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Opening extract from

Cuckoo in the Nest

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Overture

'NO SUICIDES THIS WEEK,' AUNTY WIN ANNOUNCED, LAYING THE newspaper flat on the kitchen table.

Elsie sat with her small bony elbows on the table, picking her nose. 'Any murders?' she asked.

'Elsie, you know what I've said about doin' that. One day your brains will fall out.'

Elsie removed her finger.

'Wouldn't be able to tell the difference anyway,' scoffed Harry.

'You can talk,' cried Elsie, swinging round. 'The only reason you're in Mr Woods' class is because Miss Ferguson couldn't bear to have you for three years.'

He grinned in good humour and gave a careless shrug. 'I don't care.'

'Oooooh, Ellen, listen to this,' Win exclaimed.

Elsie and Harry's mother lifted up her head from the ironing and gave her sister a tired smile.

'Next Wednesday at St Andrew's Parish Hall there's a demonstration of electric cooking. It's at 3 p.m. You ought to go.'

'There's nothin' wrong with that range,' said Ellen.

Joan looked up from the film magazine she was reading. 'There's nothing right with it, you mean.'

'It's keepin' us warm.'

'Mum, can we have the wireless on?' interrupted Harry.

'You've already had *Dick Barton*.'

'I know but . . .'

'After supper.'

'I don't see why we can't eat ours before John and Ralph get home,' said Win with meaning.

'We spent enough time apart in the war,' said Ellen. 'We're all eating together.'

'All getting indigestion together,' muttered Win.

'What do you mean?'

'You can cut the atmosphere with a knife, when those two come in. It's a wonder they don't kill each other on the way.'

'Oh, go on, Win, give 'em a chance. It's not easy for either of them. John's missing his mates and his unit, and Ralph is missing his school pals.'

'I'm missing my friends too. He ain't the only person in the universe what's got demobbed. I'm finding civvy street hard as well. I was treated with a bit of respect in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. Now I have to put up with some chit of a girl who can't be more than seventeen criticising the way I serve a customer or the way I organise cardigans on a shelf.'

Elsie and Harry gave each other a glance. 'We've all got our crosses to bear,' they mouthed as their aunt gave voice to it.

'Just because someone's seventeen don't make them stupid, you know,' protested Joan.

Winifred gave a sigh. 'I weren't casting no aspersions to you.'

'I've been working three years,' Joan pointed out. 'Longer than Ralph. But you treat him with more respect just because he's got a posh accent.'

'Oh, no I don't,' said her aunt. 'I treat no man with respect.'

'There you are,' said Joan. 'You called him a man, and he's only sixteen. But that seventeen-year-old, that one you called a . . . a . . .'

'Chit?' put in Elsie.

'Yeah, that's right,' agreed Joan.

'Are you sure it was chit?' added Harry.

'Yeah,' said Joan. 'Don't interrupt.'

'I thought she said something else,' said Harry grinning.

'Harry!' said his mother in a warning tone.

Elsie and Harry began giggling uncontrollably.

'Oh, none of you take me seriously. You never listen to me, ever.'

'I didn't mean to call him a man. It was a slip of the tongue,' said Winifred flicking through the newspaper. 'Oh listen, there is a murder, right here on page three. Huh! Another bigamist.'

'Does that mean he's got a big Mrs?' asked Elsie. She and her brother collapsed into laughter again.

'Don't be cheeky to your aunt,' said Ellen.

'It's hunger,' choked Harry. 'It's making me go off me 'ead.' Ellen took the iron over to the range and swapped it for a hot one.

'Kay has an electric iron,' said Joan. 'Her kitchen is just like a film star's kitchen. It's even got a refrigerator and it's filled with so much food, she says, some days it's difficult to close the door.'

Ellen said nothing. She turned over the leg of the trousers she was ironing and proceeded to smooth a nice knife-edged crease on to them.

'If I'd been allowed to go out with Chuck, I might have been in a kitchen in America with a refrigerator.'

'With no family around you,' Ellen remarked.

'I'd have a new one, wouldn't I?'

'You was only fifteen,' she said firmly.

'The other girls were fifteen.'

'I promised your parents that if anythin' happened to you I'd make sure you and Kitty was all right.'

'Kitty's only three years older than me. You didn't stop her from going out with Frank and marrying him.'

'Kitty's a sensible girl.'

'And I'm not?'

'I didn't say that. But a spell in the ATS helped her grow up a bit faster, that's all. She's a bit more worldly wise than you are.'

'I've got a job which is more than she has.'

'Frank doesn't want her to work.'

'Couldn't we have the wireless on?' said Harry imploringly. 'Please.'

'Elsie's got to do her homework.'

'I've got all weekend,' said Elsie.

'If you keep leaving it all till Sunday night you won't keep up with the work. You don't want to risk being chucked out in your first term.'

'But Dad might come in.'

'That's why I told you to start earlier.'

'I wanted to hear *Dick Barton*.'

'You always want to hear *Dick Barton*.'

'He should be proud of havin' a daughter at a grammar school,' said Win. 'Any man worth his salt would be.'

'Win, please.'

'He's afraid she'll get all high and mighty like Ralph,' said Joan.

'He's not high and mighty.'

'He should stand up to his father,' said Win.

'His dad was lucky to get him work at the paper mill,' said Ellen wearily. 'It'll give him security for life.'

'So why did you go to all that trouble to let him stay at the grammar school?'

'You know why. Don't go on, Win.'

'To give him a better chance.' She rattled the newspaper with relish as if scoring a point. 'Of course, if John had been around he'd have stopped you, wouldn't he? The green-eyed monster, that's what it is.'

Harry stared at her as if she was mad. 'There ain't no green-eyed monsters 'ere. What you on about, Aunty Win?'

'Jealousy!' she said dramatically. 'That's what I'm on about.'

'That's enough, Win.'

Ellen put the iron back on the range and hung the trousers on a piece of string stretched across a wall above a makeshift bed in the corner.

Outside, the yard door gave a loud slam.

'It can't be that late, surely,' exclaimed Ellen. Busily she removed the sheet and blanket from the end of the table. 'For goodness' sake, Elsie,' she said urgently, picking up a small pair of

spectacles. 'Put these in your room, quick. If they get broken the school won't lend you another pair.'

'And you don't want her dad to see them,' said Win. She raised her newspaper to hide her face.

There was a resounding crash from the back door. 'They've had another row,' commented Harry.

'I can't hear voices,' said Elsie. 'I expect they're still not talking.'

The door of the scullery was flung open and a blast of cold air swept into the kitchen. Standing in the doorway like a bull about to charge, stood a square-built man in his thirties with thick black hair and a red face.

He glanced round the room. 'Where is he?' he yelled. 'Where is the little tyke?'

'Who?' said Ellen nervously.

'Who do you think? Ralph!'

'You've not had another misunderstanding, have you?' Ellen began.

'Misunderstanding!' he roared. 'Is he upstairs? I'll tan his ruddy hide.'

'Didn't you meet him after work?'

'If I had I wouldn't be looking for him, would I?'

'Well, he's not here. He must be still at the mill.'

'Oh no. He's not at the mill. That's one thing I know. That fancy education you wanted for him has got him the sack.'

'No!' said Ellen in disbelief.

'I told him to keep his trap shut till he could lose that hoity-toity accent of his. If he'd just knuckled under . . .'

'But Ralph's a worker. Even in his school holidays he did farm work.'

'Oh, he worked all right but he didn't mix, did he?'

Winifred lowered her newspaper. 'If he wasn't supposed to open his mouth, how was he supposed to talk to them? In dumb-show?'

'You keep out of this. It's none of your business.'

'Oh, yes it is. I'm family.'

'And I don't want her ending up with her nose in the air,' he said, suddenly pointing at Elsie. 'One sign of it and I'm having her out.'

Elsie jumped nervously. There was a sudden snap from under the table where her hands were hidden. She flushed and looked hurriedly at her mother.

'Oh, no, Elsie,' her mother whispered.

'What's that?' her father said sharply.

'Dad,' said Harry quickly, 'if Ralph's got the sack, his apprenticeship will be going, won't it?'

'So?'

'I could take it.'

'You've got to stay at school until you're fourteen,' said Ellen.

'I know but maybe Dad could persuade them to let me leave a couple of terms early, eh?'

'After today I'll be lucky to keep *my* job.'

'But I don't understand,' said Ellen. 'Why did they sack him?'

'In a nutshell, backchat, being over-qualified and reading.' He slumped down in the chair. 'I told him not to let on about that ruddy School Certificate.'

'How'd they find out?'

'He took a book with him to read in his dinner break, I ask you. Worse than that it was one of those ruddy theatre books. *French Without Beer* or something.'

'Tears,' said Elsie quietly.

'What?'

'*French Without Tears.* It's called a play.'

'Don't tell me what it's called, young lady.'

'She was only trying to help, love.'

'Anyway, the other boys was teasing him, but instead of shoving the book out of sight, he starts answering them back. So, one of the men snaps at him and says he can't read it. So your Ralph says, that's because bits are in French and he starts telling them what it means in English!'

'What's wrong with that?' asked Ellen bewildered.

'It was the ruddy foreman who was looking at the book. Ralph showed him up, didn't he? In front of the other apprentices, who then started calling Ralph a pansy.'

Ellen glanced quickly at Elsie and Harry. 'So what did he do?'

'Instead of socking them one, he turns to the foreman and says, "You don't seem to be able to keep your charges in order." In that posh voice of his.'

'I told you he was hoity-toity,' said Joan.

'That's what the foreman said. Anyway, they starts to take the piss out of the way he was talking. So Ralph apparently asks him what accent would be acceptable, and you know what he does?'

'He didn't hit him, did he?'

'Oh no, he only does every accent in the entire universe and then asks him if any of those will do?'

'And then?'

'He's handed his cards. And do you know what Ralph says? He says, "This must be one of the happiest days of my life." And he walks out!' He shook his head. 'Well, if he can't pay his way, he's not staying 'ere. There's boys who'd give their right arm to work in that mill. I had to eat a lot of humble pie to get him in. Especially him being so much older than the others. Ungrateful little so-and-so.'

'But where is he?' asked Ellen.

'Lying low upstairs probably.'

'We would've heard him coming in,' said Win. 'And we haven't.'

'How do I know you're not protecting him?'

'Why should I? He's as bad as you are.'

'Win, please,' said Ellen. 'You're only making things worse.'

John glared at his sister-in-law. 'You ought to be grateful you've got a home here.'

'So you keep reminding me.'

'John, don't,' said Ellen.

'And I'd like to remind you I pay my way. Even though you ain't

got no carpets,' she snapped, and she raised her newspaper again.

John pushed his way forcefully past the chairs and left the room. They listened to him stamping up the stairs yelling out, 'Ralph! Ralph!'

Immediately Ellen rushed over to Elsie. Elsie lifted the spectacles. One side-piece had snapped off the joint. 'The lens isn't broken,' said Ellen relieved. 'We can fix that with some plaster. Now put them in your satchel. Quick.'

Elsie had hardly put them in the bag hanging from her chair when the door swung open and her father entered, his arms full of books.

'What you doin' with them?' gasped Ellen.

'They'll keep us warm until he gets home.' He marched over to the range.

'No!' yelled Ellen. 'Some of them's presents from the rector and his son.'

He opened the range with the tongs and threw one book in.

'Stop it!' screamed Ellen, flinging herself in front of him.

'Get out of my way!' And he gave her a shove. She fell backwards and her head caught the corner of the table.

'Ellen!' he cried. He flung the books to the floor. 'Ellen. Are you all right?'

'That's what the Nazis did,' said Win.

He swung round. 'What you on about?'

'They burnt books.'

'You calling me a Nazi?'

'Actions speak louder than words.'

'I wish Ralph had stayed in Cornwall with that vicar,' muttered Joan miserably.

'Amen to that,' added Win. 'Males give you nothing but a headache.'

Elsie gazed anxiously at her mother. Her dad was helping her to her chair. 'I'm sorry, love,' he said. 'I've had a hell of a day.'

'And now we're all having a hell of a night,' commented Win.

'Can't you keep your mouth shut for a second, woman!' he shouted.

Ellen gazed helplessly at John and her sister. She rubbed her forehead briskly as if trying to rub away the pain.

'I know you all don't think much of Ralphie,' she said shakily, 'but I do. And he's family. And right now he's out on the street somewhere by his self.'

'On a Friday?' Win quipped. 'Don't be daft. He'll be heading where he usually goes on pay-night.'

'He wouldn't have the gall,' whispered his father. 'Not after being sacked.'

'I forgot it was Friday,' said Ellen relieved. 'That's all right then.'

'Oh, what's the ruddy use,' he snapped. 'I'm off.'

'Where you going?'

'To drown his sorrows,' said Win sarcastically.

'At least I'm welcome there.'

'John, you haven't eaten.'

'Forget it. I'm not hungry.' And he flung the door open into the scullery.

Ellen ran after him but the back door was already open and all she could see was the fog outside. 'John, please!' she yelled after him.

'Aunty Ellen,' complained Joan from the kitchen, 'it's freezin'.'

Ellen closed both doors and returned silently to the kitchen. No one spoke.

'I know what would cheer everyone up,' said Harry suddenly.

'What's that, love?' said his mother in a monotone.

'We could put the wireless on!'

Act One

November–December 1946

One

THE HUSH IN THE THEATRE WAS ELECTRIC. EVEN AS THE CURTAIN HIT THE stage there was still a dumb silence and then it was broken suddenly by great waves of applause. Looking down at the audience from the gallery, his hands smarting with the ferocity of his clapping, Ralph could see people hurriedly wiping away their tears. The curtain sprang up revealing the cast in their Victorian costumes, holding hands. There was only one man, Basil Duke. He had played Albert Feathers, the blackmailing scoundrel of a nephew.

From below Ralph could hear cheering. He applauded with even more vigour, yelling with them. It was one of the most magical moments in the Palace Theatre for months.

Elspeth Harding, who had played the murderess, Ellen Creed, stepped forward and the audience roared their appreciation. The woman in the box office had been right, thought Ralph. She did have star quality.

Basil Duke had star quality too. But of a different kind. He was the actor that Ralph most wanted to be like. He was totally different in each part he played, almost unrecognisable at times.

The actress, smiling with pleasure, indicated the cast and they all bowed again to tumultuous applause. She lifted her hand and gradually the auditorium grew quiet. 'Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of myself and the entire company,' she began in her deep husky voice, 'we thank you for the way you have received our play tonight.'

She was magnificent, thought Ralph, quite magnificent.

'Next week,' she announced, 'we are presenting a play by Terence Rattigan entitled *French Without Tears*. This charming, diverting and amusing romantic comedy is guaranteed to give an evening of pleasure in the theatre for all the family, so if you have enjoyed tonight, which I'm sure you have judging by the volume of your applause, do come again next week. We shall be here, same time, twice nightly, same place, same company in a variety of roles, so until then,' she continued, 'we all wish you goodnight and God bless.'

The Billy Dixon Trio in the pit began to play the introductory notes of 'God save the King' and four hundred and fifty seats slammed noisily back as everyone stood for the National Anthem.

As soon as it had finished the curtain came down and the theatre was buzzing with chatter. Down in the pit the three musicians had disappeared with their usual speed. Ralph stayed leaning over the railing, drinking in the red, cream and gilt of the Edwardian theatre, the nymphs and shepherdesses on the ceiling, the chandeliers, the endless rows of shabby red velvet-covered chairs. He was conscious that it might be his last Friday night here if he couldn't find a job.

'Seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,' he had heard the Reverend Collins saying in his head before the curtain rose, and he had made up his mind there and then to knock on one of those doors that night while he had some courage left.

He drew away from the railing and leapt up the steps to the swing doorway. Pausing for a moment he took a last glance back down to the stage now hidden by an immense red and gold curtain.

'One night,' he muttered with determination, 'one night I'll be playing here.' And he pushed the doors open and headed for the next flight of stairs.

Coming down into the foyer, the wide carpeted stairs were

jammed with people pushing their way out into the night. Regular Friday nighters were waving to each other over the heads of others. Drifting from the open doors and up the stairway was a pea-souper fog which was now swathing itself around them.

The commissionaire in his maroon uniform covered in tarnished gold braid was attempting to stand firm amongst the melee of pushing, chatting theatre-goers. Ralph nodded at him, thinking that after weeks of going to the theatre every Friday, the man would recognise him but he looked straight through him.

Ralph stood by the open door where some street lights still shone on the glass, and glanced at his reflection. Surveying his unruly coarse brown hair springing upwards from the short back and sides his father had forced him to have, he looked every inch a working class lad. He fiddled around with his scarf, attempting to make it look like a cravat but it looked like what it was, an ordinary khaki knitted scarf. He couldn't take it off because he didn't have a collar on his shirt. 'Mind over matter,' he muttered to himself.

He manoeuvred his way down the steps and turned round the corner, heading up through the fog in the street. He hesitated at the next corner, spat copiously into his hands and then smoothed back his hair with as much muster as he could. Then he buttoned up his jacket, tucked his scarf neatly in and prayed his hair wouldn't suddenly spring up again in Stan Laurel fashion.

He peered round the corner. The stage door was open. He threw his shoulders back and stood to his full height. Shaking with a mixture of excitement and nerves he made his way towards it. Above the stage door a bright light burned a sulphurous yellow in the fog. Ralph blinked. Laughter was coming from inside. He hovered. He didn't want to appear a stage-door johnny, neither did he want to appear a sinister figure in the mist.

He stepped back quickly. Three of the women who had been in *Ladies in Retirement* came stumbling out of the back door

laughing. He was about to slip in when he heard the familiar male tones of Basil Duke.

'No idea,' he heard him saying. 'I just hope it's a play set in the winter. If I have to wear summer clothes again in this weather!'

'I'm going to die next week,' said a young female voice.

'You've got your love to keep you warm,' sang Ralph's hero.

'My love will be as cold as me. At least he can wear a blazer during the performance. I'll have to keep a shawl in the wings.'

He heard an elderly voice saying goodnight.

''Night, Wilfred,' said Basil Duke.

''Night,' added a young female voice whom Ralph recognised as the maid's. And then they were in the doorway pulling their coats up against the cold and Ralph was aware of a strong smell of face powder.

'Oh my goodness, what a pea-souper!' the young actress exclaimed.

She had shoulder-length pitch black hair and was slim and lovely, Geraldine Maclaren.

To Ralph's surprise, Basil Duke was shorter than he appeared on stage. Peering at him through the mist, Ralph still couldn't decide whether he was in his twenties or thirties. He gazed at the actor's thick dark hair now slicked back so smoothly as to make Ralph sick with envy.

'I'll walk you home, darling,' Mr Duke said.

'No. Honestly. I'll be fine. I know the route with my eyes shut.'

He stared out at the fog. 'You won't have to shut them in this.'

'See you tomorrow morning then for the run.'

'And cuts,' he reminded her.

'Oh, don't. A run through and three shows! It's madness!'

'We'll survive,' he said cordially. 'We always do.'

To Ralph's amazement they gave each other a kiss. He felt embarrassed to see such intimacy at close quarters. As soon as they had gone he stepped, blinking, into the light.

An elderly man with a thick shock of white hair was sitting in

a wooden cubicle reading a newspaper and sipping tea from a large stained mug. Behind him were rows of tiny pigeonholes, with letters painted roughly beneath them. Door keys hung on hooks beside them on a board with numbers on it.

Ralph stood tongue-tied. The man raised his head and glared at him. 'I'm afraid they've all gone, sonny,' he remarked in the local Hertfordshire accent. 'You're too late, best come back tomorrer night. Early.'

'But I've been waiting outside for some time,' said Ralph.

'Oh?' The man smiled at him kindly. 'Too shy to ask, that it? Leave your autograph book here and I can ask the cast to sign it for you, so's you can pick it up later.'

'But I don't want autographs,' Ralph blurted out.

'Well, what do you want?' asked the man suddenly alert.

'A job. I mean, I want to work here.'

The man scrutinised his face and frowned. And then his eyes suddenly lit up. 'You want to sign up for the strike!'

'I don't think you quite understand,' Ralph said perplexed. 'I don't want to strike. I want to work.'

The man threw back his head and laughed. 'Set strike,' he said. 'Strike the set. Take it down.'

'Oh,' said Ralph, feeling a fool.

'They do it every Saturday night. But it's heavy work and long hours. They have to set up too. It can take well into Sunday. You'd best have a word with your parents first.'

'I'm seventeen!' Ralph exclaimed. 'Well, almost. I can decide for myself.'

The man leaned on both elbows and peered at him. 'Come closer, son.'

Ralph stood in front of his wooden shelf.

'You sure you want to be working backstage?'

'Yes of course,' said Ralph. 'I'll do anything.'

'You've a fine voice.'

'Have I?' said Ralph nonchalantly.

'You look more the actor type to me. You sure that's not what you really want to do?'

Ralph felt himself flush with pleasure. 'Eventually,' began Ralph.

'Ah. Look, I'll mention you to the master carpenter or stage director. Maybe they can find somethin' for you to do. Be here same time tomorrer night.'

'Thank you!'

'No promises, mind.'

'Of course not,' Ralph stammered.

'You're a bit on the small side,' he said as an afterthought.

'But I'm strong, I've done a lot of farm labouring in my time.'

'Then it'll be a piece of cake.'

Ralph backed out towards the doors. 'Good evening, then.'

'Night, sonny,' and he returned to his newspaper.

Outside, the fog was swirling more thickly. Ralph crossed the road and felt his way along the wall to the river where he had left his bicycle. It was leaning against a tree trunk a few hundred yards from the bridge, only the bridge had been obliterated. Swiftly he unpacked a pair of ankle boots from his saddle bag, removed his walking shoes, laced up his boots, crammed the shoes back in the saddle bag and put bicycle clips around the ankles of his trousers. He shoved his cap on and mounted the bike.

And then he stopped. The fog had encircled him completely. Even as he gazed out at the river it was disappearing before his eyes. He turned to look at the road but he could see nothing. He held his hand out in front of him and watched his fingers being enveloped in the strange green mist.

Standing there being rapidly swallowed up by the fog, he felt a moment of panic. He had a five mile ride home ahead of him and he would be lucky to make it to the end of the street. He took a deep breath to calm himself. The important thing was to stay put until he had found his bearings. He would have to find his way out of the town by sound. It would be too risky to go on the path by

the river in case he fell in and in any case he'd have more chance of seeing street lights if he went via the High Street.

From the sound of the river behind him he knew he should be facing the back of the theatre. He stretched out his hand to the left and to his relief found the wall. Using it as a guide he reached the end of the pavement.

The blur of lights from the stage door helped him across the road. As he drew nearer he heard Wilfred talking to someone. An elderly woman answered back. At first he thought it must be one of the actresses leaving late, but the woman sounded working class.

He guided himself along the side of the theatre. In the distance he saw a vague smudge of light high up. He was hoping it was a street lamp. As soon as he felt the pavement hit the road he knew he had reached the High Street. To his right were shops, a department store, two cinemas and a restaurant. To his left the road sloped downwards past more shops towards the railway station. He needed to reach the railway station and veer left to a bridge, past some bombed factories and on to the main road which would take him home. He raised his collar and dragged his bike towards the Rose and Crown. To his relief he heard the sound of men's voices, and glasses clinking, but he could still see nothing in the inky black smog.

It was going to be a long night.

Two

THERE WERE ONLY FIVE HABITABLE HOUSES LEFT IN THEIR STREET. THREE ON their side, two at either end opposite. The rest of the street was rubble. They were the lucky ones, his mother kept reminding everyone when they all started getting on each other's nerves when fighting for elbow room in the only warm room in the

house, the kitchen. Even as he stumbled over the rubble in the fog, he still couldn't tell if it was their street or not.

His feet hit a broken pipe sticking out of the ground. Near it was the wall of a house. He felt his way along it on to the next house. Relieved, he realised he was touching his own front door. He tried to open it in case someone, out of kindness, had left it unlocked but no such luck. Slowly he groped his way past the house next to it and climbed over the rubble to the lane which led to their backyards.

He closed the yard door quietly behind him and felt his way towards the coalshed. Gently he leaned his bike against it. He had hardly let go of it when there was a clatter as it collapsed into a heap. He froze and stared at the back of the house. No lights were switched on. He just hoped no one had heard. He propped the bike up again and felt his way along to the outside lavatory. After a quick visit he headed for the scullery door. His clothes felt damp from the fog and his head ached from squinting.

For one awful moment he thought the back door was locked too, but on the second try the door clicked reassuringly open. He stepped quickly in and gently closed it behind him. Even then the fog had managed to force its way inside. Traces of it were swirling round the room. In the dark he saw the copper in the corner glinting, the stone sink and wooden draining board and the mangle.

He dreaded going into the kitchen in case his father was sitting there waiting for him. He removed his bicycle clips, undid the laces of his boots and left them by the door. He turned the brass handle with painstaking slowness. Luckily the door didn't creak, and within seconds he could see by the faint light of the range grate, that his father lay immobile in his bed in a deep sleep.

He eased the door shut. There was a smell of hops in the room, and then he realised it was his father's beery breath. He edged his way carefully round the chairs on the opposite side of the room, past the dresser and towards the door which led into the narrow hall.

He was halfway up the stairs when they gave a loud creak. He remained motionless for a moment, and then carried on up to the small bedroom where he slept top to tail with Harry in a narrow bed. He slipped into the room, peeled off his sodden clothes and flung them over the rail at his end of the bed. He eased his pyjamas from under his pillow and put them on.

From the neck up he felt hot from suddenly being indoors again, but from the neck down he was chilled and clammy. He climbed gratefully into bed and was just stretching his feet down his side when he hit a tiny foot. There was a shuffling from the other side and two heads rose up.

'Elsie,' whispered Ralph. 'What are you doing here?'

'Joan was snoring so bad,' she yawned, 'she kept waking me.'

There was a creak on the landing outside. Elsie dived under the covers. The door opened. Ralph glanced nervously across the room. It was his mother. She moved hesitantly towards the bed. 'Ralphie?'

Ralph propped himself on to his elbow. 'I got caught in the fog.'

'Phone Uncle Ted's place next time. Then he can let me know.'

He nodded. 'I'm sorry if I worried you.'

'You're home now,' she said with relief and she turned to go.

'Mum,' he began, 'did Dad tell you?'

She stopped at the door and gave a nod. 'We'll talk about it in the morning. Now get some sleep. Night, love.'

'Goodnight, Mum.'

He sank back into the pillow and had just closed his eyes when urgent whispers made him look down the bed. His brother and sister's heads were raised again.

'Where you been?' asked Harry.

'Everywhere, I think,' whispered Ralph. 'It was a real pea-souper.'

'Dad burnt one of your books,' said Elsie.

'What!'

'Mum stopped him burning the rest,' said Harry.

'And Dad hit her,' added Elsie.

'He never,' said Harry. 'It was an accident.'

'Anyway,' said Elsie excitedly, 'you missed a row.'

'And *Dick Barton*.'

'But we remembered it for you. You know Snowy White had found where Dick Barton was holed up by the arch-evil . . .'

'Not now,' pleaded Ralph.

'But I might have forgotten it by the morning.'

'It is the morning. Now let me sleep. And Elsie?'

'Yeah.'

'Try not to kick. There are places on my anatomy which don't take to being kicked.'

Sounds of smothered giggling came from the other side. Ralph groaned. 'You're causing a draught,' he complained. 'Can't you laugh without moving?'

There was silence for a moment then a fresh outburst of laughter from the other side.

'I give up,' yawned Ralph. And fell asleep.

'Which one did he burn?' asked Ralph.

'Dunno, dear. You'll have to check them through.'

'Where are they?'

She glanced at Harry and Elsie who were poring over a comic. Elsie was holding her broken spectacles to the bridge of her nose and reading the captions to Harry. But he knew Elsie could eavesdrop and talk at the same time. 'I won't tell,' she said in midstream.

Ralph and his mother smiled quickly at one another.

'I've hidden them in a pile of washing in the scullery till he cools down.'

'Thanks.'

'What's in the scullery?' said Harry suddenly alert.

'Do you want to know what happens next?' interrupted Elsie.

'Yeah.'

His mother handed Ralph a plate of fried bread and dripping and a mug of tea. 'What are you going to do, then?' she asked. 'You can't go back to school, love. He won't hear of it.'

'I don't want to now. I'll find a job. I won't scrounge off you, don't worry.'

'It's not that.'

'You've done enough for me.'

She reddened. He loved it when she blushed. She looked pretty again.

'It was the rector,' she began embarrassed, 'he persuaded me.'

'I couldn't have done it without you, Mum.'

'Oh, go on. You worked hard for it. Now eat that up before it goes cold. I've got things to do.' And she disappeared into the scullery.

A newspaper was lying at the end of the table. He reached over for it and flipped it open at the job advertisements.

'No time like the present,' he said and he crunched his way through the fried bread. He was starving and the bread only whetted his appetite. He gulped down the hot tea.

'Mum,' he said casually, 'there might be a chance of a job just for tonight.'

She appeared in the doorway. 'Oh yeah? What kind of job?'

'Well, um,' he said slowly, 'every Saturday night at the Palace Theatre, they have to take down the set.'

'What's a set?' asked Elsie.

'Scenery, nosy parker.'

'Just wanted to know,' she said returning to the comic. 'Watch out, yer yellow-livered hombre!'

'Sometimes they need extra hands,' he continued hesitantly. 'I saw a man backstage there and he suggested I pop round after the show. He's going to put in a good word for me.'

'I see. But won't it be late?'

'Later than late, Mum. All night.'

She came into the kitchen and sat down beside him. 'I don't

know, love. I don't like to think of you out all night. And your dad . . . It was bad enough last night.'

'But I wouldn't be out. I'd be cycling back in daylight. I'd be even safer than coming back from the theatre on a Friday.'

'Talking of which,' she said biting her lip. 'I don't know if your father will let you go any longer. He's dead ashamed of you doing it.'

'He's ashamed of me breathing,' commented Ralph. 'He only has to see me and I make his blood boil. I only have to open my mouth and the steam starts coming out of his ears.'

Elsie began to giggle. He gazed affectionately at her. She was such an appreciative audience. She peered owlishly at him, her glasses juddering on her nose. Though eleven, she was so small and skinny she could pass for being nine. She grinned mischievously at him.

'How are you going to pay for a ticket?' asked his mother.

Ralph sighed. 'I don't know. And I must go. It's the one thing that keeps me from going insane.'

'What does insane mean?' said Harry suddenly interested.

'Barmy,' said Elsie.

'Mum, what about tonight?'

'He'll be that mad.'

'I don't mind him being mad with me, as long as you don't get hurt.' And he leaned over and touched the cut on her forehead. She blushed again.

'I slipped.'

'I don't want you "slipping" again,' said Ralph, not believing.

'He wouldn't hurt me for the world, Ralphie, honest. But it's difficult with your Auntie Win here and . . .' She stopped.

'She says males give you headaches,' said Harry.

Ralph laughed. 'I can believe it. Look, Mum, if I do this job, it'll mean I'll be out of the way part of the evening. That'll give him more time to cool down.'

'Not if he knows where you are.'

'I don't know what he thinks is going to happen to me. I'm not suddenly going to turn up for breakfast in silk pyjamas, a Chinese dressing-gown and a cigarette in a long cigarette holder, am I?'

'You try telling him that.'

'At least it'll show I'm trying to look for work.'

'That's true. But even if you did get it, what about the rest of the week?'

'I'll find something.'

She gave a nod. 'I better get a move on. If I don't queue up at the butcher's soon we'll have carrot stew again.' She picked up his empty mug and plate and left him to scour the paper.

Searching the advertisements, everybody seemed to want girls, either to be trained as nurses or child nurses or as maids or cooks. There were a few light engineering apprenticeships going but he would only come up against the same problem. Slowly he looked down the small ads again. His eye fell on the word 'Winford'. Another 'housemaid wanted' ad probably. 'Gardener and odd job,' he read out surprised. 'Youth wanted.'

The yard door gave a slam and was followed by the whirring sound of a bicycle chain. There was only one other person who had a bicycle. His father. 'Come on, Harry!' said Elsie, folding the comic and rising.

'What you doin'?' he protested.

'We need some fresh air.'

'You gone daft?'

'Out!' she ordered.

'Don't boss me!' he started.

'I ain't.'

'Yes you are.'

'I'll be Snowy White again.'

His eyes lit up. 'You're on.'

'Not that way,' she said grabbing his darned sleeve. 'We'll go out the front.'

'We ain't visitors,' he said. Just then they heard the sound of

hobnail boots stomping up the yard. 'Oh yeah, I get. Good idea, Elsie,' Harry stammered and he and Elsie fled out of the door.

A sick feeling crept into Ralph's mouth. He looked down quickly at the paper and read: Trained and untrained mental nurses and attendants. Male and female required. 'Now there's a possibility,' he murmured attempting to make himself laugh. He didn't think his father would find it amusing though.

The back door slammed.

'Is his lordship out of bed yet?' he heard his father demand.

'He didn't get back till this morning.'

'He shouldn't have been out. Ruddy pansy.'

'John. Don't say that.'

'Where is he, then?'

'In the kitchen. Looking for jobs in the newspaper.'

'He don't want work. He just wants to lay about reading pansy books.'

By now Ralph's fear had disappeared. Anger had replaced it. The door was flung open. His father attempted to tower in the doorway, his stocky frame stretched to its ultimate.

'This is between him and me, Ellen,' he said over his shoulder. 'No more hiding behind his mother's apron.'

Ralph rose furiously to his feet. His father slammed the door shut. 'Don't think you're too old for a hiding, lad.'

'Go on then. Hit me. But I'll hit you back.'

'You what? I could wipe the floor with a little toe-rag like you.'

'And that's what you'd like to do, isn't it? You've been dying for an excuse to do it ever since I came back home. So why don't you get on and do it?'

'That's a lie. I've gone out of my way to help you. I got you a job for life. Steady, stable, with one of the best companies around. Good hours, good pay and a pension scheme. But oh, no, that's not good enough for you, is it? Well, I wash my hands of you now. You're on your own. You find your own work.'

'I didn't resign, Dad. They fired me.'

'I know they fired you. For reading a pansy book.'

'No!'

'You answered back.'

'I answered, that's all. I forgot I was supposed to keep it secret I could speak French.'

'Don't give me that. You wanted to show off.'

'No. Funnily enough, this week was the first time in months that I started to feel more relaxed. That's why I was off guard.'

'Relaxed! You're there to work.'

'In the lunch break.'

'Dinner! We don't need your lah-di-dah names round here.'

'Dinner then,' he said exasperated. 'I tried to hedge round it, but in the end the foreman got it out of me, that I had School Cert.'

'Clever enough to get a ruddy book exam, but not clever enough to keep your trap shut.'

'I was shocked too, Dad. My work was as good as anyone's. I worked hard. They just had it in for me.'

'I wonder why,' he said sarcastically. 'You must think I was born yesterday. I heard what you said to him about it being the happiest day of your life.'

'He asked for it. He looked so smug when he gave me my cards. He said that the manager didn't think it fair that someone with my qualifications should take an apprenticeship away from someone who hadn't. And I'd only cause trouble later on when I got bored. He was delighted, Dad. That's why I said it to him.'

'You didn't have to dance around.'

'I had to, to make it convincing, otherwise he would have thought it was sour grapes. I wanted to make sure I rubbed that satisfied smirk off his face.'

'You did that all right. Everyone knows now that I've got a rotten apple for a son.'

'I'll find a job.'

'You'd better, because if you don't pay your keep, you don't eat

here. You don't sleep here. Joan's been paying her way for three years now. She ain't going to carry you, sonny. Neither am I or your Aunty Win. And I know that you've already spent part of your last pay on that pansy theatre of yours. That'll have to stop too.'

'If I work hard, I'm entitled to spend some of it on something I like, or is there one rule for everyone else in this house, and another for me?'

'Don't tell me what you're entitled to. You're entitled to nothing till I see you muck in like the rest of us. You've got away without bringing in a pay packet for two years! But not any longer. You bring in a pay packet and you can join us at the table. Otherwise you can stay in your room and read your precious books.'

'All but one!'

'Oh, yeah, you heard, did you? Well, you can thank your ma that I didn't tip the rest in.'

'Let's hope it wasn't a library book, Dad. If it was they'll be sending you a bill.'

'Oh, no, sonny. If it was a library book it'll be out in your name.'

'You'd let me pay for you damaging it!'

'You brought it into the house.'

'It was in my room.'

'In *my* house,' he pointed out. 'And I say what comes in 'ere and who comes in 'ere.'

'So why were you so keen to get me back from Cornwall? I was happy where I was.'

'Looks like I rescued you in time. You're working class, and don't forget it. Family is the most important thing in the world. You lose family, you lose everything. That's where your first loyalty is. So you can drop that accent.'

'Which working-class accent would you like me to speak, yours or Mum's?'

For a moment his father stared dumbstruck at him. 'Hertfordshire or London?' Ralph continued.

'I dunno!' he said angrily. 'Don't twist my words.' There was silence between them.

'I did try,' said Ralph eventually. 'I'm sorry.'

'So am I,' his father said bitterly.

'Look, I've seen a job advertised. I'll go and ring up about it now.'

'What is it?'

'Gardener and odd job.'

'Odd job! You wouldn't have a clue.'

'I can learn.'

'If you phone they won't even bother to see you. They want a local lad. Your voice will put them off.'

He was right. 'I'll put on an accent, just to get me an interview.'

His father grinned triumphantly. 'Which accent?' he said.

Touché, thought Ralph. He hated this man so much, yet he was annoyed that he couldn't bring himself to hurt him and say Hertfordshire. But if he said London to please him, he'd hurt his mother. And then he knew. 'Cornish,' he said simply.

Three

IT WAS A TOWERING GOTHIC-STYLE VICTORIAN HOUSE WITH ODD WINGS sticking out of it. A large ornate gate, wedged between high hedges, led to a wide path to the front porch. There was a small gate at the side to a tiny path which, Ralph presumed, led to the tradesman's entrance.

He opened it and wheeled his bike towards what appeared to be a dilapidated conservatory at the side. Peering in, he could make out bedraggled dead plants on shelves, and beyond, the kitchen door. Swiftly he sneaked past it to take a look at the back garden, and gulped. An enormous, unkempt lawn with waist-high grass sprawled past two sheds, trees and overgrown shrubs down

to the river. The owners didn't need a gardener, he thought, they needed a combine harvester.

At the back of the house was a large room with french windows in the centre and a bay window on either side. Outside it was a long veranda with a glass roof, covered in ivy which had reached there from ornate pillars supporting it. Stone steps covered in moss and weed led down from it to wide overgrown borders of what appeared to be mostly convolvulus.

He was returning to the kitchen door when a young man came flying out. He was about nineteen, taller than him, strong looking, muscular. Yet he couldn't seem to get out of the door fast enough. Ralph watched him fly down the path like a frightened rabbit. He stepped into the conservatory and peered in through the window. A skinny disgruntled woman in an apron was moving around a large kitchen. Ralph took his cap off and knocked on the door. The woman glanced round and opened it.

'Come for the gardener job?' she asked in the local dialect.

Ralph nodded. He decided not to talk unless it was absolutely necessary.

'The last victim,' she muttered.

Ralph indicated the direction the youth had fled, opened his mouth, remembered his code of silence and then closed it again.

'Yes,' said the woman. 'He's just been to see Mrs Egerton-Smythe. And I don't think he'll be coming back.'

A bell above the door rang. She gazed sorrowfully at him. 'You're wasting your time, lad. She'll 'ave you fer breakfast. If you want to leave now I can always say you didn't turn up.'

Ralph shook his head.

'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

They walked out into an oak-lined hallway, with a massive hallstand along the wall by the kitchen door. Ralph gave an appreciative whistle. The woman grunted. 'You don't have to polish these floors. I tell her, she should get linoleum. Linoleum is the thing now. Give it a quick swab down and bob's yer uncle.'

She led him to one of the doors. 'Knock,' she said, and then abandoned him.

Ralph knocked as hard as he could. 'Think nineteen,' he muttered to himself. 'Think mature.'

'Come in!' yelled an irritated voice from the other side.

Ralph swung open the door and found himself in what appeared to be a library. Glass cabinets with shelves of books stretched up to the ceiling. Two leather armchairs stood solidly on either side of the laid, but unlit fireplace.

A handsome middle-aged woman of medium build in a tweed suit and brogues was standing by a massive table in the centre of the room. Her chestnut hair was gripped untidily back from her face. She looked tired and angry. Ralph's first instinct was that she didn't belong in the room. She scowled at him as if challenging him. 'So you're Mr Hollis,' she snapped, looking him up and down. 'More like Master Hollis to me. Still I did say gardener's *boy*.'

She strode over to him. 'Bend your arm,' she commanded. He did so.

'Oh,' she said surprised. 'There is muscle there. The strong wiry type, eh? Seen the garden then? Had a quick pry before you came in?'

He nodded.

'Now I like *doers*, Master Hollis. I haven't the time nor the energy to check that people are *doing* what I ask. When someone says they'll do something, I expect them to *do* it. I've had enough of encouraging people to get on with it. Now Master Hollis, are you a *doer*?'

Ralph nodded again.

'Another silent type, eh? How wearisome.' She began marching up and down the carpet as if a thorn had found its way into her clothes and was sticking into her. 'Hollis! Hollis! Hollis!' she muttered. 'Doesn't sound very Cornish to me. Is it Cornish?'

Ralph shook his head.

She stared at him. 'Well!' She paused. 'Elucidate.'