
Opening Extract from...

The Revolving Door of Life

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

Illustrated by Iain McIntosh

Published by Polygon

ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

THE REVOLVING DOOR OF LIFE

A 44 Scotland Street Novel

Illustrated by
IAIN McINTOSH

Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-84697-328-4

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

Typeset by Studio Monachino
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

This book is for Louise Richardson

1. *Moving Can Be Good For You*

Matthew had read somewhere – in one of those hoary lists with which newspapers and magazines fill their columns on quiet days – that moving house was one of the most stressful of life's experiences – even if not quite as disturbing as being the victim of an armed robbery or being elected president, *nemine contradicente*, of an unstable South American republic. Matthew faced no such threats, of course, but he nevertheless found the prospect of leaving India Street for the sylvan surroundings of Nine Mile Burn extremely worrying. And it made no difference that Nine Mile Burn was, as the name suggested, only nine miles from the centre of Edinburgh.

"What really worries me," he confessed to Elspeth, "is the whole business of selling India Street. What if nobody wants to buy this flat? What then?"

He looked at her with unconcealed anxiety: he could imagine what it was like not to be able to sell one's house. He had recently been at a party at which somebody had whispered pityingly of another guest: "He can't sell his flat, you know." He had looked across the room at the poor unfortunate of whom the remark was made and had seen a hodden-doon, depressed figure, visibly bent under the burden of unshiftable equity. That, he decided, was how people who couldn't sell their house looked – shadowy figures, wraiths, as dejected and without hope as the damned in Dante's *Inferno,* haunted by the absence of offers for an unmoveable property. He had shuddered at the thought and reflected on his good fortune at not being in that position himself. Yet here he was deliberately courting it …

Elspeth's attitude was more sanguine. She had been unruffled by their previous moves – from India Street to Moray Place, and then back again to India Street. The prospect of another flit – a Scots word that implies an attempt to evade

the clutches of creditors suggests, misleadingly, that moving is an airy, inconsequential thing – did not seem to trouble her, and she had no concerns about the sale of the flat. "But of course somebody will want to buy it," she reassured him. "Why wouldn't they? It's one of the nicest flats in the street. It's got plenty of room and bags of light. Who wouldn't want to live in the middle of the Edinburgh New Town?"

Matthew frowned. "The New Town isn't for everybody," he said. "Not everybody finds the Georgian aesthetic pleasing." He paused as he tried to think of a single person he knew of whom this was true. "There are plenty of people these days who are suburban rather than urban. People who like to have …" He paused for thought. He knew nobody like this, but they had to exist. "Who like to have garages. *Homo suburbiensis*. Morningside man, who is a bit like Essex man but just a touch …"

"Superior?"

"You said it; I didn't."

Elspeth smiled. "You shouldn't worry so much, Matt, darlingest. And so what if we don't sell it? We can afford the other place anyway."

Matthew winced. "If I dip into capital," he said.

Elspeth shrugged. "But isn't money for spending? And surely there's enough there to be dipped into."

Matthew knew that she was right; at the last valuation, his portfolio of shares in the astute care of the Adam Bank had shot up and he could have bought the new house several times over if necessary. But Matthew had been imbued by his father with exactly that sense of caution that had created the fund in the first place, and the idea of selling shares in any but the direst of emergencies was anathema to him.

In general, Elspeth did not look too closely at Matthew's financial affairs. She had never been much interested in money, and very rarely spent any on anything but family essentials

and the occasional outfit or pair of shoes. She was nonetheless aware of their good fortune and of the fact that thanks to the generosity of Matthew's businessman father they were spared the financial anxieties that affected most people. Her capacity for moral imagination, though, was such that she could understand the distorting effect that poverty had on any life, and she had never been, nor ever would become, indifferent to the lot of those – perhaps a majority of the population of Scotland – who were left with relatively little disposable income after the payment of monthly bills. This attitude was shared by Matthew, with the result that they were tactful about their situation – and generous too, when generosity was required.

The farmhouse near Nine Mile Burn had not been cheap. Although it was far enough from Edinburgh to avoid the high prices of the capital, it was close enough to be more expensive than houses in West Linton, a village that lay only a few miles further down the road. Their house, which they had agreed to buy from no less a person than the Duke of Johannesburg, who lived at Single Malt House not far away, had been valued at seven hundred thousand pounds. For that they got six bedrooms in the main house – along with a study, a gun room (Matthew did not have a gun, of course), and a drawing room with a good view of both the Lammermuir and Moorfoot Hills to the south and east; a tractor shed, a byre, and six acres of ground.

The Duke had been pleased that Matthew was the purchaser; they had met on several occasions before, although the Duke seemed to have only the vaguest idea of who Matthew was. Matthew's quiet demeanour, however, had been enough to endear him to the Duke.

"I must say," the Duke had remarked to a friend, "it's a great relief to have found somebody who's not in the slightest bit *shouty*. You know what I mean? Those shouty people one meets these days – all very full of themselves and brash.

We used to have very few of them in Scotland, you know; now they're on the rise, it seems."

The friend knew exactly what the Duke meant. "*Nouveau riche*," he said. "They're flashy – they throw their money around."

The Duke nodded. "Whereas I'm *nouveau pauvre*. I've got barely a *sou* these days, you know – not that I ever had very much."

"And you a duke," said the friend. "Fancy that!"

"Well, a sort of duke," conceded the Duke. "I'm not in any of the stud books, you know: Debrett's and so on. Or I'm in one of them – just – but I gather it's not a very reliable one. It was rather expensive to get in; you had to buy sixty copies, as I recall, and I think quite a number of people in it are a bit on the ropey side. In fact, all of them are, I believe."

"People take you at your own evaluation, I've always thought," said the friend. "Behave like a duke and they'll swallow it."

"True," said the Duke. "But frankly, that's a bit difficult for me, old man. I'm not quite sure what the form is when it comes to being a pukka duke."

"Take a look at some of the people who are what they claim to be," advised the friend. "Watch the way they stand; the way they walk. They're very sure-footed, I'm told. And they look down at the ground a lot."

"That's because they own it," said the Duke. "Doesn't apply to me – or not very much. I've got fifty-eight acres in Midlothian and forty-one up in Lochaber, but most of it is pretty scrubby. Lots of broom and rhododendrons."

The friend looked thoughtful. "No, you're not quite the real thing, I suppose. And then there's always the risk that the Lord Lyon will catch up with you."

The mention of the Lord Lyon made the Duke blanch. This was the King of Arms, the official who supervised all matters of heraldry and succession in Scotland. He had extensive legal powers and could prosecute people for the unauthorised use of coats of arms and the like.

"Do you think Lyon would ever bother about me?" asked the Duke nervously.

His friend looked out of the window. "You never know," he said. "But I shouldn't like to be in your shoes if he did."

It was not the sort of thing a friend should say – or at least not the sort of thing that a reassuring friend should say.

2. Distressed Furniture

The Duke of Johannesburg proved to be a most considerate seller, more than prepared to include all the contents of the house in the sale without adding anything to the purchase price.

"We haven't lived in the place for years," he said. "And recently we let it out, of course. But all the stuff is ours, and some of it is actually quite good, even if it's a bit distressed, as the antique dealers say. Mind you, *distressed* is not quite strong enough for some of my furniture. My furniture has moved beyond being distressed. *Terminal* might be more accurate. I can just imagine the auction catalogues – can't you? – 'a table in terminal condition' and so on. Hah!"

Matthew was keen to keep as much of the Duke's furniture as possible, but Elspeth had other ideas. "It's terrible old rubbish," she said. "Look at this." She referred to the inventory that the Duke's agent had prepared. "*A charming William IV library table with only two legs, but otherwise sound*."

"Oh, I saw that one," said Matthew. "It had a lovely green leather top."

"That's as may be," Elspeth retorted, "but what's the use of a table with two legs? Or …" And here she pointed to another inventory item. "*A glass-fronted bookcase, circa 1860; no glass.*"

She looked up at Matthew. "What is the point, may I ask, of having a glass-fronted bookcase with no glass in the front? In fact, one might even go so far as to say that it's an impossibility. A glass-fronted bookcase with no glass is simply not a glass-fronted bookcase."

"Perhaps," said Matthew. "If you're intent on being pedantic."

They normally did not argue with one another, but even the most equable of couples may be expected to fall out over a move. And so Matthew decided at a very early stage that he would leave everything up to Elspeth and not dispute any of her decisions. Armed with this authority, Elspeth made all the arrangements, chose the date of departure, and did most of the packing herself. He helped, of course, mostly by taking the triplets around the Botanic Gardens in their three-seated pushchair. This inevitably brought a response from passers-by – looks that ranged from amusement to sympathy and sometimes on to disapproval.

"Three!" remarked one elderly woman as Matthew and the triplets passed her on the way to the greenhouse. "My, you must have been insatiable!"

Matthew was ready to let this remark pass with a polite nod of his head, but then its implications dawned on him. Did she really think *that*? he asked himself.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I wonder what you mean by what you've just said."

The woman blushed. "Oh … oh, I don't really know. It's just that it must take a lot of energy to create triplets. Not every man … Oh dear, I'm not sure that I know what I meant."

And then there was the visiting American woman who asked the triplets' names when they were waiting together for a pedestrian light in Stockbridge. "Dear little things," she said. "They're all boys, aren't they? What are they called?"

"Tobermory, Rognvald and Fergus," answered the proud father.

"What wonderful Scottish names!" enthused the visitor. "Which is Tobermory?"

Matthew hesitated. The truth was that he did not know, as although Elspeth claimed to be able to differentiate between the three boys, he had no idea. But a father could hardly confess to being uncertain as to the identity of his own sons, and so he pointed at random to one of the boys. "Him," he said.

The woman bent forward to look more closely. "We went to Tobermory last week," she said. "We were visiting Iona and afterwards we called in at Tobermory – a lovely place …" Her voice trailed away. "He's wearing his brother's jumper, I see. It has Fergus knitted across the front."

Matthew waved airily. "They share their clothes," he said airily. "And of course they're far too young to dress themselves, or to care what they're wearing, for that matter."

In the last few days before the move, the boys were left in the care of Anna, their Danish au pair, while Matthew and Elspeth made final preparations. A couple of weeks before they were due to move in, the Duke agreed to meet them at the house to hand over the keys – they had already paid the purchase price – and to answer any final queries they might have.

"I shall miss the old place," he said, as he stood with them in the doorway of the large ground-floor drawing room. "We used to have such marvellous parties here back in the old days. White tie affairs, you know. The men in Highland dress, of course, and the women in long dresses with tartan sashes. Interminable affairs, some thought, but I always enjoyed them. We used to give breakfast to anybody who was still there at six in the morning, and standing. Sometimes we even had to give them lunch. Frightful, but there we are – it's very hard to ask guests to leave, you know. Some stayed for weeks." He paused. "I never really knew how to do it until I read about what Willie Maugham said to Paddy Leigh Fermor

after Paddy had for some reason been terribly rude to the old boy when he was staying as a guest at the Villa Mauresque. For some reason Paddy imitated Maugham's stutter at the dinner table – causing dreadful offence. One doesn't imitate the host's stutter in any circumstances. Anyway, Paddy did and so Maugham said to him over coffee that night, 'I shall have to say goodbye to you at this stage as when I get up tomorrow morning you will already have left.'"

The Duke laughed.

"How very tactful," said Matthew.

"I never met Maugham, of course," continued the Duke. "He was more my father's generation. In fact, Pa met him once or twice in Antibes. He said he was an ill-tempered old cove, but there we are. Leigh Fermor shouldn't have done what he did."

The Duke gazed fondly over the drawing room. "Yes, those white-tie parties were grand evenings, and people paid attention to what they wore. You can't just add a white tie to Highland Dress, you know. It all depends where you are. If you're in Perthshire, for example, you can only wear a white tie with Highland Dress if you were born in the county. In Argyll, if the invitation says white tie – and it does for occasions like the Oban gathering – you wear a jabot, as I'm sure you know.'

Matthew was silent. He knew nothing about any of this and he wondered why nobody had ever taught him about these things that were so important even while being utterly unimportant.

3. Boys Are So Physical

After the Duke of Johannesburg left – he had an engagement with his lawyer in Edinburgh – Matthew and Elspeth made

their way into their new drawing room. Elspeth flopped down on one of the Duke's faded chintz-covered sofas, now theirs, patting the cushion beside her in an invitation for Matthew to join her. As they sat there, surveying their new home about them, there was at first a silence of the sort that comes when one has done something important but not yet determined the full implications of one's actions. After a few minutes, almost in unison, they said, "So …" and then stopped.

"You go ahead," said Matthew.

"No you."

Matthew smiled. "I know that we haven't actually moved in yet, even if we've got the keys. But I was just going to say: *so here we are*. That's all. And you?"

"I was going to say exactly the same thing," said Elspeth.

Matthew looked thoughtful. "Do you think we've done the right thing?"

"I was just about to ask you that," said Elspeth. "My answer, though, is: yes. I can't wait to live in the country. It'll be such fun for the boys; they'll have so much room … Boys are so physical. They love to run around, to climb trees …"

"… And bruise their knees," said Matthew.

"Exactly." She looked up at the ceiling. "What's that song about bruising both your hearts and your knees? Isn't there a song about that?"

"There is," said Matthew. "But I can't remember what it's called. It's about friendship, I seem to recall."

"Just like …" Elspeth tried to remember another song about friendship, but none came to mind; there were so many songs about being in love, but people did not sing quite so much about being in friendship. And yet, she thought, there was no reason that one might not "be in friendship" just as one might be in love. Could friendship intoxicate in the way in which love did? Could you feel as elated about friendship as you could about love?

"Like *John Anderson my Jo,*" suggested Matthew. "Robert Burns."

"Isn't that about being married?"

"Yes, it is. But I think it's about friendship too. You could apply those words to an old friend – to one with whom you've shared a great deal."

She looked at him. She had read an article somewhere that many men were lonely because they did not know how to handle friendship, because they did not attend to their friendships in the way in which women did. You could not simply leave friendship to look after itself. Friendship was a plant that required careful tending – and that was something that women did rather better than men.

The same article had discussed the contemporary idea of *bromances*, which were strong friendships between men. There was nothing physical about these, but they were romantic in a way in which male friendships usually were not. David and Jonathan had a famous *bromance*, the article said, and there were other examples, but male reticence and taboos meant that it was not a common thing. Those in a *bromance* could not only play golf or squash with one another, but could go out for dinner afterwards, or could simply sit and talk; in short, they could do all the things that women did so easily and so naturally with their female friends but that men were frightened to do.

Matthew was an only child, as was Elspeth. She remembered feeling lonely in her childhood and the envy she had felt for those who had brothers and sisters. Matthew, she imagined, had felt the same, although they had never talked about it, just as they had never discussed the question of friendship. What friends did he have? There was Angus Lordie, for whom Matthew had acted as best man when Angus had married Domenica, and there was Bruce Anderson, whom he occasionally met in the Cumberland Bar. Angus was older

than him, though, and that must limit the friendship to some extent, and Bruce was vain and unreliable, and hardly a friend to be encouraged. Who else was there? There were various friends from his days at the Academy, and he met them at regular reunions, but none seemed to be particularly close. Big Lou? She did not count because men and women tended to be friends with one another in a totally different way – and anyway, no wife would encourage a husband to develop friendships with other women.

She wondered whether perhaps Matthew did not need male friends; perhaps he was one of these men who lived entirely through their family. Her own father had been a bit like that, she remembered. His life had revolved around his wife, his daughter, his dog, and his motorbike. That was his universe, and he seemed uninterested in engaging with anything very much outside that.

While Elspeth was thinking about this, Matthew had risen to his feet and was inspecting a bookcase at the end of the room.

"Elspeth," he said. "There's something odd about this bookcase. Come and take a look."

She got up to join him. She bent forwards to examine one of the books – part of the library that the Duke had thrown in with the sale. "I've far too many books," he had said. "And that can be so confusing."

One of the titles stood out. *Eastern Approaches* by Fitzroy Maclean. She reached for the book and opened it. Inside, on the title page, the author had written: *J: something I wrote some time ago, but I hope you enjoy it. Fitzroy.* She closed it. Her father had said something about Fitzroy Maclean, but she could not remember exactly what it was. And who was *J*? Johannesburg?

"Not the books," said Matthew. "It's just that I get the impression there's something behind this bookcase."

Elspeth laughed. "No," she said. "Don't tell me. A concealed room."

Elspeth laughed again. "There are no concealed rooms," she said. "Concealed rooms are a cliché too far: *nobody* has concealed rooms any more. Nobody." She imagined the estate agent's advertisement for a house so endowed: *four bedrooms (one concealed)* …

"*Au contraire*," said Matthew. "I think that's exactly what we might have."

4. Glasgow – A Promised Land

In Scotland Street, Bertie Pollock, now just seven, gazed out of his bedroom at the view of Edinburgh sky that his window afforded him. Bertie was reflecting on the fact that he was no longer six; he had been that age for so many years, it seemed, and he had begun to despair of ever getting any older. Other people had regular birthdays – at least one a year – and yet whatever clock determined the passage of time for him seemed

to be very badly calibrated.

He had to put up with some flaunting of birthdays by those who had them. "No birthday yet, Bertie?" crowed Olive. "I've had a birthday, as you may have noticed, and Pansy has had one too. Even Tofu's had a birthday, although he didn't deserve one. What about you? Still six?"

At this rate, he thought, it would be an interminably long time before he turned eighteen – the age at which, according to the law of Scotland, he believed you could leave your mother and go to live wherever you liked. In his case, he imagined it would be Glasgow, a promised land that lay only forty miles away to the west, where there would be no psychotherapy, no yoga classes, no Italian *conversazione*, and no prohibition on owning a Swiss Army penknife. Glasgow represented freedom – a life in which you could do what you liked and do it when you liked. As a small boy who had been told what to do since as long as he could remember, he could not imagine anything headier, anything more exhilarating than that.

Yet these thoughts of freedom were tinged with guilt, for although Bertie might be forgiven for dreaming of freedom from his mother, he could not rid himself of a nagging disquiet. He had encouraged his mother to go off to the Persian Gulf, and this meant that what happened there was his fault. That, of course, is how children think: they blame themselves for the misfortunes of their parents. If something goes wrong with the world, it's my fault: I did it. That was a heavy burden of guilt for so young a set of shoulders, and the strain was telling.

The trip to the Gulf had come about after Irene had entered a competition to compose a new slogan for a desert sheikhdom, and rather to her surprise she had won. Her suggestion – *So much sand – and so close at hand!* – came to her almost without thinking, and it was this spontaneity, perhaps, along with its undoubted veracity, that made her entry stand out above others. Some of those other entries, of course, were

made by those who seemed to be quite unfamiliar with the region. *From lush forests to Alpine pastures – we've got it all!* was an enthusiastic entry, but not one that disclosed much knowledge of physical geography. More truthful was the entry, *It's air-conditioned!* That had the merit, too, of being brief, but could perhaps be applied to rather too many places and did not quite capture – or so the judges thought – the particular essence of the sheikdom. And as for the entrant who suggested *Not much here!* – that was downright rude and was tossed aside without further consideration.

Irene had duly been awarded the prize, which consisted of five days on the Gulf coast with all expenses paid. Unfortunately the five days proved to be an underestimate: after having been mistaken for the new wife of a Bedouin sheikh and being consigned to a harem, Irene had now spent almost two months in a desert fastness. British diplomats had done their best to arrange for her return, but these matters can be difficult, and there had been many misunderstandings. At least a message had been allowed out, in which Irene said: *Am working on attitudes here. Don't worry about me. In fact, quite content to stay pro tem.* It was a brief and rather enigmatic message, and the British consular authorities had been doubtful as to its genuineness. Irene's husband, though, had been convinced that this was indeed Irene: *working on attitudes* had a certain ring to it that he thought could only come from his wife.

"It's the sort of thing she says," said Stuart. "It really does sound like her."

"But what can she mean?" asked a puzzled official at the other end of the telephone line.

Stuart paused. He did not wish to be disloyal. "She is very enthusiastic about changing attitudes," he volunteered.

There was a brief silence at the other end of the line. "Whose attitudes?"

Stuart thought for a moment. "I suppose everybody's," he said. "That's not to say that she doesn't recognise the validity of other points of view … I'm not saying that."

The official, trained in diplomacy, sensed that this was a sensitive area. "Of course," he said quickly. "And if you feel that she really wrote that, then that, at least, is a good sign. It means that relations with her … her host are probably quite good. And that helps, of course."

The conversation had concluded shortly after that with the advice that there was very little that anybody could do but to wait for the wheels of desert bureaucracy to grind at whatever pace they were accustomed to grinding. There was every chance, the official suggested, that Irene might return before a forthcoming round of trade talks between the United Kingdom and local states. "Nobody wants this sort of thing to be brought up at ministerial level," said the official. "It sours relations unnecessarily. She'll suddenly reappear – I'm pretty confident of that."

Stuart had passed this reassurance on to Bertie. "The people in London say that Mummy will come back," he said. "Her holiday is just taking a little bit longer than we thought."

Bertie had frowned. He was not quite sure whether he wanted his mother to come back; life without her had clear benefits, and if she was happy enough in the desert, then surely it was unkind to persuade her to come back.

"I think she might be happier over there," he said to his father. "It's much warmer than Scotland, Daddy, and you know that Mummy likes warm weather. And some of those places are really nice, you know. Look at Dubai – people love going there. Perhaps we should let her stay for …" He did a rapid calculation. "Eleven years?"

If Irene stayed in the desert for a further eleven years, then when she came back to Scotland he would be eighteen, and … He hardly dared hope.

5. E Portugallia Semper Aliquid Boni

As might be expected, Irene's absence had complicated Stuart's life. Like most men of his generation – at least in that part of Edinburgh, where new and reconstructed men abounded – he believed that he shared fully in the task of bringing up a young family. But like many men who think that of themselves, his self-evaluation was perhaps somewhat optimistic. Day-to-day responsibility for Bertie and his young brother, Ulysses, had been borne almost entirely by Irene who, in spite of her views of the tyranny of domestic drudgery, nonetheless performed almost all the mundane tasks of running the lives of two small boys – getting Bertie to school in the morning and then afterwards to yoga and psychotherapy, delivering Ulysses (in a miasma of vomit) to the East New Town pre-toddler social awareness play sessions, laundering the endless stream of flannelette garments in which Ulysses passed the day, and making meals for the entire household every evening. All of this had to be done before clearing up and preparing for the next day in which she would do exactly the same thing.

Stuart helped, of course, but there is a major difference between merely helping and actually shouldering the burden. Even if he cooked the evening meal from time to time, he rarely did the shopping required to stock the kitchen cupboard. And even if he bundled clothes into the washing machine, very seldom did he remove them, and even less often did he iron them.

Like Bertie, he had encouraged Irene to take up her prize of a five-day free holiday; like Bertie, he had imagined that these five days would be a period of blissful freedom. And that is what they were. But at the end of the fifth day, when the news came through that Irene had gone off to a desert encampment, Stuart had begun to discover that supplies were running low in the kitchen, that the hall carpet was looking particularly

dirty, and that there were very few clean flannelette rompers left in the drawer given over to Ulysses' clothing. And that was even before he had to tackle the issue of getting Bertie to school and arranging day care for Ulysses.

Stuart's solution had been to take ten days of compassionate leave from his job as a statistician with the Scottish Government. His immediate superiors had been supportive. "Of course you'll need a bit of time to get things sorted out," his departmental head reassured him. And then, with a sympathetic look, had continued, "Look, we all hope that your wife will be found – the uncertainty must be truly awful."

"Oh, they know where she is," said Stuart. "It's really a question of getting her out again."

"Of course."

Eyes were lowered. Everyone knew from the press reports that Irene was last seen entering a harem, and everyone's imagination had been working overtime to construct a picture of her there. For some, it was simply impossible, harems being so beyond the normal range of contemporary experience; surely there was some mistake, they thought, and Irene was merely the victim of some mix-up over a visa or a *permis de séjour* and everything would shortly be sorted out. Others envisaged Irene in a scene that would not have been out of place in an Orientalist painting, with blue-tiled walls, marbled pools, and great feather fans being swayed gently by sultry boys. And behind such imaginings was the awful, insistent thought: had Irene been obliged to go through some marriage ceremony with the Bedouin sheikh whose guest she had been?

Stuart himself had not a single doubt in his mind but that Irene would rapidly have taken control of the harem and engaged in the task of raising the awareness levels of the women who were quartered there. There were some indications that she had organised a book group in the harem, as Blackwell's Bookshop on South Bridge had received a bulk order for

twenty copies of a novel recently reviewed positively in the *Guardian*. The delivery address for this order was in one of the Gulf states, to an office known by British consular officials to be the address of the Bedouin sheikh's coastal agent. As far as Stuart was concerned that was proof positive that Irene, although not free to travel, was not cowed.

The solution to Stuart's difficulties came from an unexpected quarter. His mother, Nicola Pollock, now in her early seventies, had lived in Portugal for the previous ten years after marrying a shipper of Douro wines. Stuart's father had died a few years before this second marriage, and Nicola had not taken well to life on her own in Melrose, where they had spent much of their married life. She had met the wine shipper on a Baltic cruise on which the women had outnumbered the men by almost three to one. Such single men as there were – and there were not more than eight of these on board – found themselves in constant demand, and indeed one or two had taken to having their meals in the seclusion of their cabins, so pursued were they if they ventured into any of the ship's public rooms.

Nicola Pollock had met Abril Tavares de Lumiares in the bridge club that took over the aft saloon every evening before dinner. Abril was a year or two older than she was and had not been married before. He had been engaged for a number of years in an arrangement that had a dynastic flavour to it – both families saw the business sense in the union – but eventually, after eleven years, he and his fiancée had drifted apart. Abril had decided that marriage, perhaps, was not for him, and had thrown himself into building up the business that sent Douro wines, fortified and table, off to markets his father had developed in the United States, Canada, and Brazil. On the cruise, though, away from the demands and pressures of the business, he had decided that he and Nicola should be for one another more than newly-discovered bridge partners.

He declared himself in the course of a bid, in what might well have been the only proposal of marriage in the history of bridge; bridge, of course, being the catalyst for many a divorce: foolish bidding, although not in itself a ground for divorce may well be a cause of divorce.

"Five hearts," he had opened.

The likely lie of the cards made this absurd, and they all laughed; it was friendly bridge.

"Are you mad?" asked Nicola.

"No," said Abril. "But perhaps I am in love. That is why I am thinking of hearts – and of the contract that might result."

This remark was greeted with silence. Then one of the other players said, "Double," greatly increasing the risk of the original bid.

"Double is better than single," said Abril.

"Beds?" asked somebody, and laughed.