don't want any part of them. I don't want to live in your kind of world.'

'I can understand that. You're the born rebel, the born nonconformist, and you realize that you will have no opportunity to rebel in our society.'

'I'm glad you understand. In which case, I'll be off.'

He went to rise, but a firm hand on his shoulder restrained him. It was the other green-uniformed man.

The one in the steel-rimmed glasses smiled achingly.

'But I'm afraid *you* don't understand. You have no choice. People are too valuable to us. People are our most precious raw material. Your energies must be harnessed to the building of the new order.'

'I haven't got any energies left.'

'That may be so at this moment. You may have exhausted them fighting against the system. But our system is different, and we have experience in such cases as yours. You will be adapted to play a useful role in the new order.'

Hope returned briefly to him. 'Then there will be room for painters in your new order?'

The man spread his hands. 'Painting? Perhaps later. But not for you. Even at this stage of your investigation, it is clear that painting is the core of your problem, to which all your maladjustments are related. No—I'm afraid that for you painting is out of the question. Except that it will be used in alienation therapy. But calm yourself; you will not even *want* to paint by the time our social therapists have completed their work, I can assure you. By that time, I am confident that other personality factors will have become evident which will assist in a positive reclassification, fitting you to be a happy member of society for the first time. Think of that! We shall make a start on the process now. You will answer my questions, please.'

'Go to hell.'

'There is no such place. The only hell is now, if you wish to create it for yourself.'

'You're using my words again!'

'Am I? I am glad that I am expressing myself in your terms. Then may I say that *now* is your only hope of heaven?'

'Who do you think you're talking to? I still say go to hell!'

The man sighed. 'The decision is yours. You mentioned injections earlier on. We have that means too. But we prefer that you answer voluntarily.' He smiled. 'That way we get more lies, of course, but the lies are often more helpful to us than the truth. Now—shall we start again? Full name?' His ballpoint poised.

Bryan's head had slumped on his chest.

'Try. *Please*. Believe me, it will be better for you.'

Bryan's head half lifted. 'My name is Douglas Bryan,' he found himself saying.

'Good, *good*. Date of birth?'

'Nineteen forty-eight.'

'Occupation?'

'You know that.'

'From your own lips, please.'

'I was a painter in oils and tempera . . .' And a memory stirred, a memory of having said those words somewhere else, at some other time.

But he was weary—oh, so weary now—and he couldn't remember where.

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