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Restoration

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Extract

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ONE

THE FIVE BEGINNINGS

I am, I discover, a very untidy man.

Look at me. Without my periwig, I am an affront to neatness. My hair (what is left of it) is the colour of sand and wiry as hogs' bristles; my ears are of uneven size; my forehead is splattered with freckles; my nose, which of course my wig can't conceal, however low I wear it, is unceremoniously flat, as if I had been hit at birth.

Was I hit at birth? I do not believe so, as my parents were gentle and kindly people, but I will never know now. They died in a fire in 1662. My father had a nose like a Roman emperor. This straight, fierce nose would neaten up my face, but alas, I don't possess it. Perhaps I am not my father's child? I am erratic, immoderate, greedy, boastful and sad. Perhaps I am the son of Amos Treefeller, the old man who made head-moulds for my father's millinery work? Like him, I am fond of the feel of objects made of polished wood. My telescope, for instance. For I admit, I find greater order restored to my brain from the placing of my hands round this instrument of science than from what its lenses reveal to my eye. The stars are too numerous and too distant to restore to me anything but a terror at my own insignificance.

I don't know whether you can imagine me yet. I am thirty-seven years old as this year, 1664, moves towards its end. My stomach is large and also freckled, although it has seldom been exposed to the sun. It looks as if a flight of minute moths had landed on it in the night. I am not tall, but this is the age of the

high heel. I strive to be particular about my clothes, but am terribly in the habit of dropping morsels of dinner on them. My eyes are blue and limpid. In childhood, I was considered angelic and was frequently buttoned inside a suit of blue moiré, thus seeming to my mother a little world entire: sea and sand in my colours, and the lightness of air in my baby voice. She went to her fiery death still believing that I was a person of honour. In the scented gloom of Amos Treefeller's back room (the place of all our private conversations), she would take my hand and whisper her hopes for my splendid future. What she couldn't see, and what I had not the heart to point out, was that we no longer live in an honourable age. What has dawned instead is the Age of Possibility. And it is only the elderly (as my mother was) and the truculently myopic (as my friend, Pearce, is) who haven't noticed this and are not preparing to take full advantage of it. Pearce, I am ashamed to admit, fails to understand, let alone laugh at, the jokes from Court I feel obliged to relay to him on his occasional visits to me from his damp Fenland house. The excuse he makes is that he's a Quaker. This, in turn, makes me laugh.

So, to me again – whither my thoughts are extremely fond of returning.

My name is Robert Merivel, and, although I'm dissatisfied with other of my appendages (viz. my flat nose), I am exceedingly happy with my name, because to its Frenchness I owe a great deal of my fortune. Since the return of the King, French things are in fashion: heels, mirrors, sedan-chairs, silver toothbrushes, fans and fricassées. And names. In the hope of some preferment, a near neighbour of mine in Norfolk, James Gourlay (an ugly, rather disgusting person, as it happens), has inserted a "de" into his otherwise Scottish-sounding name. So far, the only reward to come to the pompous de Gourlay is that a French wit at my dinner table dubbed him "Monsieur Dégeulasse". We giggled a great deal at this and some new scarlet breeches of mine were stained with the mouthful of raisin pudding I was forced to spit out in my attack of mirth.

So this is how you might imagine me: at table, rustling with laughter in a gaudy suit, my migrant hair flattened by a luxuriant

wig, my freckles powdered, my eyes twinkling in the candlelight, my pudding being ejected from my mouth by that force within me which snorts at sobriety and is so greedy for foolishness. Do not flatter yourself that I am elegant or worthy in any way, but yet I am, at this moment that you glimpse me, a rather popular man. I am also in the middle of a story which might have a variety of endings, some of them not entirely to my liking. The messy constellations I see through my telescope give me no clue to my destiny. There is, in other words, a great deal about the world and my role in it which, despite all my early learning, I utterly fail to understand.

There was a beginning to the story, or possibly a variety of beginnings. These are they:

1. In 1636, when I was nine years old, I carried out my first anatomical dissection. My instruments were: a kitchen knife, two mustard spoons made of bone, four millinery pins and a measuring rod. The cadaver was a starling.

I performed this feat of exploration in our coal cellar, into which, through the coal hole, came a crepuscular light, augmented a little by the two candles I placed on my dissecting tray.

As I cut into the thorax, a well of excitement began to fill and glimmer within me. It rose as I worked until, with the body of the starling opened and displayed before me, I had, I suddenly recognised, caught a glimpse of my own future.

2. At Caius College, Cambridge, in 1647, I met my poor friend, Pearce.

His room was below mine on the cold stairway. We were both by then students of anatomy and, though our natures are so antipathetic, our rejection of Galenic theory, coupled with our desire to discover the precise function of each part of the body in relation to the whole, formed a bond between us.

One evening, Pearce came up to my room in a state of hilarious perturbation. His face, habitually grey-toned and flaky,

was rubicund and damp, his stern green eyes suddenly afflicted with a louche brightness. "Merivel, Merivel," he babbled, "come down to my room. A person is standing in it who has a visible heart!"

"Have you been drinking, Pearce?" I asked. "Have you broken your vow of No Sack?"

"No!" exploded Pearce. "Now come down and you will see for yourself this extraordinary phenomenon. And, for a shilling, the person says he will permit us to touch it."

"Touch his heart?"

"Yes."

"It's not a cadaver then, if its mind is on money?"

"Now come, Merivel, before he flees into the night and is lost to our research for all eternity."

(Pearce, I report in parentheses, has this flowery, sometimes melodramatic way of speaking that is interestingly at odds with the clipped, odourless and self-denying man he is. I often feel that no anatomical experiment would be capable of discovering the function of these ornate sentences in relation to the whole, soberly-dressed person, unless it is a universal but contradictory fact about Quakers that, whereas their gait, habit and ritual are monotonous and plain, their heads are secretly filled with a rapturous and fandangling speech.)

We descended to Pearce's room, where a fire was burning in the small grate. In front of the fire stood a man of perhaps forty years. I bade him good evening, but he only nodded at me.

"Shall I unbutton?" he asked Pearce.

"Yes!" said Pearce, his voice choking with anticipation. "Unbutton, Sir!"

I watched as the man took off his coat and lace collar and began loosening his shirt. He let the shirt fall to the floor. Bound to his chest, and covering his heart, was a steel plate. Pearce, at this moment, took a handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his moist brow. The man removed the plate, under which was a wad of linen, a little stained with pus.

Carefully, he unbound the linen and revealed to us a large hole in his breast, about the size of a Pippin apple, in the depths of which, as I leaned forward to look more closely at it, I saw a

pink and moist fleshy substance, moving all the time with a regular pulse.

"See?" exclaimed Pearce, the heat of whose excited body seemed to fill the room with a tropical dampness. "See it retract and thrust out again? We are witnessing a living, beating heart!"

The man smiled and nodded. "Yes," he said. "A fracture of my ribs, occasioned by a fall from my horse two years ago, was brought to a terrible suppuration, voiding such a quantity of putrefaction that my doctors feared it would never heal. It did, however. You can see the sconce of the old ulcer at the edge of the hole here. But its ravages were so deep as to expose the organ beneath."

I was dumbfounded. To observe, in a living being, standing nonchalantly by a fire, as if about to welcome friends for a few rounds of Bezique, the systole and diastole of his heart affected me profoundly. I began to understand why Pearce was in such a lather of excitement. But then – and this is why I set down the incident as a possible beginning to the story now unfolding round me – Pearce produced a shilling from the greasy leather purse in which he kept his pitiful worldly income and gave it to the stranger, and the man took it and said: "You may touch it if you wish."

I let Pearce go first. I saw his thin, white hand creep forwards and tremblingly enter the thoracic cavity. The man remained still and smiling. He didn't flinch. "You may," he said to Pearce, "put your hand around the heart and exert gentle pressure."

Pearce's thin mouth dropped open. Then he swallowed and withdrew his hand. "I cannot do that, Sir," he stammered.

"Then perhaps your friend will?" said the man.

I rolled back the lace at my wrist. Now, my own hand was shaking. I remembered that, just prior to Pearce's appearance in my room, I had cast two pieces of coal onto my fire and hadn't washed my hands since, but only wiped them carelessly on the seat of my breeches. I examined my palm for coal dust. It was faintly smudged with grey. I licked it and rubbed it again on my velvet buttocks. The open-hearted man watched me with an utter lack of concern. At my elbow, Pearce, in his vaporous dampness, was breathing irritatingly through his mouth.

My hand entered the cavity. I opened my fingers and, with the same care I had applied, as a boy, to the stealing of eggs from birds' nests, took hold of the heart. Still, the man showed no sign of pain. Fractionally, I tightened my grip. The beat remained strong and regular. I was about to withdraw my hand when the stranger said: "Are you touching the organ, Sir?"

"Yes," I said, "don't you feel the pressure of my fingers?"

"No. I feel nothing at all."

Pearce's breathing, at my side, was rasping, like that of a hounded rodent. A pearl of sweat teetered on the tip of his pink nose. And my own mind was now forced to contemplate an astounding phenomenon: I am encircling a human heart, a living human heart with my hand. I am now, in fact, squeezing it with controlled but not negligible force. And the man suffers no pain whatsoever.

Ergo, the organ we call the heart and which is defined, in our human consciousness, as the seat – or even deified as the throne – of all powerful emotion, from unbearable sorrow to ecstatic love, is in itself utterly without feeling.

I withdrew my hand. I felt as full of trouble as my poor Quaker friend, to whom I would have turned for a tot of brandy, except that I knew he never had any. So while our visitor calmly strapped on his linen pad and his steel plate and stooped to pick up his shirt, Pearce and I sat down on his extremely hard settle and were, for a good few minutes, devoid of words.

From that day, I was unable to have the same reverence for my own heart as other men have for theirs.

3. My father was appointed glovemaker to the restored King in January 1661.

I was by then at the Royal College of Physicians, after four years at Padua, studying under the great anatomist, Fabricius. I was at work on a paper entitled "The Footsteps of Disease: a Discussion of the Importance of the Seats of Tumours and Other Malign Diversities in the Recognition and Treatment of Illness". But I was becoming lazy. Several mornings a week, I would sleep late at my lodgings, instead of attending, as I was pledged to do, the Poor Sick of St Thomas's. Several afternoons, I would

walk in Hyde Park, with the purpose only of snaffling and leading to what I call the Act of Oblivion some plump whore – when I should have been at lectures.

The truth is that, when the King returned, it was as if self-discipline and drudgery had exploded in a clap of laughter. I became much too excited by and greedy for life to spend much of it at work. Women were cheaper than claret, so I drank women. My thirst for them was, for a time, unquenchable. I tumbled them riotously. Two at a time, I longed to take them, immodestly, like the wild hogs whose hair my own spare locks resemble. In public places even: in the night alleyways, in a hackney coach, on a river barge, in the Pit of the Duke's Playhouse. I dreamed of them. Until the day I went to Whitehall. And after that day – so extraordinary and unforgettable was the impression it made upon me – I started to dream about the King.

Admiration for craft and skill is, I now understand, at the root of the generous but stubborn nature of King Charles II. He took my father into his service because he recognised in him the dedicated, skilled and single-minded craftsman. Such people delight him because they inhabit an orderly, meticulously defined world and never aspire to cross over into any other. The haberdasher, my father, never considered for one moment becoming, say, a gardener, a gunsmith or a money-lender. He laid out a precise territory with his skill and kept within it. And King Charles, while trying on a pair of my father's exquisitely moulded kid gloves, revealed to him that this was how he hoped the English people would behave during his reign, "each," he said, "in his appointed station, profession, calling or trade. And all contented in them, so there is no jostling and bobbing about and no one getting above himself. In this way, we shall have peace, and I will be able to rule."

I don't know how my father answered him, but I do know that it was on this occasion that the King promised, "at some future time, when you are bringing me gloves", to show my father the collection of clocks and watches he kept in his private Study.

No doubt my father bowed humbly. Very few people ever enter the King's Study. The only key is kept by his personal

servant, Chiffinch. And it was at this moment – on his knees, perhaps? – that my father spoke up for me and asked the King whether he could bring his only son, from the Royal College of Physicians, to make his acquaintance, "in case His Majesty should ever have need of an additional physician in his household . . . a physician for the People of the Bedchamber, perhaps, or even for the scullery boys . . ."

"By all means," it seems the King replied, "and we will show him the clocks, too. As an anatomist, I expect he will be interested in their mechanical complexity."

So, on a November afternoon, with a chill wind blowing him forward up Ludgate Hill, my father arrived at my lodgings. I was, as had become my habit on a Tuesday, engaged in the Act of Oblivion with the wife of a ferryman called Rosie Pierpoint. Her laugh was as rich and juicy as that part of her anatomy she coyly referred to as her Thing. Encircled both by the Thing and the laughter, I was giggling ecstatically and bumping so energetically towards my brief Paradise, that I didn't see or hear my father as he entered my room. I must have been a risible sight: my breeches and stockings still tangled round my ankles, the sandy hogs' hair that sprouts in the crease of my bottom unflatteringly visible, Mrs Pierpoint's legs flailing either side of my back, like a circus tumbler's. I blush to remember that my own father saw me like this and, when he was consumed by fire a year later, I had, in the midst of great sorrow, the cheering thought that at least this memory burned with his poor brain.

An hour later, my father and I were at Whitehall. I had put on the cleanest coat I could find. I had washed all trace of Rosie Pierpoint's rouge from my face. My hair lay concealed and tamed under my wig. I had polished my shoes with a little furniture oil. I was excited, eager and full of admiration for the attention my father appeared to be getting from the King. But then, as we walked down the Stone Gallery towards the Royal apartments, I felt myself suddenly hesitate, gasping for breath. The public wandered freely here and all the people we passed looked at ease. But, to me, it was as if the presence of the King had altered the air.

"Come on," said my father. "Thanks to your acrobatics, we're already late."

The doors to the Royal apartments were guarded, but were opened to my father's nod. He held, over his arm, a silk pouch containing two pairs of satin gloves. We entered a Drawing Room. A fire was roaring under a vast marble mantel. After the chill of the gallery, I would have moved towards it, except that by now I felt almost too weak to move at all and wondered whether I was going to inconvenience my father (who had had enough embarrassment for one day) by falling down in a faint.

Moments passed, as if in a distorted, dreamlike time. A servant came out of the King's bedchamber and asked us to go in. I felt us glide, like skaters, across thirty feet of Persian carpet, stumble through the great gilded doors and fall flat on our faces at the feet of a pair of the longest, most elegant legs I had ever seen.

I realised, after a moment, that we were not prostrate, but only kneeling. Somehow, we the skaters hadn't fallen. This in itself seemed to be a miracle, because everything around me – the canopied bed, the candle sconces, even the brocaded walls themselves – appeared to be moving, coming in and out of focus, first clear, then dim.

Then a voice spoke: "Merivel. And who is this?"

These days, enmeshed as I am in the tangle of the story, the voice returns to me frequently: *Merivel. And who is this?* First my name. Then a denial of all knowledge of me. *Merivel. And who is this?* And the memory is so fitting. I am not now the Merivel I was that day. On that November afternoon, I was shown a roomful of clocks, chiming and ticking in disunion. I was offered a sweetmeat, but could not swallow it. I was asked questions, but could not answer them. A dog snuffled at my foot and the touch of its nose felt repellent, like the touch of a reptile.

After an interminable time (and I do not know to this day how that time was filled up) I was out in the gallery again with my father, who began to shout at me for being a dumbchuck and a fool.

I walked alone back to Ludgate and climbed wearily to my room. There, in my shabby loft, the enormity of what had

happened became suddenly and terrifyingly visible to me, as if a nest of maggots had all at once broken out of the wall. I had been within a glove's length of obtaining power, and I had not taken it. It had been there for me, and now it had gone for ever.

I began, like a pig in pain, to howl.

4. It is not clear what started the fire in my father's workshop in the New Year of 1662. It was of course crammed with wooden boxes and shelves holding the flammable materials of his trade: felt, buckram, goatskin, fur, lace, feathers, ribbons and bales of satin, camlet and silk. A small blaze begun by an upturned oil lamp or candle would have had ample substance on which to feed.

All that is known is that the fire began in the late evening, engulfed the workroom and spread ravenously upwards to my parents' apartments, where, it seems, they were at supper. Their servant, Latimer, managed to open a small skylight onto the roof, to scramble up and endeavour to haul his elderly master and mistress to safety. My mother had a hold of Latimer's hand when she suddenly fell back, retching and choking on the smoke. My father tried to lift her up again towards Latimer, but she was unconscious in his arms.

"Fetch a rope!" my father screamed, perhaps, but his instructions were muffled by the dinner napkin he had tied round his nose and mouth and Latimer could not make out what he was saying. He stared helplessly in, while all the time the smoke became thicker and darker and to belch out in his face while he clung precariously to the leads of the roof. He told me, in the bitter chill of the following morning: "I watched them die, Mr Robert. I would have given all my life's wages to save them, but I could not."

The burial was well attended. Lady Newcastle, for whom my father had made moleskin eye patches, arrived in a black coach with her horses decked with black plumes. The King sent two Gentlemen of the Bedchamber. Amos Treefeller, now in his dotage, hired a sedan-chair to carry him to the graveside, where he began to blub. The January wind carried the prayers up and away into silence.

The following day, I was summoned back to Whitehall.

The death of my kindly parents, as well as slaking for the time being my thirst for women, set moving in my anatomist's brain an acute awareness of the speed at which the body can succumb to death. I am not squeamish. At Padua, short of cadavers in the summer months, Fabricius once conducted an anatomy lesson on the body of a pauper that had been floating in the river for three days. The German students, notorious for their interruptions and disorderly behaviour, now took to vomiting and swearing all round me. I stayed perfectly well and calm and took notes as Fabricius worked. However, after my mother and father perished, I looked at my own body, of which I had never been at all proud, with a new distaste, with a new antipathy and with a new fear. And it was this fear which, in the contradictory workings of the world, brought me to the honour about to be conferred on me. Fear of death, you see, had lessened, if not obliterated, my fear of power. So when summoned to Whitehall, I was no longer overcome by the scent of majesty and thus no longer idiotic and dumb. My poor father would have been very pleased, in fact, by the way in which I was able to conduct myself.

The King received me in his Drawing Room. He talked at length and most flatteringly about my father's skill. He repeated his theory that no man should get above himself, but know his own talents and his own degree. I nodded and bowed. Then he said: "Out of my affection and admiration for your late father I have summoned you, Merivel."

"Yes, Sire," I said. "Thank you."

"But I have a task for you, a task in which you must succeed, because my heart will suffer very much if you fail."

"Did you know, Your Majesty," I ventured, "that the human heart – the organ itself, that is – has no feeling?"

He looked at me with sorrow. "Ah, Merivel," he said, "where have you learned that?"

"I have seen it, Sir."

"Seen it? But what we see is but a fraction of what it is. You, as a physician, must no doubt have understood that. Look at my hand, for instance. Wearing a glove made by your late father.

What we *see* is the excellent glove, a little rucked on my fourth finger by the large sapphire ring I am fond of wearing. Whereas, underneath the glove is the hand itself, capable of a thousand movements, *en l'air* like a dancer, supplicant like a beggar, fisted like a ruffian, in prayer like a bishop . . . but then again of what fantastic complexity is the arrangement of bones in the hand . . ."

He went on to describe, with some degree of accuracy, the skeletal structure of the human hand. By the time he had finished, I thought it prudent not to return to the subject of the heart, but to allow him to come at last to his reasons for calling me to the palace.

"One of my dogs appears to be dying," he said. "The veterinary surgeon has bled him repeatedly, shaved the hair off his back in order to cup him, has tried without success lesions, emetics and purges, but the little creature doesn't rally. If you can cure him, Merivel, I will offer you a place here as a Court Physician."

I knelt. Aghast, I noticed there was a stain of boiled egg on the thigh of my breeches. "Thank you, Sir," I stammered.

"I will have you taken to the dog immediately, Merivel. Food and drink and night linen will be brought to you and any surgical instruments you may need made available to you. You will stay until the dog dies or recovers. Call for any medicines you deem suitable."

"Yes, Sir."

"The dog's name is Bibillou. He also answers to Bibi and Lou-Lou."

"Lou-Lou, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. Your own name, by the way, has a very pleasing cadence."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Merivel. Very pretty, to my ear."

I left the royal presence and followed two servants down acres (or should I say *hectares*, in that the King appears committed to distributing French names everywhere?) of corridor. I was shown into a pleasant bedroom, with a view of the river and the crowded wharves. A fire had been lit. In front of the fire, in a

little basket, a brown and white Spaniel was lying. Its body was pitifully thin and its breath rasping. On a table near the window, a decanter of claret, a goblet and a dish of Portuguese figs had been placed. Laid over the bed was a fine linen nightshirt and a matching nightcap, which, once the servants had left me alone with the dog, I immediately put on, suffering as I was that day from a scabrous itching under my wig. I also removed my shoes and coat and poured myself a glass of claret.

I felt extraordinarily tired. I had slept badly since the fire, but it was more a total exhaustion of the mind, rather than of the body, that I felt. I was glad to be alone. I took the claret over to the bed and half reclined on it, sipping the wine greedily, like a Roman senator. Once or twice, I glanced in the direction of the dog. It twitched and whimpered in its dreams. "Lou-Lou," I called softly, but it didn't stir. Presently, I told myself, I will get up and examine the dog and see what can be done. Meanwhile, I went on drinking the claret, which was some of the finest I'd ever tasted, and soon began to feel a delicious ease, like velvet, caressing my mind. Once, experiencing a sudden hunger, I forced myself to get up and eat a couple of figs, but my body felt as heavy and unsteady as a barrel of eels in a swell, and I stumbled back to the bed, where I passed out in a stupor of claret and delayed grief for my parents' dying.

I slept, it seems, for seven hours. When I awoke, it was dark, but my room had been lit with candles and a supper of roast partridges and boiled salad placed on the claret table. Had the servants tried to wake me? If so, they would have had to report to the King that Physician Merivel lay in a drunken sleep, with his nightcap fallen over his eyes. I groaned. For the second time, I had been near to preferment, and yet again I had let it elude me.

I got up, my legs still unsteady. I knelt down by the fire, which still burned well, with fresh logs laid on it by the invisible servants. I stroked the head of poor Lou-Lou. To my surprise, he opened a watery brown eye and looked at me. I bent and listened to his breathing. The rasp in it had lessened. I looked in his mouth. His tongue was swollen and his muzzle dry. I

fetched water from my washstand and spooned a little into his mouth. He lapped it with all the eagerness a sick Spaniel can muster. It is as if, I said to myself, the purging and vomiting he's been forced to endure has drained his body of its vital moisture. And with this realisation, I suddenly saw that my hopes of curing the dog were probably greater now than they had been when I had arrived eight hours before. My own neglect of him could, indeed, be the key to his recovery. For while I'd slept, he'd been left alone, possibly for the first time in several days and nights, and nature had had a chance to work quietly within him.

"*Studenti!*" Fabricius would thunder, his voice echoing like the word of God round the tiers of his primitive anatomy theatre. "*Non dimenticare la natura!* Do not forget nature! For nature is a better doctor than any of you – particularly you Germans, who are so noisy – are ever likely to be!"

I watched over Lou-Lou for the next seventeen hours. I sent for alcohol to dress the boils and lesions made by the cuppings, but otherwise I didn't touch him, only gave him water, and when his fever lessened, fed him morsels of partridge mashed in my own mouth. By the following night, when a meal of guinea fowl, cream and radishes was brought to me, I was confident that he wouldn't die. And I was right. Four days later, I carried him to the King's bedchamber and set him on the Royal lap, where he stood entranced and wagged his tail.

5. The fifth beginning is the strangest, the most unlooked for and the most momentous. Without it, the story in which I find myself would not have happened as it has.

I can tell it with reasonable brevity. (I am, unlike Pearce, usually able to come swiftly to the *point* of a story, whereas his tales are so larded with lugubrious metaphysical observations that his audience is prone to lose the thread of the thing almost before he's begun.) Here it is then:

I abandoned my studies at the Royal College and my lodgings at Ludgate. I was allotted two pleasant rooms inside the Palace, which lacked only, alas, a view of the river, which was of great fascination to me, in all its hubbub, vagabondage and changing

light. My duties were defined as follows: "The daily Care and Comfort of the eighteen Royal Dogs, with, as required, the right to perform operations upon them, prescribe Remedy for Disease and do all in my power to ensure the Continuity of their Life." The stipend paid to me was one hundred livres per annum, and this, added to the two hundred and thirty-seven livres left to me and mercifully found unharmed in my parents' damp cellar, was quite enough to keep me in good claret, high-heeled shoes, silk coats, Brussels lace and well-made wigs for the foreseeable future. Astonishing good fortune had, in short, fallen on me ("All undeserving you are, Merivel," noted Pearce, who was struggling on, trying to cure the paupers of St Barts and – ghastly enterprise – the lunatics of Bedlam).

I celebrated by visiting Mrs Pierpoint, getting drunk with her at the Leg Tavern and tumbling her in a muddy ditch on Hampstead Fields. Afterwards, she had the temerity to ask me whether, now that I was in the King's employ, I could get some position at Court for the uncouth Mr Pierpoint, who is a mere bargeman, and I learned at once a lesson I never let myself forget: that power and success carry in their train a clamouring queue of greasers and supplicants, the noise and sight of which haunt my private pleasures and my dreams, but from whom multifarious and handsome bribes may very often be had.

A year passed most profitably and pleasurably. My nature, I quickly understood, was in every particular well suited to life at Court. My fondness for gossip and laughter, my brimming appetites, my tendency to sartorial chaos and my trick of farting at will made me one of the most popular men at Whitehall. Few games of Cribbage or Rummy were started without me, few musical evenings or *soirées dansantes* were given to which I was not invited. Women found me hilarious and in magnificent numbers allowed me to tickle not only their humours but their charming and irresistible centres of pleasure, and I seldom slept alone. And – most fortunate of all – the King showed towards me from the start a most flattering affection, stemming, he told me, not only from my curing of Lou-Lou, but from my ability to amuse him. I was, I suppose, his Fool. When I made him hold

his sides with laughter, he would beckon me to him, take hold of my squashed nose with his elegant hand and draw me towards him in order to smack an affectionate kiss on my mouth.

After a while, I realised that he actively sought my company and this realisation was to me a most astounding thing. He would show me his gardens and his orchards and his tennis court, and began coaching me at tennis, at which I proved more adept and nimble than I expected. He gave me presents: a handsome French clock from the collection I'd seen that first afflicting day, a set of voluminous striped table napkins, large enough to cover my whole suiting while I ate, lending me the risible appearance of a man in a tent and thus causing mirth at the dinner table, and a dog of my own, a sweet Spaniel bitch he insisted I christen Minette, after his own adored sister.

Impossible to say I wasn't happy. My half-finished knowledge of medicine was adequate to keep the dogs well, particularly dogs fed on milk and beef and bedded in warm rooms. And as to comfort, diversion and women, I had all any man could ask. I was growing fat and a trifle indolent, but then so were many at Court, not possessed of King Charles's great energy and curiosity. When Pearce visited me, he grew white and rigid at the sight of so much profane luxury. "This age suffers from a woeful moral blindness," he said stonily.

And then . . .

On an April morning, the King sent for me.

"Merivel," he said, "I want you to get married."

"*Married*, Sir?"

"Yes."

"Marriage, Sire, is not, has never been, on my mind . . ."

"I know. I'm not asking you to want it. I'm asking you to *do* it, as a favour to me."

"But – "

"Have I not done very many favours to you, Merivel?"

"Yes, Sir."

"*Voilà!* You owe me at least this one. And there will be compensations. I propose to give you the Garter, so that your bride will have a title, albeit a modest one. And small but agreeable estates in Norfolk I have confiscated from a recalci-

trant Anti-Monarchist. So arise, Sir Robert, and go to your duty without hesitation or barter."

I knelt. We were in the Royal Bedchamber and from the adjoining study came the disunified tick-tocking and pinging of the clocks, which perfectly mirrored, at that moment, my own confused thoughts.

"Well?" said the King.

I looked up. The Royal visage was smiling at me benignly. The Royal fingers caressed the dark brown moustache.

"Who . . .?" I stammered.

The King leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "Ah yes. The bride. It is, of course, Celia Clemence."

The knee on which my weight was balanced trembled and then tottered beneath me. I fell sideways into the carpet. I heard the King chuckle.

"It means, of course, that you – and possibly she – will have to spend some time in Norfolk, thus depriving me of your respective companies now and then. But this is a sacrifice I am prepared to make."

I endeavoured to right myself, but my left knee had gone suddenly numb and wouldn't support me, so I had no alternative but to lie in a kind of foetal heap by the Royal footstool.

"I don't," said the King, "need to explain myself further, do I, Merivel?"

"Well, Sir . . ."

"I do? I'm surprised at you. I thought you were one of the most knowledgeable people at Court."

"No, it is merely that this is . . . this matter is . . . somewhat difficult for me to grasp."

"I can't for the life of me see why. It is childishly simple, Merivel. The frequent presence of Celia Clemence in my bed has become a necessity in my life. I am, as everyone knows, utterly beguiled by her. Likewise, my *grand amour*, Barbara Castlemaine, is absolutely essential to my continuing health and well-being. In short, I love and need both mistresses, but I have no wish to continue to endure Lady Castlemaine's tantrums on the subject of Miss Clemence. They make me edgy and give me indigestion. So she must be married at once – the better

that I may come by her again secretly, without Castlemaine's knowledge. But to whom must I marry her? Not, I think, to a powerful aristocrat, who will soon irritate me profoundly by starting to consider his own position and honour. No. What I am looking for in Celia's husband is a man who will enjoy and profit from his estates and title, and who will be kindly and amusing company to his bride on the rare occasions he is with her, but who is far too enamoured of women in general to make the mistake of loving any particular one. And in you, Merivel, I have surely made the perfect choice. Have I not? You also, as I am fond of observing, have a pleasingly fashionable name. To ask Celia to become – in name alone, of course – Lady Merivel, is something I feel I can undertake with equanimity."

So that was it, uttered: the fifth beginning.

The dogs were to be taken from my care and in their place was to be put the youngest of the King's mistresses. The practical matter which most absorbed me, as I left the King's presence, was that I could not remember how far from and in what relation to (viz. north-east or directly north of) London lay the county of Norfolk.