Part Six.

RICHARD FROST

Poems and Essays—6.

Here is always now
and now is always here.
I am always here and now.

I could have been there
but it would have been then.
Still I would have been here
as I am now.

I am always here and now.

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Kent.

According to the Master of Hounds, the Tunbridge cub hunt had been a thorough success. So thorough, in fact, that he did not deem it prudent to let the November meet go through, as it might finish the fox population altogether, and leave a wasteland for future generations of sportsmen.

Taking his cue, the Captain decided to start a tour around the shires, loading his favourite hunters into a special wagon, assembling his array of weaponry, and telling his wife to go pack her frocks.

He grew quite sentimental on departure, saying he would crave my company and expressing the hope that, when he returned in the New Year, we could play some polo together.

"Got to stay in England, y'see," he added in clarification, "because of the old man. Pretty damn rotten, this parallellysis, I tell you. Don't suppose he'll ever hold a gun again. What d'you think, Holland?" He threw me an expectant look, yet doubtful—but expectant all the same.

"No," I replied as solemnly as I could, "I don't think that is likely."

He sighed. "Gathered as much. Well, survival of the fittest and all that."

Clapping me on the shoulder (once more I was surprised by the strength of his friendship, almost buckling at the knees when his big hand came down), he turned and jumped into the carriage that stood ready. It would first take him to Wiltshire, where one of his Eton chums, a Baron with a double-barrelled name, had a large estate. A right pest of wildlife there waiting to be shot. Just dying for it. De Ville-De Ville had said so himself.

Even so, I did wonder whether the Devil-Devil had made the best choice by asking the Captain to help the fox-fiends to hell. As I watched the convoy roll off, I thought: they won't know what hit them.

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"It's getting dull for you, I fear," Sir Sidney said after the Captain had left. However, I did not mind the autumn quiet that now settled over Sutton Hall—and I was more than relieved to have seen the back of Mrs. Althane: ever since his attempt at mamatricide, I'd felt wary of letting Tristram out of my sight. Actually, the only one I missed was Cedric (and Roz, that goes

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without saying; but I didn't want to think of her, not before I knew). I missed Cedric most urgently when Lady Althane and I were having dinner together: alone together, without anyone to deflect the strong force of her strong personality. Less favourably disposed to me than ever, she slapped me time and again about the ears with her dictate of doing. An artist practised art, she said, and until the day that I penned down my first word of fiction, I was no more of a writer than the cook in the kitchen downstairs.

I did not agree with her, but never said so, afraid of another outpouring of scorn. For instance, I never told her that, although I knew what I wanted to do, I still struggled with the why and wherefore. I could not catch my own meaning—I did not see it, didn't hear it—which made just making the beginning seem an unattainable end. Once, when I asked her what she thought people could learn from her out-of-focus paintings (stupid of me, to ask, but I had to make some conversation), she replied coolly, "Nothing, I hope." At my puzzled face, she frowned (oh, I was so slow!) and, pointing her fork at me, she declared, "It is not sight that makes one see, Mr. Holland: it is vision." It was the usual circular reasoning (surely vision implied there was some message to impart?), but trying to unwind the circle in my mind, I only tied myself in the same knot as before.

Actually, the sole thing I knew for certain was that the more I wrote for Sir Sidney, the more the gist of his philosophy grew clear. Ever more often, too, I could predict precisely where he would deviate from the path we were following, and where he'd go straight on. To my own discomfort, though, I still was unsure whether I concurred with the tenets of his approach. It had seemed so simple: a list of ten kings, ten essays that punctuated ten periods in time. However, as we moved from chapter to chapter, the feeling increasingly arose in me that we did not go forward, not at all. Unnerving in its departure from historiographic custom, and somewhat disheartening too, in Sir Sidney's view humankind had achieved but very little. Still blundering on: that was about it.

One day I decided to inquire if he did not think that, perhaps, we should pay more attention to the advancements that had been made. After all, the story of Great Britain was one of growth and development, of increasing democracy, the evolution and the progress of man.

Gazing at me over his reading glasses, Sir Sidney reflected on this for a moment. Then he replied, "People tend to interpret Darwin wrongly, John.

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He has merely described a process—which doesn't necessarily entail progress."

"But surely, sir, there have been major achievements. We know more, we can do more. We've arrived at a far higher level of understanding."

"Ah," he uttered, "but wouldn't you rather go deep? When you think of the spiral: do you imagine it as a staircase up into a tower from which we can see all there is to see? Maybe we should go down instead: corkscrew into the matter, as it were." He paused, to resume, "Look, I do grant you that the world, that circumstances have changed. Yet the idea of history having a positive direction, purpose even . . . I don't know. Personally, when I go through time, I keep reading the same story again and again. They thought they were at the pinnacle of civilisation in the Middle Ages, you know. And we, in our day, think the same."

"Still, we have machines," I argued. "They've just invented a telephone, sir. A telephone! You can talk to someone a mile off!"

"And King Alfred could hear the voice of God," said Sir Sidney. "We can't do that any more: we're losing God rather than getting closer. Remember what you said in your manifesto: 'individual inconsistency in an ever more erratic society.' Now what on earth gave you that impression? And do you really believe that, if you conceive of an idea like that, you're living in a world that is nearing its ideal shape?"

It was unsettling, the way he quoted my own words back at me, although I could see what he meant. Because his book wasn't about machines: it was about men, and the minds of men. He hadn't chosen the public figures of kings for nothing: for if they were fully human—fickle, contradictory, driven as much by desire as by duty—then, well, we ordinary mortals must be so too. It was this willingness to allow for a fundamental unreliability and disorder in our psychological make-up which had first attracted him to my manifesto, and which had made him decide that, if anyone could aid him in his research, it was me. It had struck a chord in Lady Althane, and made her now so impatient with me for not singing my song.

Yet ironically, ahead of my time as I must have seemed to them (and I was ahead, as time has told), I was also very much a child of my time. Brought up in a predominantly Benthamite society, where knowledge was power, and the March of Mind only meant that, given enough of this

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knowledge, man would triumph over his environment; raised with the idea that fiction, if not educational in intent, surely must be suspect; always told to do as the Romans do, I feared the very private impulse, the inner urge which I had once marked down as the only suitable subject for a literature that was true to life. Like a Prufrock, I was trapped by the fear of making the wrong move and, like Prufrock, I did not move as a result.

The head or the heart. My heart knew what I wanted, but my head still did not see why. And I felt that, until I saw this, I could not, and should not begin.

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… In your letter, you asked after the circumstances of Tristram's birth, giving me, by your choice of word and rather roundabout way of putting the question, the distinct impression that you have harboured the suspicion our sweet Rosalind was party to bringing my nephew to life. I wish it were so, my darling—he would have been even more fabulous—still I am infinitely pleased to say that I can set your mind at rest on this point. Indeed, I am finally at rest myself, for I cannot express how I have racked my brains over the sudden, mysterious turn which your affections for Roz took last May. I surmised that the poor girl had made some reference to your family history, which, innocent though its intent, you mistook for unsavoury curiosity, or even insult. To know, however, that you were merely wrestling with doubts as regards the maiden's honour and honesty was like finding the door open after vainly having tried a whole bunch of keys. "Goodness me," I cried to myself, "is that all? Is that really all? But I can—I must, I will—solve this trifling problem!"

Before I continue, I should like to point out, dearest, that you do not seem to have had your maths and geography right, or you would have seen that Roz is almost too young to be Tristram's mother: she was only sixteen years of age when my nephew first saw the light. Also—which I am sure I have mentioned to you on at least one occasion—he was born in India, and Roz has never been abroad in her life. Remember how I told you that, in his second month as a baby, Tristram almost died of an Asian fever? Last but not least, Roz only became part of our existence four years or so ago (shortly after she turned twenty, I believe), and my brother first met her when Tristram was already fully

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breeched. But let me stop throwing facts at you, or I shall feel like a regular Gradgrind! Dear oh dear, those facts! The mammoth importance of detail! It is quite daunting!

To resume my story. You know my brother is fond of women; well, women are fond of him. He is crude, rude and, I dare say, a total dunderhead, which most females seem to find an irresistible combination, mistaking it as they do for the quintessence of masculinity. Being married to an ice queen, Ralph often cannot resist bathing himself in the warmth of such adoration from the fair sex as he attracts, which, whilst in India, led to him entering into a corporeal liaison with one of the servant girls who was then engaged in his household. Either that, or the girl was too helpless and dependent upon her employer to refuse his advances, although the eagerness with which she, at a later stage, tried to rake in as much of his money as she could seems to plead against such a sympathetic interpretation of affairs. My father now pays her the sum of a hundred shillings a year, the minimum which she professes is required for her safekeeping. For certain, the plan of blackmail has succeeded as well as the claimant could hope; however, as Lady Althane told Ralph, you takes your choice and pays your price. Wise woman, my step-mother: such a stickler for responsibility.

But I appear to have skipped a bit. Indeed, so eager am I to give you the good news, that I have jumped straight from the beginning to the end. Very well: Ralph had acquired a mistress, and no sooner had they shared the bed than the girl announced to him that she was with child. With unusual foresight, my brother realised that perhaps, here, his only chance of becoming a father presented itself, and so he decided that the fruit of his loins must be allowed to ripen. The ice queen, being informed of why the kitchen maid was filling out so, was altogether indignant at the irregularity of the affair; still, being but a weak and helpless wife, she had no choice when, seven months later, Ralph acknowledged the baby boy that was born as his son, and told her to stop moaning and do the same. The rest, as they say, is history. It is a sad history maybe, although personally I can only feel joy at Tristram's parentage. Just think, my dear, if instead of the bouncing bundle of delight that he is now, you had had a pupil who reclined in a chair all day complaining of head aches and stomach aches and what aches have you. You would grow as bored as my brother is with his wife.

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Now concerning your observations on the August ball. You are right that Ralph is very much taken with Roz, but—as even his blunt brain will one day perceive—the affection is not reciprocated. The dear girl simply intended to enjoy herself that evening and, I might add without betraying too much trust, she also hoped that by displaying her talents as a dancer (she moves so beautifully: do you not agree it is a most delightful sight?), she could maybe entice you to come over and take her hand. That your refusal to do so has hurt her deeply, it is no doubt redundant to state. You must have noticed her distress in the ensuing days and, also, how difficult it was for her to part with you in London, feeling as she did that it formed her last chance at a reconciliation. I did as much crying for her as I could; sadly, though, her letters since have told me that it has brought no relief. She suffers exceedingly at the thought that you will never smile at her again in, as she herself has put it, "the carefree, friendly manner of the beginning", when you still liked her as much as you love her.

To be blunt (and I must be blunt with you, dearest, my conscience bids me to do so), fully understandable as your doubts and fears now are to me, the fact remains that you have crushed our precious rose. You have torn at her petals, John—I love her, I loathe her, I love her, I loathe her—like an ignorant schoolboy who is only concerned with his own feelings, without ever considering the harm that he is inflicting upon the object of his desire. Crushed and torn, she has gone back to a city where, place of birth as it may be to her, she has never felt she could flourish, and where she is pining away further still at your persistent neglect. Not a word, not a hope that she will ever regain her special friend. Now do be a good boy and go sprinkle some tears of regret on her; bring her a ray of sun, a piece of the blue heaven she for which she so desperately prays. I visit her once a fortnight, but I fear it is not enough. It is you whom she needs to see, your palm she wishes to squeeze with her welcoming hand.

If you have any qualms about approaching her in her parental home, I think I know the perfect solution: my father intends to give you a little holiday in the week before Christmas, so that you can look up your family; and yesterday I suddenly realised that, being frightfully busy at the college that very same week, I probably shall not be able to make the usual journey to London. To be sure, I resolved, it were best if I sent you in my stead. Would you be so kind as to do the honours for me? If you wish (and I hope you do, for I sincerely wish

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it myself), you can afterwards travel on to Cambridge, and spend a few days with me. I know we shall see each other again at the Hall after Christmas, but I so much would like to show you my Queens', which, I can safely say without boasting, is the most charming little college community in the entire universe. Indeed, I intend to convert your old Oxford soul wholly to "the other place".

You can sleep with me in my room, or put up at an hotel, if you like. One night is all I ask for.

With all my love (all of it),
Cedric

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I decided to disregard propriety and the need for secrecy, and told Tristram the full story of how he had been "brought to life".

"So it's not Roz," was all that he said.

"No. Sorry."

"It might have been, though."

"Yes, I think you're right. I suspected it as well." To try and ease the pain of his disappointment, I added, "One thing's for certain, though. Of all the people in the world, you are Roz's absolute favourite. And that's really special, for someone who isn't even your mother."

His face brightened a little. "Yeah. She's still my friend."

"The best."

And that was it. He never talked about mothers again. He never even asked about the woman who *had* given birth to him. The only noticeable effect the truth had on Tristram was that, ever afterwards, he firmly referred to his father's wife as "Mrs. Althane".

As he had told me, she was not a mama.

London.

I was with my girl. We were already getting dressed again (alas, the next customer was waiting, a regular like me—and who could blame him?).

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However, as she told me, looking over her shoulder (such a lovely, plump shoulder), her cheeks still flushed (such a nice, deep blush),

"You're me favoury gen'leman."

"I bet you say that to all the boys."

"No, really." She took up her corset. (It would have to come off again in ten minutes; but, she had once explained to me, they thought it was part of the fun, unwrapping her—and so it was.) "I said it to Nancy when you come in: 'ere's me favoury gen'leman.'" Starting to do up the hooks, she added confidentially, "The others often keep them shirts 'n socks on, y'know. Which is just as well, 'cause most of 'em ain't much to look a'. But you're beautiful: all ev a symmetry, and nice 'n strong. Like a prince. That's why you're me favoury gen'leman."

I smiled. Life was good. She was a good girl, and it was a good house—not cheap, but good. The beds were clean; the girls were clean; even the building's façade had a very clean air to it. And I was her favourite gentleman.

She asked me to go down first, saying she hoped I'd soon come and see her again. Rosy, all rosy, my body and ego aglow, I decided to forego the shabby back exit, and descended the elegant stairs (marble, if you please: marble stairs) to the lobby.

And there, there was the Captain. He was sitting in one of the easy chairs by the fire (and a table with newspapers, red plush carpet, a gilded mirror, a vase with flowers, put there on purpose to create the feel of a quality hotel, or the entrance to some smart club); he was sitting there, gazing at the flames, deeply absorbed in thought. However . . . .

However, just as I thought I was lucky (he really seemed miles away, and I had almost sneaked past), he started and looked up. As his pupils clicked into focus, he shook his head, struggling to make sense of what he saw. "Bloody hell, Holland," he cried, "what are *you* doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?" But I already knew the answer. She was blonde, she was buxom and, as I very well knew, the Captain had a taste for girls like that—and yes, he was, without a doubt, the next customer.

"Keptin Othane, zir?" Madame Jeanine glided into sight. "You cen go up now, zir, iv you like."

"Huh?" He was still staring at me, still completely flabbergasted. Then he snarled, "No, no, woman, not now!" He waved his hand, annoyed at the

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interruption; finally, remembering why he was here, he pulled some notes from his pocket and thrust them into her hand. “I’ll come back some other time.” Turning to me, he said, “Got to talk to you, actually—urgently. Any place where we can get a drink? Really, Holland, you don’t know what . . . . We’ve been had, you and I.” Taking me by the elbow and guiding me to the door, he gabbled on, “Honestly, I still can’t really believe . . . . Even when I . . . . Oh yes, old boy, we’ve been had.”

He looked troubled, nervous, all his usual bravado gone, and once we were seated in the public house round the corner, two glasses of wine in front of us . . . . The way he kept fidgeting on his chair, his eyes darting back and forth, and his fingers were trembling so . . . .

He’d just come from his father’s solicitor, he said, panting rather than speaking: they’d had to discuss the London property—also about the will. Naturally, it was all strictly confidential, but . . . .

“Look,” I broke in, “if it’s really that confidential, are you sure you should be telling me?”

“Ah,” he growled, “you’re practically family anyway. Or maybe . . . .” He paused, frowned: confused. Then he fumbled his moustache and muttered, “Well, perhaps I’d better not. But I’m telling you: we have been had. Of course I’m married, even so . . . .” His gaze travelling down, he stared at his wine. “Fucking hell,” he cursed. “How we’ve been had.”

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Instead of the composed state of mind in which I had intended to call on Roz and her parents, I went there all in a turmoil. As the cab rumbled to Knightsbridge, I kept wondering what on earth the Captain could have been meaning to tell me. He had probably visited the solicitor’s in his capacity as future owner of the Sutton estate, and the solicitor had told him . . . what? Something about the London property? Or had Sir Sidney made some unfavourable changes in his will? But supposing this were true, what would it have to do with me? He had said it clearly, “We’ve been had, you and I”, implying that whatever the solicitor had told him concerned the both of us; and he had also been clearly very upset about . . . whatever it was.

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Having arrived at my destination, I was still so absorbed in these questions that I just blindly began walking, and had left Thurloe Place before even taking a look round. Cedric had mentioned the name of the street, but no number, just that the family lived over the shop; and so, when I had retraced my steps, I made a quick inventory of what commercial premises I could see. Apart from Lacy's, the famous departmental store, whose ten-storey building commanded nearly half of the street, the only other shops around were a greengrocer's and a newsagent's—but Roz had spoken of silks. Thinking I must have got the address wrong, I turned the corner into Thurloe Mews, then Thurloe Street, Thurloe Square, Thurloe Terrace, Thurloe Close (no sign of any Munros anywhere), only to find myself back at the beginning.

Getting annoyed (I'd said I would be there at three and, thanks to the Captain, I was late already), I entered the greengrocer's and asked the grubby type behind the counter if he knew where the Munro family lived.

"Top offe shop," he replied as he continued re-arranging his potatoes.

"Here? But . . . ."

"No, Lacy's." He shifted some poor-looking specimens to the back of the pile. "Top offe shop. You gotta take the lift atta far corner."

I wrinkled my brow. "I'm looking for the Munros," I repeated.

"Yeees," he said slowly, as if suspecting he was dealing with someone who was dull-witted. "You're looking for them that owns Lacy's. As I said: top offe shop. Private lift, innit? Far corner."

This was the first shock.

The second one came a few minutes later—after the liveried doorman, the electrical lift with the electrical lights, the eminently respectable butler, the long walk under the tall ceiling of the broad hall, the entry into one of the grandest drawing rooms I had ever seen—when I was invited to take a seat on the sofa (pure velvet: probably from "the shop") and saw, through the vast windows opposite, London, all of it, lying at my feet. The South Kensington Museum, the newly built Albert Hall, Hyde Park, Buckingham Palace, the Heath . . . . As Roz would tell me that evening, if one stood at the glass and the weather was right (which was hardly ever, she said: most days it was too dull), you could follow the snaky shape of the Thames all the way to Greenwich, or even see the silhouette of Windsor on the left.

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And sitting there, in that splendidly decorated room, growing ever smaller (I had taken care not to overdress, thinking I'd be having tea with lowly folk; and here I was, looking but a clerk in my second-best coat), feeling dizzy, humbled, I realised one thing only full well: Roz was far too rich for me. But there again, she seemed happy, truly happy to see me—she had simply leapt up when I came in—and her parents, they were so polite, so kind . . . . And maybe, I thought to myself, if I worked hard, if I became famous, via Sir Sidney, and made the Dickens critique the best book on Dickens ever . . . . But no, what prospects were these, besides castles in the air, dreams about what I might be, might do? Oh Lord, I concluded in my panic, Lady Althane was right.

Meanwhile I chattered on, stressing it was all Cedric's idea (I kept saying this: it had been his idea—nay, his command): he was the one who had told me to take Roz, sorry, Miss Munro, out for an evening. (My, did I feel dizzy. Their silver, china, crystal . . . . I just couldn't breathe.) Really, I repeated, I was merely a replacement. Yet Roz did not appear to notice my confusion, only beaming at me, and when I mentioned the outing, she raised her hand to her mouth in delight and called out,

"Oh, I'd so love to see a music-hall!"

"Whát?" It escaped before I could stop myself; and for a moment she looked cast down, her expression turning even more dubious when I said that actually I'd had the opera in mind: Cedric had mentioned the opera (well, he hadn't, but I could imagine him mentioning it, or at least concurring with the idea), so in the end it became, as a compromise, Gilbert and Sullivan (*H.M.S. Pinafore*: had she seen it already? No? Good.)—her parents nodding, approving of my choice; and then Roz smiling again and saying she'd be thrilled. And she seemed genuinely happy, so happy to see me, the old sparkle back in her eyes, and the curl of her lips telling me that, wherever we went this evening, we would surely have fun.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in a bit of a flurry, getting quite a headache over clothes, but congratulating myself on my last-minute decision to rent the full works upon my return to Thurloe Place, where the family carriage turned out to stand waiting to take us to the *Opera Comique*. However, glad as I was of my rags (the cashmere cloak, the silk collapsible hat, my shining new shoes), once we were there, in the bright lights (as I noticed, I was far more elegantly attired than the rest of the audience), Roz

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laughing at the jokes on the stage, then glancing aside to share her merriment with me, I knew that I needn't have worried so. Indeed, I felt fully at my ease now. I was with Roz, after all.

Sometimes the doubt crept back in. (But maybe, if I worked hard . . . . It was just a matter of money, wasn't it?, and money could be earned. For in a way, if you looked at it from a distance, we were equals: shopkeeper's daughter, shopkeeper's grandson; besides, there was nothing of the grand lady about her—as long as I could give her a comfortable home. And of course she'd inherit . . . . Good grief, what was I thinking? Did I even want to get married? No: first my career; and I wasn't going to marry on my wife's expectations.)

All the same, I never doubted for long. It was just so good to be with Roz. And God, my God, how I had missed her.

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We had agreed on a second outing the following afternoon. I had suggested Regent's Park and the Zoo, but Roz declined: she did not like to see animals that were permanently caged up. Cedric always took her to the Heath, she said, so that she could get a breath of fresh air. And the Heath it was.

At Lacy's top floor, I was received by Mr. and Mrs. Munro: Roz hadn't finished dressing yet. Her mother, after a few short questions—how was Sir Sidney? And Lady Althane?—soon went to see if Roz was making any progress (somehow she seemed less charmed by my presence than the day before, and relieved to go), which left me alone with the father. He was a good-humoured, affable character, who looked a bit like Mr. Pickwick, with the same bald head and plump belly, and two brightly twinkling eyes behind his ring-shaped spectacles.

Having inquired how I had enjoyed the operetta last night, and smiling at my praise (false praise, I admit, but I wanted to make a favourable impression, and I sensed he was a fan), he remarked,

"My daughter tells me it is your ambition to become an author."

"It is, sir, yes."

"And you're going to write a book about Dickens, is that right?"

"That's the plan." Upon his nod (apparently he found it a good plan), I proceeded, "I see you have the Household Edition of the great master's

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works." I pointed at the bookcase beside the door, where a row of green spines with gold lettering took pride of place on the top shelf.

"Indeed I have," said Mr. Munro with a happy face. "I like to read to the family, and Rosalind is very keen on the pictures. They're all new ones, by our finest modern illustrators."

'Are they really?"

"Oh yes. An asset, I always say. A true asset." Getting up from his chair, he waddled towards the bookcase and took out one of the fatter volumes.

Before he had even handed it over to me, I knew what the title was: *Bleak House*. Neither was I wholly surprised when, leafing through the book, I found a small, pink piece of paper stuck bookmark-fashion between the pages, right at the illustration that showed Lady Dedlock sunk in anguish to her knees, her hands to her head, and her contorted mouth exclaiming, as the caption underneath revealed, "O my child, O my child!"

For a moment I sat staring at the plate, admiring its artistry, expressing as it did such utter, lonely despair—and recalling, too, the occasion when Roz, in her despair, had cried out those very same words. I'm afraid I even sunk into a little reverie about the luscious outline which her body had presented beneath her gown that night, alarming though the exposure had been to me at the time.

But then, all at once, I heard Mr. Munro, who was still standing beside me, mutter in a reflective voice, "Well of course . . . . Why didn't I think of that before? It is because she's curious about her mother!"

I looked up. "Her mother?"

He jerked upright, flushed. "Well, yes, er . . . " he faltered. "The picture, you see. It's her favourite, and I always thought . . . ." Now he was shuffling his feet, his fingers fumbling one of the buttons on his waistcoat. "Seeing that Rosalind is adopted . . . . Although I'm not sure if you . . . . And, as one might expect, she sometimes does wonder . . . . But perhaps I shouldn't . . . ." At last he fell silent, extending his hand for me to return the book. Closing it carefully—very carefully, keeping the pink piece of paper perfectly in place—he carried it to the shelf again and put it back in the row. With a furtive glance at the door, he told me, "My wife doesn't like to be reminded; I'd rather you didn't mention anything to her." To round off, in a much firmer voice, "The light of my life she is, Rosalind. The best that

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ever happened to me." And no sooner had he finished speaking than the door opened, and the light of his life bustled in.

On our way to Hampstead (we'd been assigned a brougham this time), I reflected that Cedric was right, with his "mammoth importance of detail": as had just been divulged to me, Roz was not the mother, but the child. Needless to say, I speculated a great deal on the detail of the missing parent. I recalled what Roz had once said about Lady Althane not being her real aunt—what if she was, I asked myself, her mother? But no, they were too different; and Lady Althane, being such a "stickler for responsibility", would, if she had had a child, surely have raised it herself. But had she at all been married at the time of Roz's birth? For someone of her rank and station to have an illegitimate daughter would have created a serious scandal; and she may have decided to give the child away. Or maybe—that was another possibility—Lady Althane had acted as some sort of go-between in the adoption; maybe Roz's real mother was dead. —Or Lady Althane had nothing to do with the whole affair, it suddenly occurred to me, and the Munros had simply picked up the baby from some orphanage themselves.

Of course, I did not share any of these thoughts with Roz: Mr. Munro had clearly made an inadvertent slip. Also, I would hate to spoil the day by dragging up subjects that might be distressing to her. Last but not least, my own relief at what I had recently learned from Cedric was still too great to let the mood turn grave. On the Heath, Roz laughed at the sight of a little boy who was performing a capricious ice dance on one of the lakes, hopping away on his skates as if doing the hornpipe. His pranks reminded her of Tristram, she said; and for once, such a remark did not make me frown. I could laugh with her now: after all, Tristram was almost as dear to me as to her, just because he was Tristram, and just because Tristram was so much fun.

Roz also proved herself right in other matters: her preference for the Heath over the Park, for instance. Standing on Parliament Hill, we looked back at London, but my intention to point out to her that, from this spot, one might be able to see her parental home was frustrated by the thick fog that had formed overnight. To be frank, London looked a right swamp, a swirling mass of smoke, the occasional whiff of wind giving off a filthy smell, as if the Great Stink, which my father had told me such horror stories

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about, had never ended. Indeed, I was glad we had come here: my headache of the previous evening, which had only grown worse in the fumes of the theatre lights, had completely cleared.

The biggest advantage of all, though: today there was more room for conversation, the words between us flowing as easily and effortlessly as the blood in our veins. In fact, the only minus of the moment was our chaperone, in the mild form of a footman called Johnny. (Evidently, the Munros didn't consider me a possible suitor, probably because my prospects were so poor—and this smarted a little.) Every time we halted, Johnny's dark shape remained dithering behind us, as if he were a piece of the fog down below clinging to our heels. The other thing that slightly irked me were the openly approving looks that I saw male passers-by throw at Roz's full figure, although it made me proud too, to be walking here with such a pretty girl on my arm. (Yet that boy! We ought to have had at least a married cousin to guard the maiden's honour and honesty. There again, a more substantial third party would not have allowed me to talk so freely with her. Oh well.)

Towards tea-time, we went into the village for a rest. Roz suggested a certain public house where she and Cedric always went for "chips and chops". "Cedric says the beer is first-rate," she added as an extra incentive. Cedric and beer? Chips and chops? Yet I was careful not to repeat the lesson in fine taste of the previous day, and replied that it sounded great, which, to my surprise, it turned out to be. The food was good, it was nice and warm inside, and thankfully, we were given our own booth, Johnny the servant retreating to the bar at the front. For a while, the only sounds to be heard were those made by knife and fork, for our walk had given Roz a ravenous appetite. Having taken her fill, she heaved a contented sigh and leaned back in her seat, giving me that mischievous smile of hers, as if she were a child who had secretly eaten the whole birthday cake, but was sure that I wouldn't betray her crime to the cook.

Suddenly, though, her expression turned serious, and in a tentative voice, as if a little scared, she began, "Mr. Holland, Cedric said there'd been a misunderstanding, and I . . . ." She hesitated. But then she nodded to herself, sat up straight and resumed, "I know you were a bit angry with me last summer, and Cedric said it was because of a misunderstanding."

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Her frankness—so characteristic of her, but no less unnerving for that—left me at a loss for a second as to how to reply. In the end I tried,

"That is correct, yes."

"But it is all cleared up now?"

"It is." Seeing her bite her lip (not entirely reassured), I appended, "I do regret my behaviour, Miss Munro. I'm afraid I've been very unkind."

"No, no," she spoke hastily. "You couldn't help it. If one has been falsely informed, it only follows that one draws false conclusions. I completely understand, really. I'm sure it was no fault of yours."

She was so eager to forgive me, so grateful for the apology, it was quite painful to see. And the way she looked at me: encouraging, soothing . . . . I felt embarrassed.

Before she could try and console me even more, I changed the subject, remarking on the dress she was wearing, and how well it suited her hair.

"Thank you," she said. "The Viscount liked it as well."

"The Viscount?"

She gave a quick nod. "Lord Goodfellow. You remember him: from the ball. I saw him last month, at the opening of Lady Althane's new High School for Women. And, well, at the tea-party afterwards, he told me that, whenever there was a special occasion, I should wear this dress."

"Did he now?" I wrinkled my brow. It seemed somewhat inappropriate for a middle-aged man to give such advice to a girl. But then I heard what she'd been trying to tell me, and I grinned, pleased with the compliment.

"It *is* a special occasion," I returned, "very special indeed."

Roz smiled back at me, a bit naughtily, and I remember feeling surprised how easy, how simple it was for a concern to turn into a comfort.

And it should be simple. Just sitting here, snug in our own private space, biscuits and cheese on the table (or rather cheese: Roz had eaten all the biscuits), our cheeks aglow after the cold outside, the candles throwing their smooth shine over Roz's pretty face and her soft, bare throat. We ordered coffee, some fruit, sipping quietly, eating slowly, reluctant to call the day to an end. And then we just sat gazing at each other gleefully, letting the coffee grow cold and the fruit go warm.

Only when the first candle had died out were we interrupted by Johnny, who had come to declare that, pardon, Miss, but it had grown quite dark, and the Master had explicitly told him . . . .

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Back in the brougham, I felt the soft weight of Roz's body against my shoulder, my thigh, leaning ever so slightly, as if to confirm our newly recovered intimacy. And, as we passed Marble Arch, I decided that, after my visit to Cedric, I would not go to my mother and sister's after all, but return straight to the Hall. I knew that Roz would be coming as well, and I just couldn't bear the thought of Christmas without her, of missing the chance of seeing her again so soon.

My resolution made the parting easier, and when Roz had been whisked up and away by the private lift at the far corner, I only smiled to myself and, still smiling, began my walk to Thornton, whom I had agreed to meet for a drink. However, before leaving Thurloe Place, I looked up once more at the tall tower that was Lacy's.

Ten storeys. But maybe, if I worked hard . . . .

I turned and walked away.

Cambridge.

"Darling!" Cedric thrust his arms wide and, with an exultant air, he swept me into an embrace. As I saw over his shoulder, several fellow-passengers who had also alighted halted on their way to the station exit, their curiosity either aroused by the manner of his greeting, or by his coat. A full-length fur, it made Cedric look like a huge bushy ball, and the embrace a warm one indeed.

He let go of me only slowly, savouring the drama of the moment. The instant he released me, though, he became all busy and bustling, telling me the omnibus would leave in a minute—but no, we'd better take a hansom: he wanted to show me around; it would be more private too.

"So how were things with Roz?" he asked when we got into the cab.

"Well, I'm glad to say that the thorny issue has come up roses."

I had been practising this sentence in my mind, and perhaps I shouldn't have, for it didn't come out right. Yet Cedric did not seem to notice the awkward, stilted tone, only throwing me an endeared smile.

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"Ah, how lovely. And you blossoming again . . . . You look absolutely divine." In a quick rattle, he appended, "To tell you the truth, I already knew: Roz's letter preceded you by two trains. Dear oh dear, what a week. Only four days ago I received such amazing news from Justin. Good old Justin, so uplifting for the soul. If only I had known before. Still I think that, at some level, I always . . . ." Here, he interrupted himself. "Never mind, you'll get all the details later." And, tucking in my blanket, "Actually, Ralph's the only one kicking up a fuss. His male pride is injured, I guess."

"About what?"

"Can't tell you yet, dearest. Please bear with me: I'm just so happy." To add in the same breath, "God, do you look good. It's a vision."

He was very hopscotch, vague; however, at the time I merely ascribed it to his excitement at finally having me to himself. Just the way his monocle flickered in the low winter sun, his other eye glittering at me directly—and then he was patting my knee again: was I really comfortable enough? I did not even connect his remark about Ralph with what had happened in London. Not that I wanted to tell anyone about my meeting with the Captain: I still found it too embarrassing even to think back to it.

"You met the parents as well, I gather?" asked Cedric.

"I certainly did. Did you know Roz was adopted?"

"Oh yes. That's why . . . . Peterhouse to your left: oldest college in town. They have ghosts in the garden—we are *so* jealous."

I glanced aside: an iron gate flashed past. Turning back to Cedric, I resumed, "You might have told me it was Lacy's, though."

"But my sweet boy, I'm sure I mentioned it to you—many, many times." He broke off again; we were crossing the Cam. "Wave hello to my Queens', sweetheart: it is right there. You can also see the Mathematical Bridge. Whoops! It is gone. Don't worry, I'll show you later. I thought I'd first take you to King's, you see, and it's best approached from the Backs. We can walk from here." He tapped the roof with his cane. Having paid the driver, and arranged for my luggage to be dropped off at the college porter's, he announced, "You'll like the Chapel, it has a fabulous roof. Took them over two centuries to complete, but by Jove, it's been worth it."

It *had* been worth it, all of it. Of course, we had beautiful buildings in Oxford too, many so, but . . . . Or it was just Cedric himself. Once he focussed on his task as a guide, he calmed down considerably, the story-

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teller in him coming out in its full glory. He told me about the past of the place, about the many people who had studied and worked here, the often strange tales of their lives. And not just the colleges, but also other details: the contrast in wealth between Town and Gown, how Dick Turpin had used one of the local pubs as a hide-out, and about the vapours from the fens that settled over the city at night, carrying, according to legend, soul-sucking spirits in their wake. The only moment that he veered off track again was when we ran into an acquaintance of his, and Cedric, in full hand-flapping mode, insisted on introducing me as, "Jahn Hahlland, the mahst hahndsome mahn in the cahntry, hahre to vahsit me pahrsonally."

After four hours of wandering around—small, flat Cambridge growing ever larger and deeper—he finally led me to his Queens', whose Old Court exuded a tranquil medieval charm that I found altogether mesmerising. Indeed, towards sunset, I felt I was wholly converted to "the other place".

*

We were in Grantchester, in a pub called the Green Man. I had just finished my third glass of water; Cedric was taking little sips of the cognac he had ordered, his eyes travelling hesitantly over my face and, every time they met mine, flicking promptly aside again.

I did not remember much of the night before, only that I'd met some of his friends (queer folk, to say the least), and had had far too much to drink. I had woken up in Cedric's bed, Cedric himself sitting in a chair by my side, regarding me with a motherly smile. Seeing me grimace as I lifted my head from the pillow, he started fussing about with cool cloths and coffee, but to no avail. (Flashes of the night kept breaking in: I was sure I had done something bad, and I'd also swallowed some white substance—which I shouldn't have. More worrying still were the big gaps in between. For instance, who had undressed me? I must have been too intoxicated to do it myself. But no, best not to think of it; first concentrate on my rebirth.)

When, curiously enough, even Cedric's personal touch brought no solace—the only response he was getting a series of moans and groans— he suggested trying to restore me with some exercise and air. It was a shame that it was winter, he said, or we could have punted up the river. Cycling wasn't an option either, as Cedric's overweight had caused three bikes to

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collapse already. And so we had gone walking through the meadows, all the way to this little village, arriving at one of the few pubs from which Cedric, as he confessed to me, had not yet been banned.

Seeing me light a cigarette and lean back in my chair (I was starting to feel slightly alive again), Cedric lowered his glass, in the manner of someone who'd been looking for an opening and now spotted the chink.

"How's *The Rule of Kings* coming along?" he inquired in a casual tone.

I blew some smoke towards the window. "Quite well. It's different than I expected, and maybe I would have taken a more conventional approach myself, still I think it'll make interesting reading."

Cedric nodded slowly. "Of course," he remarked, "you do realise he makes most of it up."

"Well, Sir Sidney likes to speculate on the facts."

"Hm. A bit more than that." He gazed pensively at his cognac, swirling the velvety liquid round in the glass until a small vortex appeared at its centre. All at once, though, he brought the glass to a standstill again, and asked, "My dear, have you never wondered about his sources, of which there's often only one extant copy? And why it is that the Sutton Hall library contains so many of those unique documents?"

"Huh?" But the moment I voiced my surprise, in this less than articulate fashion, I knew. There had always been one word that bothered me—one word. It was why I had so much wanted to see the original; I thought that perhaps Sir Sidney had mistranslated, or it had been some aberrant usage of Malory's. But if . . . .

Oh, I was wide-awake now. "Cedric," I demanded sharply, "where is the manuscript of *The Knight of the Yellow Lands*?"

He flinched, blinked, blushed. Then, glancing shyly away, he decided to settle for a quick, conciliatory shrug, and he mumbled,

"Never you worry, love. It is there all right."

"In a safe place . . . . Would that be your father's mind?"

"Really, I do assure you, it's all written down, in proper ancient English: matching script and all." Putting down the cognac, and at last meeting my gaze, he gushed out, "Look, John, it's still a brilliant story. As you must know from your own studies, most *chansons de geste* are total bores. They're often badly written, horrors of construction, or only give a rehash of what's been done before. And if my father felt he could improve on that, I say:

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good for him. At least now, when reading his *Book of Medieval Romance*, you get a truly wonderful experience. He has distilled the very essence of the genre, in its purest, its most polished form. They did nothing but copy in the Middle Ages, you know; invention was considered suspect. And, well, in a way, that's exactly what he has done. He's made an imitation, and masterly so."

I shook my head, not wanting to hear more. To be honest, I felt wounded, actually wounded to know that *The Knight of the Yellow Lands* was not a true story (or at least a real one, an original, a first—whatever). Yet I should have known: of course. "*Thys is the Holie Grayle. Thysse is a Joke.*" Let's make a treasure map, give them a quest, an imaginary country to explore. The meaning of life, Mr. Holland: room for doubt.

Strange as it may seem, with respect to *The Rule of Kings*, I felt less of a loss. Sir Sidney often said that people attached too much value to facts and, deep down, I had always known that all he wanted with his book was to give his own personal view of history. If he had invented certain evidence to corroborate that view because this was, after all, what people wanted to see and hear—so be it. It didn't make his studied subject any less solid, the way Lady Althane's paintings, for all their haziness and blur, still had a firm basis in reality. In fact (in fact!), I often suspected that, in his quirky, spiralling way, Sir Sidney didn't deviate that far at all from the truth, if only because he was such an intelligent and imaginative thinker. For sure, imagination, creativity: the way Tristram conveyed his feelings by means of stories, and the Reverend tried to give you the religious experience with his tales from the Bible. But hang on, wait a minute: what about standards of veracity? Honour and honesty? God didn't exist, did he? Oh my dear Lord, I thought, I'm an accessory to fraud.

I have to say, I found it hard to forgive Cedric for springing the big secret on me so suddenly, although perhaps I should have been grateful; the whole idea behind telling me had probably been to alert me to the double-edged sword I now saw hanging so low over my head. He felt bad about it, getting truly worried when I wouldn't let him take my arm any more on the way back, and practically begging me to come with him to the Hall for Christmas. It was always so jolly, he said, with the decorations, the big meal; we could play chess, go riding together.

But I only told him that I had to go to St. Albans. I really must go.

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Back and Forth: St. Albans and Norwich.

I had to go to St. Albans because Thornton had made me change my plans back again. I'd had another scolding from him—well, to be honest, we had a complete row.

This time it was about money. My opera outing with Roz had been expensive, and because I wanted to buy Christmas presents for her and Tristram, I asked Thornton, whom I saw the next day, if he could lend me a few quid.

And on the instant he exploded. First I got a harangue about how it would kill my mother and sister if I wasn't there on Christmas Eve, and that I had postponed my visit too often already, hardly ever writing, never even inquiring how they were . . . . When all at once his eyes narrowed to focus on the money. What had happened to the previous loan he'd given me? And my salary: Sir Sidney paid me in advance, didn't he? I was even given bed and board: so where had those 300 pounds—no, 360, if he included the loan of January—where on earth had all that money gone?

When, in all stupid obedience, I began recounting my different outlays (rent of the cottage in St. Albans, upkeep of my family, private expenses), Thornton shook his head. There was still money missing, he said. Taking a pen and a sheet of paper, he told me to sit down and give him a full list of the specifics; surely there must be money leaking away somewhere. Stupidly again, I obeyed a second time, feeling actually quite pleased with myself when I found that I could perfectly recall all of the sums I had seen pass by on bills over the past twelve months.

However, if I felt buoyed up by the specifics (everything accounted for, except for the margin I had left, which I had labelled *Odds & Ends*), Thornton only grew pale. Adding up the different amounts, he cried,

"You spent 75 pounds on books? And 130 on clothes? On clothes alone?"

"Well, I don't want to look like some pauper," I explained. "And I needed new spectacles, for the ball."

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"New spectacles for the ball," he repeated in a tone of stunned disbelief. "Good God." He grabbed hold of his beard (from the depths of which I heard the words "spectacles for the ball" echo on, and on—until Thornton put an end to it by clasping his lips together). Then he lowered his hand and said in a tired-sounding voice, "At least you didn't spend it on wine and women."

I remained very silent at this point, but reflected that, now I came to think of it, my London girl was rather dear. It was just that good looks and cleanliness didn't come cheap; I didn't want to catch some scary disease.

—Or perhaps I already had a disease, a bug I just couldn't shed. For the thing was, I still thought that money made the man. Until a few years ago, I had always been in the money, rolling in money, and money had always been rolling in. My life had been made of money; and even now that the roles were reversed, and it was I who had to make the money, I still believed that money should roll and should be making me. The moment I got my hands on money, I strew money about for all to see what a moneyed fellow I was. Anything, anything, as long as people wouldn't think me a pauper.

Back then, though, I was less self-critical. As I told Thornton, it was my money and I could do with it as I liked. I was part of an upper-class household: did he really expect me to go about in sackcloth? Also, he had no right to patronise me like this. I was a grown man; what made him think he could talk down to me as if he were twenty years my senior?

I went on in this manner for over five minutes, until it hit me that I was stamping my foot like, indeed, a child. Sinking down in my chair, feeling suddenly deflated, I asked, "Robert, why aren't we friends any more?"

Letting out a short cough, Thornton gazed at his feet. He hadn't let himself be ruffled by my outburst—meeting it with more equanimity than I would have liked—yet this question almost seemed to embarrass him. Finally he answered, "Well, maybe I don't want to be your friend—or not just a friend." He coughed again. "You see, I had hoped that, one day, I could call you my brother-in-law."

"Excuse me?"

A blush crept over his face. "Theresa."

For a second I thought I had misunderstood; then I spluttered,

"Theresa? But . . . but she's not at all nice!"

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"And in this, too, I disagree with you," said Thornton. In a somewhat steadier voice, he went on, "Don't worry, we're not engaged; so far we've never really spoken about the matter. Which is just as well, as I don't think I earn enough yet to marry a highly brought-up girl like Theresa. I need to improve my position first."

His position . . . .

"Is this why you've done so much for me?" I asked suspiciously. "So that you wouldn't have a tramp for a brother-in-law?"

The reply was immediate. "No: it's why I've done so much for your family." He added, "And if you don't go and see them at Christmas, you'll never be my friend again."

*

We had goose for Christmas—paid for by Thornton. He had wanted to donate a turkey, but my mother had refused, saying it was too expensive.

Too expensive by far, I thought gloomily. Notwithstanding my mother's joy at seeing me again (she kept ruffling my hair, so glad to have me with her after all this time), I had felt depressed from the moment I'd set foot in one of the smallest cottages I had ever seen from the inside. My mother's hands depressed me. They had always been so white and smooth, but now they were red and raw with all the work she had done to get everything ship-shape for the festivities. I had been shocked to hear that she'd had to let go of the cook, the housemaid (prices were going up so, she explained, and Theresa had wanted a new dress), having to make do with a girl-of-all-work for just one day a week, who helped out with the scrubbing and the laundry. She, who had once commanded a staff of over forty, sitting here, with these red and raw hands, in this dark, cramped, cold room, and saying how nice it was, how nice to be together at last.

To me, however, it was far from nice. I wished I had gone to Sutton Hall after all: at least there was comfort. I didn't even smile when I found the silver piece in my pudding and my mother said it must mean I'd become a famous author. Theresa got the ring, and remarked that it was a shame Mr. Thornton hadn't stayed for dinner. I loathed her for it, as I loathed her for her refusal to cooperate. I had asked my mother if Theresa couldn't do any housework, but she had said, no: Theresa wasn't used to toil, she'd been

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brought up to be a lady. Herself, she had started out in a humble home, but for my sister it was different. And so Theresa played the lady while my mother slaved for her, her hands getting red and raw, and her best frock no longer even a good frock, but showing alarming signs of wear.

Oh yes, it would be very hard to give up my job now. It would be very hard to put my foot down. Because I needed money more than ever. I needed it for Roz, and for my family. In fact, I urgently needed some help.

*

"I'm here on behalf of my mother," I began. And then I fell silent.

It was the room, perhaps, so bright and opulent after the dull furniture and bare walls in St. Albans. It was the rich blend of the tea, and the choice chocolate cake. It was Uncle Joseph himself, sitting there in his perfectly fitted coat, the solid gold albert tracing a grand curve over his prosperous belly. It was the honest joy he had displayed when he saw me come in, the delight he'd expressed that I looked so well, quite the gentleman again. And it was his friendly patience with my struggling so to spit it out.

"Sir," I tried again, "my mother is finding it very hard to cope. She . . . ."

Uncle Joseph raised his hand. "Say no more, sir: the offer still stands. For certain, I shall be grateful if you let me provide my dear niece and sister-in-law with a new home and perhaps also an allowance, so that they can live as the ladies of standing they are. Would you . . . ?"

He raised his eyebrows at me, so good-humouredly, so kindly.

"Very well," I said at last. And what a tiny voice I had.

"Ah, but that is wonderful! That is truly splendid. Most generous of you, my boy. Your aunt will be so pleased. She's been hoping for this ever since your poor father's death, you know: she'd really enjoy the company. Thank you for being so obliging, thank you so very much. We are most indebted." And, all cordiality, all pleasantness, he shook my hand.

Indeed, as it struck me on my way back to the station, he was so forthcoming that he hadn't even told me the story of how he had invented the first British tin-opener.

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Kent.

When I arrived in Tunbridge Wells, I was surprised to see the Reverend waiting for me on the platform.

It was not a pleasant surprise—and not a good sign.

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