

THE ABSOLUTIST

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TOMBLAND

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SEATED OPPOSITE ME in the railway carriage, the -elderly lady in the fox-fur shawl was recalling some of the murders that she had committed over the years.

'There was the vicar in Leeds,' she said, smiling a little as she tapped her lower lip with her index finger. 'And the spinster from Hartlepool whose tragic secret was to prove her undoing. The actress from London, of course, who took up with her -sister's -husband just after his return from the Crimea. She was a flighty piece so no one could blame me for that. But the maid-of-all-work in Connaught Square, I rather regretted killing her. She was a hard-working girl of good Northern stock, who perhaps didn't deserve such a brutal ending.'

'That was one of my favourites,' I replied. 'If you ask me, she got what was coming to her. She read letters that were not hers to read.'

'I know you, don't I?' she asked, sitting forward now, -narrowing her eyes as she examined my face for familiar signs. A sharp combination of lavender and face cream, her mouth viscous with blood-red lipstick. 'I've seen you somewhere before.'

'I work for Mr Pynton at the Whisby Press,' I told her. 'My name's Tristan Sadler. We met at a literary lunch a few months ago.' I extended my hand and she stared at it for a moment, as if unsure what was expected of her, before shaking it carefully, her -fingers never quite closing on my own. 'You gave a talk on untraceable poisons,' I added.

'Yes, I remember it now,' she said, nodding quickly. 'You had five books that wanted signing. I was struck by your -enthusiasm.'

I smiled, flattered that she recalled me at all. 'I'm a great admirer,' I said, and she inclined her head graciously, a movement that must have been honed over thirty years of receiving praise from her readers. 'As is Mr Pynton. He's talked several times about trying to lure you over to our house.'

'Yes, I know Pynton,' she replied with a shudder. 'Vile little man. Terrible halitosis. I wonder that you can bear to be near him. I can see why he employed you, though.'

I raised an eyebrow, confused, and she offered me a half-smile.

'Pynton likes to be surrounded by beautiful things,' she explained. 'You must have seen it in his taste for artwork and those ornate couches that look as though they belong in the Paris -atelier of some fashion designer. You remind me of his last -assistant, the scandalous one. But no, there's no chance, I'm afraid. I've been with my publisher for over thirty years and I'm perfectly happy where I am.'

She sat back, her expression turning to ice, and I knew that I had disgraced myself, turning what had been a pleasant exchange into a potential business transaction. I looked out of the window, em-barrassed. Glancing at my watch, I saw that we were running about an hour later than planned and now the train had stopped again without explanation.

'This is exactly why I never go up to town any more,' she declared abruptly as she struggled to open the window, for the carriage had begun to grow stuffy. 'You simply cannot rely on the railways to bring you home again.'

'Here, let me help you with that, missus,' said the young man who had been sitting next to her, speaking in whispered, -flirtatious tones to the girl next to me since we departed Liverpool Street. He stood and leaned forward, a breeze of -perspiration, and

gave the window a hefty pull. It opened with a jolt, allowing a rush of warm air and engine-steam to spill inside.

'My Bill's a dab hand with machinery,' said the young woman, giggling with pride.

'Leave it out, Margie,' he said, smiling only a little as he sat down.

'He fixed engines during the war, didn't you, Bill?'

'I said leave it out, Margie,' he repeated, colder now, and as he caught my eye we considered each other for a moment before looking away.

'It was just a window, dear,' sniffed the lady--novelist with impeccable timing.

It struck me how it had taken over an hour for our three -parties even to acknowledge each other's -presence. It reminded me of the story of the two Englishmen, left alone on a deserted island together for five years after a shipwreck, who never exchanged a single word of conversation as they had never been properly introduced.

Twenty minutes later, our train shifted into motion and we were on our way, finally arriving in Norwich more than an hour and a half behind schedule. The young couple dis-embarked first, a flurry of hysterical impatience and rush-me-to-our-room -giggles, and I helped the writer with her suitcase.

'You're very kind,' she remarked in a distracted fashion as she scanned the platform. 'My driver should be here somewhere to help me the rest of the way.'

'It was a pleasure to meet you,' I said, not trying for another handshake but offering an awkward nod of the head instead, as if she were the Queen and I a loyal subject. 'I hope I didn't em-barrass you earlier. I only meant that Mr Pynton wishes we had writers of your calibre on our list.'

She smiled at this – *I am relevant*, said her -expression, *I -matter* – and then she was gone, -uniformed driver in tow. But I remained where I was, surrounded by people rushing to and from their- -platforms, lost within their number, quite alone in the busy railway station.

I emerged from the great stone walls of Thorpe Station into an unexpectedly bright afternoon, and found that the street where my lodgings were located, Recorder Road, was only a short walk away. Upon arriving, however, I was disappointed to find that my room was not quite ready.

'Oh dear,' said the landlady, a thin woman with a pale, scratchy complexion. She was trembling, I noticed, although it was not cold, and wringing her hands nervously. She was tall, too. The type of woman who stands out in a crowd for her unexpected stature. 'I'm afraid we owe you an apology, Mr Sadler. We've been at sixes and sevens all day. I don't quite know how to explain what's happened.'

'I did write, Mrs Cantwell,' I said, trying to soften the note of irritation that was creeping into my tone. 'I said I would be here shortly after five. And it's gone six now.' I nodded in the direction of the grandfather clock that stood in the corner behind her desk. 'I don't mean to be awkward, but—'

'You're not being awkward at all, sir,' she replied quickly. 'The room should have been ready for you hours ago, only . . .' She trailed off and her forehead wrinkled into a series of deep grooves as she bit her lip and turned away; she seemed unable to look me in the eye. 'We had a bit of unpleasantness this morning, Mr Sadler, that's the truth of it. In your room. Or what was to be your room, that is. You probably won't want it now. I know I shouldn't. I don't know what I'll do with it, honestly I don't. It's not as if I can afford to leave it unlet.'

Her agitation was obvious, and despite my mind being more or less focused on my plans for the -following day, I was concerned for her and was about to ask whether there

was anything I could do to help when a door opened behind her and she spun around. A boy of about seventeen appeared, whom I took to be her son: he had a look of her around the eyes and mouth, although his complexion was worse, scarred as he was by the acne of his age. He stopped short, taking me in for a moment, before turning to his mother in -frustration.

'I told you to call me when the gentleman arrived, didn't I?' he said, glaring at her.

'But he's only just arrived this minute, David,' she protested.

'It's true,' I said, feeling a curious urge to jump to her defence. 'I did.'

'But you didn't call me,' he insisted to his mother. 'What have you told him, anyway?'

'I haven't told him anything yet,' she said, turning back to me with an expression that suggested she might cry if she was -bullied any longer. 'I didn't know what to say.'

'I do apologize, Mr Sadler,' he said, turning to me now with a complicit smile, as if to imply that he and I were of a type who understood that nothing would go right in the world if we did not take it out of the hands of women and look after it ourselves. 'I had hoped to be here to greet you myself. I asked Ma to tell me the moment you arrived. We expected you earlier, I think.'

'Yes,' I said, explaining about the unreliable train. 'But really, I am rather tired and hoped to go straight to my room.'

'Of course, sir,' he said, swallowing a little and -staring down at the reception desk as if his entire future were mapped out in the wood; here in the grain was the girl he would marry, here the children they would have, here the lifetime of bickering misery they would inflict upon each other. His mother touched him lightly on the arm and -whispered something in his ear, and he shook his head quickly and hissed at her to stay quiet. 'It's a mess, the whole thing,' he said, raising his voice -suddenly as he returned his -attention to me. 'You were to stay in number four, you see. But I'm afraid number four is indisposed right now.'

'Well, couldn't I stay in one of the other rooms, then?' I asked.

'Oh no, sir,' he replied, shaking his head. 'No, they're all taken, I'm afraid. You were down for number four. But it's not ready, that's the problem. If you could just give us a little extra time to prepare it.'

He stepped out from behind the desk now and I got a better look at him. Although he was only a few years younger than me, his appearance suggested a child play-acting as an adult. He wore a pair of man's trousers, a little too long for him, so rolled and pinned in the leg to compensate, and a shirt, tie and waistcoat combination that would not have seemed out of place on a much older man. The beginnings of a moustache were teased into a fearful line across his upper lip, and for a moment I -couldn't decide whether in fact it was a moustache at all or simply a dirty smudge overlooked by the morning's facecloth. Despite his attempts to look older, his youth and inexperience were obvious. He could not have been out there with the rest of us, of that I felt certain.

'David Cantwell,' he said after a moment, extending his hand towards me.

'It's not right, David,' said Mrs Cantwell, blushing furiously. 'The gentleman will have to stay somewhere else tonight.'

'And where is he to stay, then?' asked the boy, turning on her, his voice raised, a sense of injustice careering through his tone. 'You know everywhere's full up. So where should I send him, because I -certainly don't know. To Wilson's? Full! To Dempsey's? Full! To Rutherford's? Full! We have an obligation, Ma. We have an obligation to Mr Sadler and we must meet our obligations or else we disgrace ourselves, and hasn't there been enough of that for one day?'

I was startled by the suddenness of his aggression and had an idea of what life might

be like in the boarding house for this pair of mismatched souls. A boy and his mother, alone together since he was a child, for her husband, I decided, had been killed in an accident involving a threshing machine years before. The boy was too young to remember his father, of course, but worshipped him nevertheless and had never quite forgiven his mother for forcing the poor man out to work every hour that God sent. And then the war had come and he'd been too young to fight. He'd gone to enlist and they'd laughed at him. They'd called him a brave boy and told him to come back in a few years' time when he had some hair on his chest, if the godforsaken thing wasn't over already, and they'd see about him then. And he'd marched back to his mother and despised her for the relief on her face when he told her that he was going nowhere, not yet, anyway.

Even then, I would imagine scenarios like this all the time, searching in the undergrowth of my plots for tangled circumstances.

'Mr Sadler, you'll have to forgive my son,' said Mrs Cantwell, leaning forward now, her hands pressed flat against the desk. 'He is rather excitable, as you can see.'

'It's got nothing to do with that, Ma,' insisted David. 'We have an obligation,' he repeated.

'And we would like to fulfil our obligations, of course, but—'

I missed the end of her speech, for young David had taken me by the crook of the elbow, the intimacy of the gesture surprising me, and I pulled away from him as he bit his lip, looking around nervously before speaking in a hushed voice.

'Mr Sadler,' he said, 'might I speak to you in private? I assure you this is not how I like to run things here. You must think very badly of us. But perhaps if we went into the drawing room? It's empty at the moment and—'

'Very well,' I said, placing my holdall on the floor in front of Mrs Cantwell's desk. 'You don't mind if I leave this here?' I asked, and she shook her head, swallowing, wringing those blessed hands of hers together once again and looking for all the world as if she would welcome a painful death at that very moment over any further discourse between us. I followed her son into the drawing room, partly curious as to the measure of concern that was on display, partly aggrieved by it. I was tired after my journey and filled with such conflicting emotions about my reasons for being in Norwich that I wanted nothing more than to go directly to my room, close the door behind me, and be left alone with my thoughts.

The truth was that I did not know whether I could even go through with my plans for the following day. I knew there were trains to London at ten past the hour, every second hour, starting at ten past six, so there were four I could take before the appointed hour of my meeting.

'What a mess,' said David Cantwell, whistling a little between his teeth as he closed the door behind us. 'And Ma doesn't make it any easier, does she, Mr Sadler?'

'Look, perhaps if you just explained the problem to me,' I said. 'I did send a postal order with my letter in order to reserve the room.'

'Of course you did, sir, of course you did,' he replied. 'I registered the booking myself. We were to put you in number four, you see. That was my decision. Number four is the quietest of our rooms and, while the mattress might be a little lumpy, the bed has a good spring to it and many of our clients remark that it's very comfortable indeed. I read your letter, sir, and took you for an army man. Was I right, sir?'

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded curtly. 'I was,' I told him. 'Not any more, of course. Not since it ended.'

'Did you see much action?' he asked, his eyes lighting up, and I could feel my patience beginning to wane.

'My room. Am I to have it or not?'

'Well, sir,' he said, disappointed by my reply. 'That's rather up to you.'

'How so?'

'Our girl, Mary, is up there at the moment, dis-infecting everything. She kicked up a stink about it, I don't mind telling you, but I told her that it's my name above the door, not hers, and she'll do what she's told if she wants to keep her position.'

'I thought it was your mother's name,' I said, -teasing him a little.

'Well, it's mine, too,' he snapped indignantly, his eyes bulging in their sockets as he glared at me. 'Anyway, it will be as good as new by the time she's done with it, I can promise you that. Ma didn't want to tell you anything, but since you're an army man—'

'An ex-army man,' I said, correcting him.

'Yes, sir. Well, I believe it would be disrespectful of me not to tell you what's gone on there and let you make up your own mind on the matter.'

I was intrigued now and a variety of possibilities came to mind. A murder, perhaps. A suicide. A straying husband caught by a private detective in the arms of another woman. Or something less -dramatic: an unquenched cigarette catching flame in a wastepaper basket. A guest absconding in the night without -settling his account due. More tangles. More wasteland.

'I'm happy to make up my mind,' I said, 'if only I—'

'He's stayed here before, of course,' said the boy, interrupting me, his voice growing more animated as he prepared to let me have it, warts and all. 'Mr Charters, that's his name. Edward Charters. A very respectable chap, I always thought. Works in a bank in London but has a mother somewhere out Ipswich way and goes to see her on occasion and usually comes into Norwich for a night or two before heading back to town. When he does he always stays here. We never had any problems with him, sir. A quiet gentleman, kept himself to himself. Well dressed. Always asked for number four because he knew how good the room was, and I was happy to oblige him. It's me who organizes the rooms, Mr Sadler, not Ma. She gets confused by the numbers and—'

'And this Mr Charters,' I said. 'He refused to vacate the room earlier?'

'No, sir,' said the boy, shaking his head.

'There was an accident of some sort, then? He was taken ill?'

'No, it was nothing like that, sir. We gave him a key, you see. In case he came back late. We give it to preferred clients. I allow it. It will be perfectly all right to give one to you, of course, what with you being ex-army. I wanted to join up myself, sir, only they wouldn't let me on account of—'

'Please,' I said, interrupting him. 'If we could just—'

'Yes, I'm sorry, sir. Only it's a little awkward, that's all. We're both men of the world, am I right, Mr Sadler? I can speak freely?'

I shrugged. I expected I was. I didn't know. Wasn't even sure what the phrase meant, if I was honest.

'The thing is, there was something of a com-motion early this morning,' he said, lowering his voice and leaning forward in a conspiratorial -fashion. 'Woke the whole bloody house up, it did. Excuse me, sir,' he said, shaking his head. 'It turned out that Mr Charters, who we thought was a quiet, decent gentleman, was anything but. He went out last night but didn't come home alone. And we have a rule about that sort of thing, of course.'

I couldn't help but smile. Such niceties! Was this what the last four years had been about? 'Is that all?' I asked, imagining a lonely man, kind to his mother in Ipswich, who had somehow found a little female companionship for the evening, perhaps

un-expectedly, and had allowed himself to be taken over by his baser instincts. It was hardly anything to get excited about, surely.

'Not quite all, sir,' said David. 'For Mr Charters's . . . companion, shall we say, was no better than a thief. Robbed him blind and when he protested held a knife to his throat and all hell broke loose. Ma woke up, I woke up, the other guests were out in the corridors in their night attire. We knocked on his door and when we opened it . . .' He looked as if he was unsure whether he should go on or not. 'We called the police, of course,' he added. 'They were both taken away. But Ma feels wretched over the whole thing. Thinks the whole place is spoiled now. Talking about selling up, if you can believe that. Moving back to her people in the West Country.'

'I'm sure that Mr Charters feels wretched, too,' I said, experiencing pangs of sympathy for him. 'The poor man. I can understand the young lady being arrested, of course, if she had become violent, but why on earth was he? Surely this is not a question of morality?'

'It is, sir,' said David, standing up to his full height now and looking positively affronted. 'It most -certainly is a question of morality.'

'But he hasn't broken the law, as far as I understand it,' I said. 'I don't quite see why he should be held accountable for what is, after all, a personal indiscretion.'

'Mr Sadler,' said David calmly. 'I shall say this plain, as I think you might have misunderstood me. Mr Charters's companion was not a young lady, I'm afraid. It was a boy.' He nodded knowingly at me and I flushed a little and looked away.

'Ah,' I said, nodding my head slowly. 'I see. That.'

'So you can understand why Ma is upset. If word gets about . . .' He looked up quickly, as if he had just realized something. 'I trust you will be discreet about this, sir. We do have our livelihoods to -consider.'

'What?' I asked, staring at him and nodding quickly. 'Oh yes, of course. It's . . . well, it's nobody's business but your own.'

'But it does leave the matter of the room,' he said delicately. 'And whether you wish to stay in it or not. As I say, it is being -thoroughly cleaned.'

I thought about it for a moment but could see no objections. 'It really doesn't bother me, Mr Cantwell,' I said. 'I'm sorry for your difficulties and for your mother's distress, but if the room is still available for the night, I am still in need of a bed.'

'Then it's all settled,' he said cheerfully, opening the door and stepping back outside. I followed him, a little surprised by how quickly our interview had been terminated, and found the boy's mother still in place behind the desk, her eyes darting back and forth between us.

'Mr Sadler understands everything perfectly,' announced her son. 'And he would like to avail himself of the room after all. I have told him that it will be ready in an hour. I was right to do so, I presume?' He spoke to her as if he were already master of the house and she his servant girl.

'Yes, of course, David,' she said, a note of relief in her voice. 'And it's very good of you, sir, if I may say so. Would you care to sign the register?'

I nodded and leaned over the book, writing my name and address carefully on the ledger, the ink splashing a little as I struggled to control my grip of the pen in my spasmodic right hand.

'You can wait in the drawing room, if you wish,' said David, staring at my trembling index finger and, no doubt, wondering. 'Or there's a very respectable public house a few doors down if you require a little refreshment after your journey.'

'Yes, that I think,' I said, replacing the pen carefully on the desk, aware of the mess that I had left behind me and em-barrassed by it. 'May I leave my holdall here in the

meantime?’

‘Of course, sir.’

I leaned down and took my book from inside the bag, fastened it again and glanced at the clock as I stood up.

‘If I’m back by half past seven?’ I asked.

‘The room will be ready, sir,’ said David, leading me towards the door and opening it for me. ‘And once again, please accept my apologies. The world’s a funny place, sir, isn’t it? You never know what kind of deviants you’re dealing with.’

‘Indeed,’ I said, stepping out into the fresh air, relieved by the breeze that made me pull my overcoat tightly around my body and wish that I had remembered my gloves. But they were inside, in the bag, in front of Mrs Cantwell, and I had no desire to engage in any further conversation with either mother or son.

To my surprise, I realized for the first time that day that it was the evening of my twenty-first birthday. I had forgotten it entirely until now.

I made my way down the street but before entering the Carpenter’s Arms public house, my eyes drifted towards the brass plaque that was nailed -prominently above the door, where the words -PROPRIETOR: J. T. CLAYTON, LICENSED TO SELL BEERS AND SPIRITS were etched in a black matted script. I stopped short for a moment and stared at it, holding my breath, a sensation of dread soaring through my veins. I longed for a cigarette and patted my pockets, hoping to find the packet of Gold Flakes I had bought in Liverpool Street that morning, already knowing that they were lost, left behind on my train-carriage seat when I reached up to help the novelist with her suitcase before disembarking, and they probably lay there still, or had found their way into the pockets of another.

PROPRIETOR: J. T. CLAYTON.

It had to be a coincidence. Sergeant Clayton had been a Newcastle man, as far as I knew. His accent had certainly betrayed him as one. But had I heard that his father had been something high up at a brewery? Or was I confusing him with someone else? No, it was ridiculous, I decided, shaking my head. There must be thousands of Claytons spread across England, after all. Tens of thousands. This couldn’t be the same one. Refusing to succumb to painful speculation, I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The bar was half filled with working men, who turned to glance at me for only a moment before looking away and returning to their conversations. Despite being a stranger, I felt at ease there, a -contentment born out of a sense of isolated companion-ship. As the years have passed, I have spent far too many hours in pubs, hunched over unsteady, ale-stained tables, reading and writing, tearing at beer mats as I’ve raised my characters from poverty to glory while dragging others down from mansion to gutter. Alone, always alone. Not drinking too much, but drinking all the same. A cigarette in my right hand, a scorch mark or two on my left cuff. That caricature of me, writing my books in the corner snugs of London saloons, the one that -irritates me so and has caused me, in later life, to rise up, bristling and whinnying in interviews like an aggravated horse, is not, in fact, a mistaken one. After all, the clamour of the crowded public house is infinitely more welcoming than the stillness of the empty home.

‘Yes, sir?’ said a hearty-looking man standing behind the bar in his shirtsleeves, wiping a cloth along the countertop to remove the beaded lines of spilled beer. ‘What can I get for you?’

I passed an eye across the row of taps that stood before him, some of the names unfamiliar to me, local brews perhaps, and chose one at random.

'Pint, sir?'

'Yes please,' I said, watching as he selected a glass from the rack behind him and then, in an instinctive gesture, held it by its base up to the light to examine it for fingerprints or dust marks before, satisfied, -tilting it at a precise angle against the tap and -beginning to pour. There were flakes of pastry in his heavy moustache and I stared at them, both repulsed and fascinated.

'Are you the proprietor?' I asked after a moment.

'That's right, sir,' he said, smiling at me. 'John Clayton. Have we met before?'

'No, no,' I said, shaking my head as I rooted a few coins out of my pocket. I could relax now.

'Very good, sir,' he said, placing the pint before me, -apparently unconcerned by my question. I thanked him and made my way across to a half-empty corner of the pub, where I removed my coat and sat down with a deep sigh. Perhaps it had been for the best that my room had not been ready, I decided, staring at the dark brown ale settling in the glass before me, its frothy head winking as the tiny bubbles made their way north, anticipating as I did so the great -satisfaction that first mouthful would offer me after my train journey. *I could sit here all night*, I thought. *I could become very drunk and cause a scene. The police might arrest me, lock me in a cell and send me back to London on the first train tomorrow morning. I wouldn't have to go through with it. The whole thing would be taken out of my hands.*

I sighed deeply, dismissing the notion, and took my book from my pocket, glancing for a moment at the jacket with the feeling of safety that a set of bound-together pages has always afforded me. On that mid-September Monday of 1919, I was reading *White Fang* by Jack London. My eyes focused on the dust-jacket image: a silhouetted cub testing the air beyond some trees, the shadows of their branches suggesting a road cut deep into the heart of the mountains ahead, the full moon guiding his way forward. I turned to where my page holder rested, but before reading, I glanced again at the title page and the words inscribed there: *To my old pal Richard*, it said in black ink, the characters elegant and well formed. *No less of a mangy ol' dog than White Fang himself, Jack*. I had found the book a couple of days earlier on a stall outside one of the bookshops on Charing Cross Road and it was only when I had taken it home and opened it that I noticed the inscription. The bookseller had charged me only a ha'penny for the second-hand volume so I presumed that he had overlooked the words -written inside, but I considered it a great bonus, although I had no way of knowing whether the Jack who signed himself 'Jack' was the Jack who had written the novel or a different Jack entirely, but I liked to believe that it was him. I traced my right index finger – the one whose inconsistent trembling always caused me such trouble – along the letters for a moment, imagining the great author's pen leaving its trail of ink along the page, but instead of being offered a curative through literature, which in my youthful fancy I hoped it would, my finger trembled even more than usual and, repulsed by the sight, I pulled it away.

'What are you reading, then?' asked a voice from a few tables away, and I turned to see a middle-aged man looking in my direction. I was surprised to have been addressed and turned the novel around to face him so that he could read the title, rather than simply answering his question. 'Never heard of that one,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'Any good, is it?'

'Very good,' I said. 'Terrific, in fact.'

'Terrific?' he repeated, smiling a little, the word sounding unfamiliar on his tongue. 'Well, I'll have to look out for it if it's terrific. I've always been a reader, me. Mind if I join you? Or are you waiting for someone?'

I hesitated. I had thought that I wanted to be alone, but when the offer of company was made I found that I didn't mind so very much.

'Please,' I said, indicating the seat next to mine, and he slid across and placed his half-finished pint on the table between us. He was drinking a darker beer than mine and there was an odour of stale sweat about him that suggested a long, hard-working day. Curiously, it wasn't unpleasant.

'The name's Miller,' he said. 'William Miller.'

'Tristan Sadler,' I replied, shaking his hand. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'And you,' he said. He was about forty-five, I thought. My father's age. Although he did not remind me of my father in the slightest for he was of slender build, with a gentle, thoughtful air, and my father was the opposite. 'You're from London, aren't you?' he asked, sizing me up.

'That's right,' I said, smiling. 'Is it that obvious?'

'I'm good with voices,' he replied, winking at me. 'I can place most people within about twenty miles of where they grew up. The wife, she says it's my party trick but I don't think of it that way. It's more than just a parlour game to my way of thinking.'

'And where did I grow up, Mr Miller?' I asked, eager to be entertained. 'Can you tell?'

He narrowed his eyes and stared at me, remaining silent for almost a minute, save for the sound of his heavy, nasal breathing, before he opened his mouth again, speaking cautiously. 'I should think Chiswick,' he said. 'Kew Bridge. Somewhere around there. Am I right?'

I laughed, surprised and delighted. 'Chiswick High Street,' I said. 'My father has a butcher's shop. We grew up there.'

'We?'

'My younger sister and I.'

'But you live here? In Norwich?'

'No,' I said, shaking my head. 'No, I live in London now. Highgate.'

'That's quite a distance from your family,' he said.

'Yes,' I replied. 'I know.'

From behind the bar, the sound of a glass crashing to the floor and smashing into a million fragments gave me a jolt. I looked up and my hands clenched instinctively against the side of the table, only relaxing again when I saw the shrugged shoulders of the proprietor as he bent down with pan and brush to clear up his mess, and heard the delighted, teasing jeers of the men sitting close to him.

'It was just a glass,' said my companion, noticing how startled I had become.

'Yes,' I said, trying to laugh it off and failing. 'It gave me a shock, that's all.'

'There till the end, were you?' he asked, and I turned to look at him, the smile fading from my face as he sighed. 'Sorry, lad. I shouldn't have asked.'

'It's all right,' I said quietly.

'I had two boys out there, you see. Good boys, the pair of them. One with more than his share of mischief about him, the other one a bit like you and me. A reader. A few years older than you, I'd say. What are you, nineteen?'

'Twenty-one,' I said, the novelty of my new age striking me for the first time.

'Well, our Billy would have been twenty-three now and our Sam would have been about to turn twenty-two.' He smiled when he said their names, then swallowed and looked away. The use of the conditional tense had become a widespread disease when discussing the ages of children and little more needed to be said on the matter. We sat in silence for a few moments and then he turned back to me with a nervous smile. 'You have the look of our Sam, -actually,' he said.

'Do I?' I asked, strangely pleased by the comparison. I entered the woods of my imagination again and made my way through gorse and nettle-tangled undergrowth to picture Sam, a boy who loved books and thought that one day he might like to write some of his own. I saw him on the evening he announced to his parents that he was signing up, before they came to get him, that he was going out to join Billy over there. I pictured the brothers finding solidarity on the training ground, bravery on the battlefield, heroism in death. This was Sam, I decided. This was William Miller's Sam. I knew him well.

'He were a good boy, our Sam,' whispered my companion after a moment, then slapped the flat of his hand three times on the table before us as if to say, No more of that. 'You'll have another drink, lad?' he asked, nodding at my half-finished beer, and I shook my head.

'Not yet,' I said. 'But thank you. You don't have a tab on you, by any chance?'

'Of course,' he replied, fishing a tin box out of his pocket that looked as if it had been with him since childhood, opening it and handing me a perfectly rolled cigarette from a collection of about a dozen. His fingers were dirty, the lines on his thumb heavily defined and darkened by what I decided was manual labour. 'You wouldn't see better in a baccie's, would you?' he asked, smiling, indicating the cylindrical precision of the smoke.

'No,' I said, admiring it. 'You're a dab hand.'

'Not me,' he said. 'It's the wife who rolls them for me. First thing every morning, when I'm still about my breakfast, she's sat there in the corner of the kitchen with a roll of papers and a packet of gristle. Takes her only a few minutes. Fills the box for me, sends me on my way. How's that for luck? There's not many a woman would do that.'

I laughed, satisfied by the cosy domesticity of it. 'You're a lucky man,' I said.

'And don't I know it!' he cried, feigning indignation. 'And what about you, Tristan Sadler?' he asked, using my full name, perhaps because I was too old to be addressed with the familiarity of 'Tristan' but too young to be called 'Mr'. 'Married gentleman, are you?'

'No,' I said, shaking my head.

'Got a sweetheart back in London, I suppose?'

'No one special,' I replied, unwilling to admit that there was no one who was not special either.

'Sowing your wild oats, I expect,' he said with a smile, but without that leering vulgarity with which some older men can make such remarks. 'I don't blame you, any of you, of course, after all you've been through. There'll be time enough for weddings and young 'uns when you're a bit older. But, my Lord, the young girls were thrilled when you all came home, weren't they?'

I laughed. 'Yes, I expect so,' I said. 'I don't know really.' I was beginning to grow tired now, the combination of the journey and the drink on an empty stomach causing me to feel a little drowsy and light-headed. One more, I knew, would be the ruination of me.

'You have family in Norwich, do you?' asked Mr Miller a moment later.

'No,' I said.

'First time here?'

'Yes.'

'A holiday, is it? A break from the big city?'

I thought about it before answering. I decided to lie. 'Yes,' I said. 'A few days' break, that's all.'

'Well, you couldn't have picked a nicer place, I can tell you that,' he said. 'Norwich born and bred, me. Lived here man and boy. Wouldn't want to live anywhere else and I

can't understand anyone who would.'

'And yet you know your accents,' I pointed out. 'You must have travelled a bit.'

'When I was a pup, that's all,' he said. 'But I listen to people, that's the key to it. Most people never listen at all. And sometimes,' he added, leaning forward, 'I can even guess what they're thinking.'

I stared at him and could feel my expression begin to freeze a little. Our eyes met and there was a moment of tension there, of daring, when neither of us blinked or looked away. 'Is that so?' I said finally. 'So you know what I'm thinking, Mr Miller, do you?'

'Not what you're thinking, lad, no,' he said, holding my gaze. 'But what you're feeling? Yes, I believe I can tell that much. That don't take a mind reader, though. Why, I only had to take one look at you when you walked through the door to figure that out.'

He didn't seem prepared to expand on this so I had no choice but to ask him, despite the fact that my every instinct told me to leave well alone. 'And what is it, then, Mr Miller?' I asked, trying to keep my expression neutral. 'What am I -feeling?'

'Two things, I'd say,' he replied. 'The first is guilt.'

I remained still but kept watching him. 'And the second?'

'Why,' he replied, 'you hate yourself.'

I would have responded – I opened my mouth to respond – but what I might have said, I do not know. There was no opportunity anyway, for at that moment he slapped the table again, breaking the tension that had built between us as he glanced across at the wall clock. 'No!' he cried. 'It's never that time already. I'd best get home or the missus'll have my guts for garters. Enjoy your holiday, Tristan Sadler,' he said, standing up and smiling at me. 'Or whatever it is you're here for. And a safe trip back to London when it's over.'

I nodded but didn't stand up. I simply watched him as he made his way to the door, turned for a moment and, with a raised hand, exchanged a quick goodbye with J. T. Clayton: Proprietor, Licensed to Sell Beers and Spirits, before leaving the bar without another word.

I glanced back at *White Fang*, lying face up on the table, but reached for my drink instead. By the time I finished it, I knew that my room would be available to me at last, but I wasn't ready to go back yet, so I raised a finger in the direction of the bar and a moment later a fresh pint was before me: my last, I promised myself, of the evening.

My room at Mrs Cantwell's boarding house, the infamous -number four, was a bleak setting for the apparently dramatic events of the previous night. The wallpaper, a lacklustre print of drooping hyacinths and blossoming crocuses, spoke of -better, more cheerful times. The pattern had faded to white in the sun-bleached square facing the window, while the carpet beneath my feet was threadbare in places. A writing desk was pressed up against one wall; in the corner stood a washbasin with a fresh bar of soap positioned on its porcelain edge. I looked around, satisfied by the efficient English under-statement of the room, its brisk functionality. It was certainly superior to the bedroom of my childhood, an image I dismissed quickly, but less considered than the one I had furnished with a mixture of thrift and care in my small flat in Highgate.

I sat on the bed for a moment, trying to imagine the drama that had played out here in the small hours of the morning: the unfortunate Mr Charters, wrestling for affection with his boy, then struggling to retain his dignity as he became the victim of a robbery, an attempted murder and an arrest all within the space of an hour. I felt sympathy for him and wondered whether he had even secured his -desperate pleasures before the horror began. Was he part of an entrapment scheme or just an unfortunate victim of

circumstance? Perhaps he was not as quiet as David Cantwell believed him to be and had sought a satisfaction that was not on offer.

Rising slowly, my feet tired after my day's -travelling, I removed my shoes and socks and hung my shirt over the side of the chair, then remained standing in the centre of the room in trousers and vest. When Mrs Cantwell knocked on the door and called my name, I considered putting them on again for the sake of decorum but lacked the energy and anyway, I decided, it was not as if I was indecent before the woman. I opened it and found her standing outside carrying a tray in her hands.

'I'm so sorry to disturb you, Mr Sadler,' she said, smiling that nervous smile of hers, honed no doubt by years of servility. 'I thought you might be hungry. And that we owed you a little something after all the unpleasantness earlier.'

I looked at the tray, which held a pot of tea, a roast-beef sandwich and a small slice of apple tart, and felt immediately grateful to her. I had not -realized how hungry I was until the sight of that food reminded me in a moment. I had eaten breakfast that morning, of course, before leaving London, but I never ate much in the mornings, just tea and a little toast. On the train, when I grew hungry, I found the dining car pitifully understocked and ate only half a lukewarm chicken pie before setting it aside in distaste. This lack of food, coupled with the two pints of beer in the Carpenter's Arms, had left me -ravenous, and I opened the door further to allow her to step inside.

'Thank you, sir,' she said, hesitating for a moment before looking around as if to ensure that there was no further sign of the previous night's disgrace. 'I'll just lay it on the desk here, if that's all right.'

'That's very kind of you, Mrs Cantwell,' I said. 'I wouldn't have thought to bother you for food at this time.'

'It's no bother,' she said, turning around now and smiling a little, looking me up and down carefully, her attention focused for so long on my bare feet that I began to feel embarrassed by them and -wondered what she could possibly find of interest there. 'Will you be lunching with us tomorrow, Mr Sadler?' she asked, looking up again, and I got the sense that she had something that she wanted to -discuss with me but was anxious to find the appropriate words. The food, while welcome, was clearly a ruse.

'No,' I said. 'I'm meeting an acquaintance at one o'clock so will be gone by the late morning. I may head out and see a -little of the city if I wake early enough. Will it be all right if I leave my things here and collect them before catching the evening train?'

'Of course.' She hovered and made no move to leave the room; I remained silent, waiting for her to speak. 'About David,' she said eventually. 'I hope he didn't make a nuisance of himself earlier?'

'Not at all,' I said. 'He was very discreet in what he told me. Please, don't think for a moment that I—'

'No, no,' she said, shaking her head quickly. 'No, I don't mean that. That business is behind us all now, I hope, and will never be mentioned again. No, it's just that he can sometimes ask too many questions of servicemen. Those who were over there, I mean. I know that most of you don't like to talk about what happened but he will insist. I've tried speaking to him about it but it's difficult.' She shrugged her shoulders and looked away, as if defeated. '*He's* -difficult,' she said, correcting herself. 'It's not easy for a woman alone with a boy like him.'

I looked away from her then, embarrassed by the familiarity of her tone, and glanced out of the window. A tall sycamore tree was blocking my view of the street beyond and I found myself staring at its thickset branches, another childhood memory -surprising me by how ruthlessly it appeared. My younger sister Laura and I gathering horse chestnuts

from the trees that lined the avenues near Kew Gardens, stripping their prickly shells away and taking them home to string into weapons; a memory I dismissed just as quickly as it had arrived.

'I don't mind so very much,' I said, turning back to Mrs Cantwell. 'Boys his age are interested, I know. He's, what . . . -seventeen?'

'Just turned, yes. He was that angry last year when the war ended.'

'Angry?' I asked, frowning.

'It sounds ridiculous, I know. But he'd been -planning on going for so long,' she said. 'He read about it in the newspaper every day, following all the boys from around here who went off to France. He even tried to sign up a couple of times, pretending to be older than he was, but they laughed him straight back to me, which, to my way of thinking, sir, was not right. Not right at all. He only wanted to do his bit, after all, they -didn't need to make fun of him on account of it. And when it all came to an end, well, the truth is that he thought he'd missed out on something.'

'On having his head blown off, most likely,' I said, the words ricocheting around the walls, splattering shrapnel over both of us. Mrs Cantwell flinched but didn't look away.

'He wouldn't see it like that, Mr Sadler,' she replied quietly. 'His father was out there, you see. He was killed very early on.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. So the accident at the threshing machine was fiction, after all.

'Yes, well, David was only just thirteen at the time and there never was a boy who loved his father as much as he did. I don't think he's ever got over it, if I'm honest. It damaged him in some way. Well, you can see it in his attitude. He's so angry all the time. So diffi-cult to talk to. Blames me for everything, of course.'

'Boys his age usually do,' I said with a smile, -marvelling at how mature I sounded when in truth I was only her son's elder by four years.

'Of course / wanted the war to end,' she continued. 'I prayed for it. I didn't want him out there, suffering like the rest of you did. I can't even imagine what it must have been like for you. Your poor mother must have been beside herself.'

I shrugged and turned the gesture quickly into a nod; I had nothing to say on that point.

'But there was a part of me, a small part,' she said, 'that hoped he would get to go. Just for a week or two. I didn't want him in any battles, of course. I wouldn't have wanted him to come to any harm. But a week with the other boys might have been good for him. And then, peace.'

I didn't know whether she was referring to peace in Europe or peace in her own particular corner of England but I said nothing.

'Anyway, I just wanted to apologize for him,' she said, -smiling. 'And now I'll leave you to your tea.'

'Thank you, Mrs Cantwell,' I said, seeing her to the door and watching for a moment as she scurried down the corridor, looking left and right at the end as if she didn't know which direction she should go in, even though she had most likely lived there for nearly all her adult life.

Back inside my room, with the door closed again, I ate the sandwich slowly, conscious that to rush it might upset the -fragile equilibrium of my stomach, and sipped the tea, which was hot and sweet and strong, and afterwards I began to feel a little more like myself. I could hear occasional movements in the corridor outside – the walls of my room were paper-thin – and resolved to be asleep before any of my neighbours in rooms three or five returned for the night. I could not risk lying awake: it was im-portant to feel refreshed for the day that lay ahead of me.

Setting aside the tray, I stripped off my vest and washed my face and body in cold water at the sink. It quickly dripped down upon my trousers so I pulled the curtains, turned the light on and stripped naked, washing the rest of myself as well as I could. A fresh towel had been laid on the bed for me but it was made from the type of material that seemed to grow wet very quickly and I rubbed myself down with it aggressively, as we had been shown on our first day at Aldershot, before hanging it over the side of the basin to dry. Cleanliness, hygiene, attention to detail, the marks of a good soldier: such things came instinctively to me now.

A tall mirror was positioned in the corner of the room and I stood in front of it, examining my body with a critical eye. My chest, which had been well toned and muscular in late -adolescence, had lost most of its definition in recent times; it was pale now. Scars stood out, red and livid across my legs; there was a dark bruise that refused to disappear stretched across my abdomen. I felt desperately unattractive.

Once, I knew, I had not been so ugly. When I was a boy, -people thought me pleasant to look at. They had remarked as much to me and often.

Thinking of this brought Peter Wallis to my mind. Peter and I had been best friends when we were boys together, and with thoughts of Peter it was but a short stroll to Sylvia Carter, whose first appearance on our street when we were both fifteen was the -catalyst for my last. Peter and I had been inseparable as children, he with his curly rings of jet-black hair, and me with that un-helpful yellow mop that fell into my eyes no -matter how often my father forced me into the chair at the -dinner table and cut it back quickly with a heavy pair of butcher's scissors, the same ones he used to cut the gristle from the chops in the shop below.

Sylvia's mother would watch Peter and me as we ran off down the street together with her daughter, the three of us locked in youthful collusion, and she would worry about what -trouble Sylvia might be -getting herself into, and it was not an unjustified concern, for Peter and I were at an age when we talked of nothing but sex: how much we wanted it, where we would look for it, and the terrible things we might do to the unfortunate creature who offered it.

During that summer we all became most aware of each other's changing bodies when we went -swimming, and Peter and I, growing older and more confident in ourselves, attracted Sylvia's teasing stares and flirtatious remarks. When I was alone with her once, she told me that I was the best--looking boy she had ever seen and that whenever she saw me climbing from the pool, my body sleek with water, my swimming trunks black and dripping like the skin of an otter, I gave her the shivers. The remark had both excited and repelled me, and when we kissed, my lips dry, my tongue uncertain, hers anything but, the thought passed through my mind that if a girl like Sylvia, who was a catch, could find me attractive, then perhaps I wasn't too bad. The idea thrilled me, but as I lay in bed at night, bringing myself off with quick, dramatic fantasies that were just as quickly dispelled, I imagined scenarios of the most lurid kind, none of which involved Sylvia at all, and afterwards, spent and feeling vile, I would curl up in the sweat-soaked sheets and -swallow back my tears as I wondered what was wrong with me, what the hell was wrong with me, anyway.

That kiss was the only one we ever shared, for a week later she and Peter declared that they were in love and had decided to devote their lives to each other. They would marry when they were of age, they announced. I was mad with envy, -tortured by my humiliation, for, without realizing it, I had fallen desperately in love; it had crept up on me without my even noticing it, and seeing the pair of them together, imagining the things that they were doing when they were alone and I was elsewhere, left me in bitter twists

of anguish, feeling nothing but hatred for them both.

But still, it had been Sylvia Carter who had told me when I was an inexperienced boy that my body had given her the -shivers, and as I looked at it now, beaten and bruised from more than two years of fighting, my once-blond hair a muddy shade of light brown and lying limply across my forehead, my ribs visible through my skin, my left hand veined and discoloured in places, my right prone to the most inexcusable shakes and shudders, my legs thin, my sex mortified into muteness, I imagined that if I were still to give her the shivers they were more likely to be spasms of revulsion. That my com-panion in the railway carriage had thought me beautiful was a joke; I was hideous, a spent thing.

I pulled my shorts and vest back on, unwilling to sleep naked. I didn't want the sensation of Mrs Cantwell's well-worn sheets against my body. I couldn't abide any touch that might suggest -intimacy. I was twenty-one years old and had already decided that that part of my life was over. How stupid of me. Twice in love, I thought as I closed my eyes and placed my head on the thin pillow that raised me no more than an inch or two from the mattress. Twice in love and twice destroyed by it.

The thought of that, of that second love, made my stomach turn violently and my eyes spring open as I leaped from the bed, knowing that I had no more than a few seconds to reach the sink, where I threw up my beer, sandwich, tea and apple tart into the washbasin in two quick bursts, the undigested meat and spongy bread forming a deeply unpleasant -picture in the porcelain base, a mess that I washed away quickly with a jug of water.

Perspiring, I collapsed on to the floor, my knees pressed up against my chin. I wrapped my arms around them, pulling my body close as I pushed myself hard between the wall and the base of the washbasin, scrunching my eyes up tightly as the -terrible images returned.

Why did I come here? I wondered. What was I thinking? If it was redemption I sought, there was none to be found. If it was understanding, there was no one who could offer it. If it was forgiveness, I deserved none.

* * *

I woke early the following morning after a -surprisingly un-disturbed sleep and was the first to use the bath that served the needs of the six rooms in Mrs Cantwell's establishment. The water was tepid at best, but it served its purpose and I scrubbed my body clean with the same bar of soap that had been left for me in my room. Afterwards, having shaved and combed my hair in the small mirror that hung over the washbasin, I felt a little more con-fident about what lay ahead, for the sleep and the bath had revived me and I did not feel as unhealthy as I had the night before. I held my right hand out flat before me and watched it, daring the spasmodic finger to tremble, but it held itself still now and I relaxed, trying not to think about how often it might betray me as the day -developed.

Not wishing to engage in conversation, I decided against -taking breakfast in the boarding house and instead crept downstairs and out of the front door shortly after nine o'clock without so much as a word to my host or hostess, who I could hear busying themselves in the dining room and bickering away like an old married couple. I had left the door of my room ajar with my holdall atop the bed covers.

The morning was brisk and bright; there were no clouds in the sky, no suggestion of rain later, and I was grateful for that. I had never been to Norwich before and purchased

a small printed map from a street stall, thinking that I might spend an hour or two strolling around the city. My appointment was not until one o'clock, which left me ample time to see a few of the local sights and return to my lodgings to freshen up before making my way to our designated meeting place.

I crossed the bridge on Prince of Wales Road and stopped for a moment, staring down into the Yare as it flowed quickly along, and recalled for a moment a soldier I had trained with at Aldershot and fought alongside in France – Sparks was his name – who had told me the most extraordinary story one evening when the two of us were on top-duty together. It seemed that he had been crossing Tower Bridge in London one afternoon some four or five years earlier when, halfway across, he was stopped short by an overwhelming conviction that at that precise moment he was exactly halfway through his life.

'I looked left,' he told me. 'I looked right. I looked into the faces of the people walking past me. And I just knew it, Sadler. That this was it. And right then, a date popped into my mind: 11 June 1932.'

'But that would make you, what, no more than forty?' I said.

'But that's not all,' he told me. 'When I got home again, I took a scrap of paper and worked out that if it really was the halfway point of my life on that very day, then what date should be my last. And you'll never believe what it came to?'

'Never!' I said, astonished.

'No, it wasn't the right date,' he replied, laughing. 'But it was close. It would have been August 1932. Either way, it's not much of an innings, is it?'

He made it to neither. He had both legs blown off just before Christmas 1917 and died of his injuries.

I put Sparks from my head and continued northwards, climbing the steep gradient of the street, and found myself walking along the stone walls of Norwich Castle. I considered climbing the hill towards it and examining the treasures that might be on display inside but decided against that, suddenly uninterested. Castles such as this, after all, were nothing more than the remains of military bases where soldiers might camp out and wait for the enemy to appear. I did not need to see any more of that. Instead I turned right, walking through a place that identified itself by the rather morbid name of Tombland, and in the direction of the great spire of Norwich Cathedral.

A small café attracted my notice and with it a reminder that I had eaten no breakfast. Rather than continuing on, I decided to stop for something to eat, waiting only a few moments in a corner window seat before a rosy-cheeked woman with a high hat of thick red hair came over to take my order.

'Just some tea and toast,' I said, happy to be sitting down again for a few minutes.

'A couple of eggs with that, sir?' she suggested, and I nodded quickly.

'Yes, thanks. Scrambled, if that's possible.'

'Of course,' she replied, nodding pleasantly and disappearing back behind the counter as I switched my focus to the street. I regretted not having brought *White Fang* with me for it seemed like a decent opportunity to relax, enjoy my breakfast and read my book, but it was left behind in my holdall at Mrs Cantwell's. Instead, I watched as the passers-by went about their business.

The street was filled mostly with women carrying string bags loaded with their early-morning shopping. I thought about my mother, about how she had made the beds and cleaned the flat every morning at this time when I was growing up, while my father poured himself into his great white coat and took up his position behind the downstairs shop counter, carving up the fresh joints for the regular customers who would come his

way over the next eight hours.

I had been terrified of everything associated with my father's job – the boning knives, the animal -carcasses, the bone saws and rib pullers, the bloodstained overalls – and my squeamish-ness did not endear me much to him. Later, he taught me how to use the knives correctly, how to separate the joints of the pigs or sheep or cows that hung in the cold-room out back and were delivered every Tuesday morning with great ceremony. I never cut myself but, although I grew reasonably proficient at the art of butchery, I was never a natural at it, unlike my father, who had been born to it in this same shop, or his father, who had come over from Ireland during the potato famine and somehow managed to scrape together enough money to go into trade.

My father hoped that I would follow him into the family business, of course. The shop was already called Sadler & Son and he wanted our fascia to be an honest one. But it never came to pass. I was expelled from home just before I turned sixteen and returned only once, over a year and a half later, on the afternoon before I left for France.

'The truth is, Tristan,' my father said that day as he steered me carefully out on to the street, his thick fingers pressing tightly on my shoulder blades, 'it would be best for all of us if the Germans shoot you dead on sight.'

The last thing he ever said to me.

I shook my head and blinked a few times, un-certain why I allowed these memories to destroy my morning. Soon my tea, eggs and toast were before me and I realized that the waitress was still hovering, her hands pressed together like those of a supplicant in prayer, a smile spreading across her face, and I glanced up, my loaded fork suspended in the air between plate and mouth, wondering what she might want of me.

'Everything all right, sir?' she asked cheerfully.

'Yes, thanks,' I said, and the compliment was apparently enough to satisfy her, for she scurried back behind her counter before attending to her next task. I was still unaccustomed to being able to eat at my leisure, having spent almost three years in the army eating whatever was put in front of me, whenever I could, trapped between the poking elbows of other soldiers who stuffed their faces and masticated their food as if they were rutting pigs in a farmer's backyard and not a group of Englishmen who had been brought up with their mothers' -manners. Even the quality of the food and the new abundance of it had the power to surprise me, although it was still -nothing like as good as it had been before the war. But to walk into a café like this one, to sit down and look at a menu and say, 'Do you know, I think I might have the mushroom omelette,' or 'I'll try the fish pie,' or 'One portion of the sausage and mash, please, and yes to the onion gravy' – this was an extra-ordinary sensation, the novelty of which is almost impossible to -articulate. Simple pleasures, the result of inhuman -deprivations.

I paid my few pence, thanked the woman and left the café, continuing along towards Queen Street in the direction of the cathedral spire, and looked up at the magnificent monastic building as it came into sight, and the precinct wall and gates that -surrounded it. I take great pleasure in churches and -cathedrals. Not so much for their religious aspect – -agnosticism has been my declared denomination – but for the peace and tranquillity offered within. My twin contra-dictory places of idleness: the -public bar and the chapel. One so social and teeming with life, the other quiet and warning of death. But there is something soothing to the spirit about resting a while on the pews of a great church, breathing in the chilly air perfumed by centuries of incense and candle-burning, the extraordinary high ceilings that make one feel insignificant in the greater scheme of natural design, the artworks, the friezes, the carved altars, the statues whose arms reach out as if to embrace their observer, the -unexpected moment when a choir above,

rehearsing its matins, bursts into song and lifts the spirit from whatever despair brought one inside in the first place.

Once, outside Compiègne, our regiment had rested for an hour about a mile from a small *église* and, despite having been marching all morning, I decided to stretch my legs towards it, more as a means of escape from the other soldiers for a few minutes than out of a desire for spiritual awakening. It was nothing special, a fairly rudimentary building both outside and in, but I was heartsick by how abandoned it seemed, its congregation scattered to safety, the trenches or the graveyard, its atmosphere emptied of the once-attendant conviviality of the faithful. Walking outside again, thinking that I might lie on the grass until summoned back to the line, perhaps even close my eyes in the noonday sun and imagine myself in happier surroundings, I found another of my regiment, Potter, leaning on the opposite side of the church at a slight angle, one hand resting forward on the wall as he relieved himself noisily against the centuries-old stonework, and I ran towards him without a second thought, pushing him off his feet and to the ground, where he fell in surprise, exposed to all, his stream of urine coming to an unexpected halt but not before -splattering over his trousers and shirt. He was on his feet a moment later, pulling himself together, -cursing loudly, before knocking me off my own and seeking satisfaction for the humiliation. We had to be separated by a handful of other soldiers. I accused him of desecration and he accused me of something worse – religious mania – and although the charge was false, I did not deny it, and as our tempers started to fail us we stopped -trading insults and were eventually released after facing each other, shaking hands, and calling ourselves friends once again before heading back down the hill. But the sacrilege had disturbed me nevertheless.

I made my way through the nave of the cathedral now, glancing surreptitiously at the dozen or so people who were scattered in silent prayer around the church, and wondered from what hardships they sought relief or for what sins they begged -absolution. At the crossing, I turned and looked up towards the place where the choir would stand on a Sunday morning, offering worship. I walked south from there and an open door led me outside to a labyrinth where a few children were playing a game of catch in the bright morning, and continued along the wall towards the eastern end of the cathedral, where I found myself brought to a halt by a single grave. It stood out. Its stark nature surprised me, a simple stone cross resting atop a two-tiered base, and I leaned forward to discover that this was the grave of Edith Cavell, our great nurse-patriot, who had helped hundreds of British prisoners of war escape from Belgium through her underground route and had been shot in the autumn of 1915 for her trouble.

I stood up and offered not a prayer, for that was of no use to anyone, but a moment of contemplation. Nurse Cavell had been proclaimed a heroine, of course. A martyr. And she was a woman. The people of England seemed to celebrate this fact for once in their history and I felt a great sense of joy at dis-covering her grave in such an unexpected fashion.

Footsteps on the gravel alerted me to the approach of someone else, two people, in fact, whose steps had fallen in time with each other, like a night patrol -circling a compound. I walked a little further past the grave and turned away, pretending to be engaged in a study of the stained-glass windows above.

'We should be making the final list by about three o'clock,' the young man – who had the look of a -sacristan – was saying to his older companion. 'Assuming we can get through the -earlier business quickly.'

'It will take as long as it takes,' the other man replied -insistently. 'But I'll have my say, I promise you that.'

'Of course, Reverend Bancroft,' came the reply. 'It's a difficult situation, we're all aware of that. But everyone there understands your pain and grief.'

'Nonsense,' snapped the man. 'They understand nothing and they never will. I will have my say, you may have no doubt on that score. But I need to get home quickly afterwards. My daughter has arranged something. A . . . well, it's difficult to explain.'

'Is it a young man?' asked the sacristan in a flippant voice, and the look that he received in response put a stop to any -further enquiries of that sort.

'It won't matter too much if I'm late,' said the -reverend, his tone betraying deep uncertainty. 'Our meeting is far more important. Anyway, I haven't quite decided on the wisdom of my daughter's plans yet. She gets notions, you see. And not always very sensible ones.'

They turned to start walking again and at that moment, the reverend caught my eye and smiled. 'Good morning, young man,' he said, and I stared at him, my heart beating faster inside my chest. 'Good morning,' he repeated, stepping towards me, smiling in an avuncular fashion and then seeming to think better of it, as if he could sense the potential of a threat, and moved back again. 'Are you quite all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

I opened my mouth, unsure how to reply, and I believe that I must have shocked the two of them entirely as I spun around, turned on my heels and ran back in the direction of the gate through which I had entered, almost tripping over a raised hedge to my left, a small child to my right and a series of paving stones in front of me, before finding myself inside the cathedral once again, which seemed -monstrous now but also claustrophobic, ready to take me within its grasp and hold me there for ever. I looked around the confusing space, desperate for a way out, and when I found it, I ran through the nave of the church, my boots sounding heavily on the tiles and sending their drum-like rhythms echoing into every corner of the building as I made for the doors, aware that the heads of the faithful were turning in my direction now with a mixture of alarm and disapproval.

Outside I breathed quickly, desperate to fill my lungs, and felt a horrible clamminess begin to seep through my skin, -covering my body, my earlier relaxed state replaced by one of terror and remorse. The serenity imparted by the cathedral had left me and I was a man alone again; here in the unfamiliar surroundings of Norwich, with a task to complete.

But how could I have been so stupid? How could I not have remembered? It was all so unexpected though; the name – Reverend Bancroft – and then the expression on his face. The likeness was uncanny. I might have been back on the training grounds of Aldershot, or the trenches of Picardy. It might have been that dreadful morning when I ascended from the holding cells in a terrible, vengeful fury.

By now it was time to start making my way back towards the boarding house in order to freshen up before my appointment. I walked away from the cathedral and took a different route, turning left and right on the criss-crossing streets.

It was I who had initiated the correspondence with Marian Bancroft. Although we had never met, Will had spoken of her often and I envied their extraordinary closeness. I had a sister myself, of course, but she had been only eleven when I left home, and even though I had written to her shortly after, my letters never received any reply; I suspected that they were intercepted by my father before they could reach her. But did he read them himself, I often wondered? Did he steal them away and tear open the envelopes, scanning my scrawling handwriting for news of where I was and how I was scraping a living together? Was there even a part of him that wondered whether one day my letters

might stop, not because I had given up writing, but because I was no longer alive, the streets of London having swallowed me whole? It was impossible to know.

The war had been over for almost nine months by the time I finally plucked up the courage to write to Marian. It had been on my mind for a long time, a sense of responsibility that had kept me awake night after night as I tried to decide what to do for the best. A part of me wanted to dismiss her from my thoughts entirely, to pretend that she and her family did not exist. What help could I be to them, after all? What possible comfort could I offer? But the idea lingered and one day, -tortured by guilt, I purchased what I considered to be an -elegant packet of -notepapers and a new fountain pen – for I wanted her to think well of me – and composed a letter.

Dear Miss Bancroft,

You don't know me, or maybe you do, maybe you have heard my name mentioned, but I was a friend of your brother, Will. We trained together before we were sent over there. We were in the same regiment so we knew each other well. We were friends.

I must apologize for writing to you out of the blue like this. I don't know what you've been going through over these last -couple of years, I can't -imagine it, but I know that your brother is never very far from my thoughts because, no matter what anyone says, he was the bravest and kindest man I ever knew and there were plenty of brave men out there, I can promise you that, but not so many kind ones.

Anyway, I write to you now because I have -something -belonging to Will that I thought I should return. The letters you wrote to him while he was over there. He kept them all, you see, and they fell to me. Afterwards, I mean. On account of our friendship. I assure you that I've never read any of them. Only I thought that you might like them back.

I should have written before now, of course, but the truth is I haven't been well since my return and have had to take a -little time for myself. Perhaps you can understand that. That's all over now, I think. I don't know. I'm not sure about things when I look to the future. I don't know if you are; I know I'm not.

I didn't mean to write so much really, I just wanted to -introduce myself and say that if perhaps you would permit me to call on you some day, then I should very much like to do so and I could return the letters to you, for I wonder if it might not give you some degree of comfort when you think of your brother.

Maybe you come to London sometimes. I don't know if you do or not, but if you don't I wouldn't mind coming to Norwich. I hope this letter reaches you safely; you might have moved for all I know. I heard that sometimes in these cases people move because of all the trouble that comes about.

If you would write to me, I would like to set this matter right. Or, if you prefer not to meet, I could put the letters in a box and send them along to you. Only I hope you do agree to meet me. There are so many things I would like to tell you.

Your brother was my best friend, I said that already, didn't I? Anyway, I know this much, that he was no coward, Miss Bancroft, he was no coward at all. He was a braver man than I will ever be.

I didn't mean to write so much. But there's a lot to say, I think.

With respectful wishes,

Tristan Sadler

Without realizing it, I had walked directly past my turning for Recorder Road and found myself standing on the Riverside, -staring across from where the stone pillars of Thorpe rose up to greet me. I found that my feet were taking me across the river and inside the station and I stood quietly, watching the people as they purchased their tickets and

made their way towards the platforms. It was five minutes past twelve and there in front of me was the London train, set to go in another five minutes' time. A conductor was walking up and down crying, 'All aboard!' and I put my hand in my pocket for my wallet, looking at the ticket that I was carrying for my return journey later that evening. My heart raced when I saw that it was valid all day. I could simply climb on board and go home, put the whole wretched business behind me. I would have lost my holdall, of course, but there was not much in it, just yesterday's clothes and the Jack London book. I could forward Mrs Cantwell what I owed her and apologize for leaving without a word.

As I hesitated, a man approached me, hand extended, and asked whether I had any spare change. I shook my head, stepping back a little as he reeked of stale sweat and cheap alcohol; he walked on crutches for his left leg was missing, while his right eye was sealed over as if he had recently been in a fight. He wasn't a day over twenty-five.

'A few pennies, that's all,' he said, growling at me. 'Fought for my country, didn't I, and look how they left me. You can spare some change, can't you? Come on, you fucking bastard!' he cried, raising his voice now and shocking me with the un-expected vulgarity. 'You can spare a few pennies for them what gave you freedom.'

A lady who was passing by with a small boy immediately covered his ears and I noticed him staring at the man in rapt fascination. Before I could say anything to the man he lunged at me and I stepped back again at the very moment that a constable appeared and took a hold of him – gently, as it turned out – and said, 'Come along, that's not going to solve anything, now is it?' And with that platitude, the man seemed to crumple inside himself and moved away, hobbling back towards the wall and returning to a seated position on the ground, where he became almost catatonic, holding his hand out in the air, not even expecting anyone to help him.

'Sorry about that, sir,' said the constable. 'He's not usually much trouble so we let him stay there as he gets a few shillings most days. Ex-army, like myself. Had rather a rough time of it, though.'

'It's quite all right,' I muttered, leaving the station, any thought of heading back to London quite gone now. I had come to do a job, it was important that I completed it. And it had nothing to do with the return of a packet of letters.

It was almost two weeks before I received a reply from Marian Bancroft and in the intervening time I had thought of little else. Her silence made me question whether she had received my note, whether her family had been forced to move to another part of the country, whether she simply wanted nothing to do with me. It was impossible to know and I was torn between regret at having written to her at all and a sense that I was being punished by her refusal to reply.

And then one evening, returning home late from a day of reading dreary, unsolicited manuscripts at the Whisby Press, I discovered a letter waiting for me under the door of my flat. I lifted it in amazement – I never received any post – and stared at the elegant handwriting, knowing immediately who it must be from, and went inside to make a cup of tea, staring at the envelope nervously as I did so and imagining the possible traumas that it might contain. Finally settled, I opened it carefully, removed the single sheet of paper, and was struck immediately by the faint smell of lavender that accompanied it. I wondered whether this was her particular perfume or whether she was a girl who stuck to the old-fashioned ways and put a drop of scent in her envelopes, regardless of whether she was writing a love letter, paying a bill or answering an unexpected correspondence such as my own.

Dear Mr Sadler,

First, I should like to thank you for writing to me and -apologize for taking so long to reply. I realize that my silence might have appeared rude but I think you will understand when I say that your letter both upset and moved me in -unexpected ways and I was uncertain how to answer it. I -didn't want to reply until I was sure of what I wanted to say. I think people often rush responses, don't you? And I didn't want to do that.

You speak very kindly of my brother and I was tremendously affected by this. I am glad that he had a friend 'over there', as you call it. (Why is that, Mr Sadler? Are you afraid to name the place?) I'm afraid I have a very contradictory feeling towards our soldiers. I respect them, of course, and pity them for fighting for so long in such terrible -conditions. I am sure that they were -terribly brave. But when I think of what they did to my brother, what these same soldiers did to him, well, I'm sure you can understand that at such times my feelings are less than generous.

If I try to explain all this I am not sure that there will be enough ink in the world to hold my thoughts, nor enough paper on which to write them down, and I dare say I would have -trouble finding a postman who would deliver a -document as long as the one I would need to compose.

The letters – I can't believe you have them. I think it is very kind that you want to return them to me.

Mr Sadler, I hope you don't mind but I don't think I can come to London at present for personal reasons. I would like to meet you, but does it make any sense for me to say that I should like to meet you here, in streets that I know, in the place where Will and I grew up? Your offer to come here is a generous one. Perhaps I could suggest Tuesday the 16th of this month as a possible day? Or do you work? I expect you do. Everyone must these days, it's quite extraordinary.

Look, maybe you'd write again and let me know?

Sincerely,

Marian Bancroft

I hoped that I would have a free run of it when I stepped inside the boarding house but David Cantwell was there, -placing fresh flowers in two vases that stood on side tables. He flushed a -little when he saw me and I could tell that he was -embarrassed.

'My mother's gone out,' he explained. 'So I'm left with this job. Woman's work, isn't it? Flowers. Makes me look like a pansy.'

He smiled at me and tried to make me complicit in the pun but I ignored his feeble attempt at humour and told him of my intentions.

'I'm just going up to my room,' I said. 'Would you rather I left my holdall in your office or can I leave it up there?'

'The office is probably best, sir,' he replied, a little archly now, perhaps disappointed by my unwillingness to treat him as if he were a friend of long standing. 'We do have another guest booked in for the room and they're due in around two o'clock. At what time do you think you'll be back for it?'

'Not till much later than that,' I said, although why I thought that I did not know. It was possible that my appointment would not last for anything more than ten minutes. 'I'll stop in for it before I catch my train.'

'Very good, sir,' he said, going back to his flowers. I noticed that he was not quite as forthcoming as he had been the night before and, despite the fact that I was not looking for conversation, I couldn't help but wonder about the reason for it. Perhaps his mother had spoken to him and explained that talking about what had happened out there to someone who had experienced it might not be the kindest thing. Some servicemen lived off their stories, of course, as if they had actually enjoyed the war, but others, myself included, didn't.

I went upstairs, cleaned my teeth and washed my face, and combing my hair once again in the mirror decided that, although pale, I did not look too -terrible. I felt as ready for this appointment as I ever would.

And so, no more than twenty minutes later, I found myself sitting in a pleasant café just off Cattle Market Street, glancing at the clock on the wall as it ticked its way mercilessly towards one o'clock, and the other customers around me. It was a -traditional café, I felt, one that had perhaps been passed through a number of generations of the same family. Behind the counter was a man of about fifty and a girl of my own age – his daughter, I presumed, for she had the look of him. There weren't too many other customers, no more than half a dozen, which satisfied me, for I felt that it would be very -difficult for us to talk if the room was completely full and noisy, and equally difficult if it was empty and our conver-sation could be overheard.

Dear Miss Bancroft,

Thank you for your reply and your kind words. You owe me no apology for the delayed response. I was happy to get it, that's all.

The 16th is fine for me. Yes, I do work but I have some -holiday days due to me and I shall take them then. I look -forward to meeting you. Perhaps you could suggest by reply where and when might be convenient.

Sincerely,

Tristan Sadler

The door opened and I looked up, amazed by the fright the noise gave me. My stomach was rolling with anxiety and I -suddenly dreaded this encounter. But it was a man who had come inside, and he looked around, his eyes darting left and right in an almost feral fashion, before taking a seat in the far corner, where he was hidden behind a pillar. I thought he looked at me suspiciously for a moment before moving away from my sightline, and I might have thought more of it had I not already been so preoccupied.

Dear Mr Sadler,

Shall we say one o'clock? There's a nice café along Cattle Market Street, Winchall's it's called. Anyone can direct you there.

Marian B.

I picked up a container of napkins from the table for something to do. My right hand immediately broke into a fresh spasm and the box fell from my grasp, spilling the napkins across the tablecloth and on to the floor. I cursed beneath my breath and reached down to pick them up, which was why I failed to notice when the door opened one more time and a lady stepped inside and made her way towards my table.

'Mr Sadler?' she said breathlessly, and I looked up, my face flushed from leaning over, then stood up instantly, staring at her, words failing me now, words failing me.