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Infernal Relations

By
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Chapter One

I was idling in my Cambridge retreat, away from all the strife that seems to originate in my world, watching a children's game of cricket and feeling that life couldn't have been any rosier when I had the first inkling that my present tranquillity would soon be upended. A sense of foreboding generally manifests itself whenever a return to the family home of Lockwood is brewing and, with a new term in the offing, I was in its thrall. This climactic upheaval rampages over my oasis like a monsoon. It haunts me every year, but little could I have known that these particular pangs were the harbingers of circumstances that would harrow the soul and boggle the mind at every turn.

It's not my usual practice to spectate when the standard of play is so pitiful and I was poised to turn away when something seemed to herald an intriguing shift in the dynamics. Until then I'd always assumed it was better to fasten a heavy object to a stout rod to really fling it, but here came clear evidence that it's far better, if you want to achieve more in the way of centrifugal force, if it's gripped and swung by something pathetically weedy. In this instance it was the bowling arm of a spindly boy with a floppy middle parting. Whether this unruliness was a deliberate ploy to appear more menacing was unclear, but after setting off in the direction of the pavilion and coming to a stop near the boundary line, this runt of the brood turned sharply and scrambled to the pitch and let loose what became, for a time, a new direction in the weaponisation of circular objects. The delayed release, when it came, carried such snap and velocity on the bounce that the batsman, an oversized and surly blighter, was a sitting duck when he was clattered roundly on the chin.

The viewing public recognised immediately that they had witnessed a once-in-a-generation breakthrough and were unreserved in their hoots of 'bravo' and 'I say!' Once the applause had petered out and all that could be heard was the bawling batsman, from out of the pavilion poked the bald dome of what I

took to be the teacher responsible for these urchins. Rising to his full six foot four he strode intently across, covering ground quickly and, arriving at the snivelling mass, made a firm delivery of his own by landing a glancing blow just above the boy's ear.

'Stop your whining!'

This display of sporting decency proved so popular with the viewers that pretty soon a standing ovation was acknowledging this blow for civilisation.

I was watching this triumphant spectacle through the window from my chaise longue and feeling an affinity for this hero of our times when I felt a full-on drowsiness come over me. I had noticed this tendency of late. You may have experienced it yourself perhaps. There you are in the middle of the afternoon thoroughly absorbed in something, actively taking part I mean, and your attention starts to ebb. This typically encourages others to repeat things you were glad you missed the first time. Setting things straight, you lay the problem squarely at your posture and explain that there's nothing physicians can do about it and, after shifting in your seat, you issue a polite 'do go on' before restoring the blindfold.

Truth be told, I had a longing for the licence that accompanies the time of life when it's dashed proper to be seen with mouth open and feet over the arm of the settee in the afternoon. Why, I wonder, should this practice be confined to the seniors? And I had it on good authority that I wasn't alone in my thinking. Inasmuch as there ever can be such a thing, there might be said to be public discussion under way at the time on the subject from all thinking quarters and I remember distinctly it was a chap from the British Medical Something Or Other who published a piece attributing the malaises of the day to the scourge of hurry and excitement of modern life. He didn't refer to it as a scourge, as I recall, but we seem to share opinions on the topic so I feel at liberty to paraphrase the fellow. I had also read about these hunter-gatherer types who, when they weren't slaying something, would be getting their full complement of forty winks. For these enlightened philosophers, it seemed there was nothing better than to put up a sign and turn out the light.

I became so curious about the subject that I added a few volumes to the library and made a point to digest them as soon as I found them again. Even so, the present inducement to clock out was particularly intoxicating. No sooner had I twanged the blindfold than I sank into a recurring dream that distresses me greatly at this time of year.

It begins with a brusque man with bristly mutton chops and a bushy moustache ordering me to go to a secluded spot surrounded by miles of forest. There I am greeted by a doddering old man who, while complaining of lumbago, leads me through the impressive grounds past a perfectly fine mansion towards a complex of decrepit dorms and outbuildings towards the place he calls my residence where he deposits my four cases before shuffling off. The purpose of my visit – to join the other jobwalas in the whole shabby enterprise.

I had got half-way through this harrowing torture of the subconscious when I felt a tickle in my right ear lobe and, suddenly, a rush of blinding light invaded my dulled senses triggering a bout of violent sneezes. Throughout this onslaught I discerned the sound of gleeful laughter. It was a man's voice. After the sound of furious scribbling came a sharp snap and a tiny projectile shot into my ear canal. With a heavy tut there came a mumbling about the sub-standard quality of utensils nowadays which revealed to me the identity of my molester – it was my cursed cousin, Monty. With his parents to thank for much of my upbringing, I bear something of a fraternal responsibility for this pestilential relation who can be relied upon to blot an otherwise peaceful existence. I was in such sporting bliss that I'd forgotten that he was visiting.

'Ah-ha, it lives!' he said as I struggled to lift my head. Trying desperately to shake off the lethargy, I felt like an opium enthusiast after a considerable dose.

'The creature rose in a fit of fury,' Monty gibbered excitedly, scrambling for another pencil. I lost no time in getting down to the nub.

'What the dickens are you doing?'

'No cause for alarm,' he said, 'it's what are referred to in the field as side-effects.'

He said this as though he were an eminent diagnostician on the frontier of a ground-breaking discovery.

‘You know,’ he continued, ‘symptoms which stubbornly persist where they’re not wanted. Like misfits at a soirée.’

‘I know what fismits are, thank you, doctor,’ I said, clouting my ear to dislodge the broken tip. ‘But of what, exactly?’

‘I’m testing the efficacy of this,’ he said, handing me a semi-transparent vial. I squinted woozily in vain at the bizarre markings on the label. Nobody has been found who can interpret Monty’s Palaeolithic scrawl.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Well, bromide, of course.’

‘What!’ I thundered.

Without waiting to hear any more I yanked the stethoscope from his neck and wedged the filthy earpieces firmly in my ears. Holding them tightly, I closed my eyes and tried to listen to my insides. It was appalling. I mean to say, I’d never stood on the precipice peering into a volcano, but I’d say the sound of gloopy bubbling molten lava would be the same in every particular. I felt myself becoming delirious and I was soon overwhelmed with visions of descending into a fiery pit. As I shook my head to stop myself plunging deeper into the inferno, I could hear Monty babbling away unintelligibly. While I wrestled with my slipping consciousness I was fixed by an inescapable feeling of pity that it was just my misfortune to be related to a sadist, when I opened my eyes to see he was still holding the chest-piece to his torso. By Jove! the relief was overwhelming.

I tottered to my feet and surveyed my surroundings. An assortment of pharmacological volumes from my bookshelves were strewn over the floor. It took a moment, but eventually I pieced it together. I’d seen this infestation take root in Monty before. Ever since taking on the role of the Danish prince in the blasted play that cannot be named, with its cackling witches and their potions, a feverish curiosity had been awakened in him. Entirely how it was that Monty had come to manifest a propensity for experimenting with solubles is a subject best unravelled by the field of

psychotherapy, but I'd long come to the conclusion that probing into his subconscious would yield no answers, only questions.

Even so, little did I expect him to unleash his obsession on me in this ghastly way. Still shaky and with my throat parched, I was poised to confront the fellow when he raised a hand.

'No need to thank me, old man.'

I was stupefied.

'Thank you?'

'Really no need. I know how much you enjoy slipping into a bit of quiet time on the settee so I prepared a concoction.'

Lucky for me that he hadn't flipped to the pages on trepanning. This was Monty all over. What the Germans call an Einfaltspinsel – fascinated by everything, good at nothing. And yet here was this busy little Erasmus reworking the enlightenment for his own twisted ends. I mean, no one could argue that an injection of knowledge in Montgomery Fipps wouldn't be a welcome development on all sides. In fact, I'd be the last to fault his pursuit of it. If only it weren't the clambering, clodhopping kind. I was preparing to have it out with him when he said something which altered my outlook completely.

'I'll just finish this batch and you can keep it with you always.'

I felt the immediate outrage subsiding at these words.

'Hmm.'

Many deep breaths later, seeing that I was no worse for wear, I reflected on the upside of having the essence of nature's sweet restorer to hand. I imagined myself slipping into the land of nod on a whim and I found myself strangely more forgiving of Monty using me as a lab rat for his beastly experiments. The path of human advancement, I told myself, is often the story of the unlikeliest of persons stumbling upon something of utility.

So, in the interests of science I told him I was resolved to think it over. He rubbed his hands together, happy to have helped a friend get more pleasure in life, or rather in sleep.

'I think I missed my calling as an apothecary,' he said, reclining. He sat with his arms behind his head as if concluding a seminar at the Royal Institute. And this from the chump who should have been in our home town of Winsbrook attired in breeches and ruffs

rehearsing for an amateur production of Hamlet as the eponymous brooding prince, of all things.

He'd posted me a tea-stained copy of the Winsbrook Repertory Bulletin some time ago, presumably so I might rejoice in the news of his casting, but truth be told, I was rather taken aback that he'd been selected to front it. I mean, this seemed a far cry from school productions which generally consisted of him dressing up as foliage, waving to his latest love interest in the audience during the quiet moments.

A few days later came his unexpected arrival at my residence, which shattered the solitude. He clattered my knocker like an outlaw ducking the imminent clasp of Scotland Yard.

'Monty?' I said, peering at the slovenly figure before me.

'Shh,' he said, pushing past me and ripping off the false beard.

'What the...'

He looked positively haunted.

'I've come to stay, Spencer. You don't mind, do you?'

I pondered this for a moment, but eventually relented. I often wonder if I should have been less hasty. I asked if he'd been given the boot from work again, but he pooh-poohed the idea. Then, no sooner had he sat down than he sprang up and wandered over to the window. After scanning the street thoroughly he seemed satisfied that the coast was clear and returned to his seat. He cut a perturbed figure and I could see that this was a time for drastic measures.

'Drink?' I said.

I poured two, but before I had time to take a seat, he'd snaffled his, so I placed the brandy bottle on the table.

'Don't mind if I top myself, do you?' he said, reaching for it.

'By all means.'

One learns to appreciate Monty's malapropisms. He glugged feverishly at the sort of measure usually reserved for a chap who's fallen overboard. As I examined the shambolic wretch before me I was reminded of something.

'Just a minute,' I said, after it eventually dawned on me, 'aren't you supposed to be in rehearsal?'

'Ha!' he exclaimed. 'Fat chance.'

I eyed him askance. There was something distinctly evasive in his manner. This could mean only one thing.

‘You mean you’ve been kicked out of the play?’

‘Certainly not!’ he said, haughtily. He rose to his feet and began pacing the room. ‘Certain creative differences have surfaced, that’s all.’

‘I see,’ I said, playing along. ‘You’ve parted brass rags.’

‘Don’t be absurd,’ he said. ‘The idea. I’m just—’

‘Extricating oneself from a tight spot?’

He thought for a moment.

‘You could say that.’

‘By removing oneself from the production.’

‘Exactly.’

‘To lie low for a spell.’

‘Quite so,’ he said, fingering his collar.

‘Staying at arm’s length.’

‘That’s it, blast you.’

This lingered in the air for a moment. Then in an instant his expression soured and he crumpled.

‘Oh,’ he wailed, landing heavily on the chair, ‘you’ve hit the nail on the crux of it, curse you.’

Monty’s defences, such as they are, have a tendency to buckle under the slightest questioning and open up like a burst dam when sufficiently lubricated. And since I felt instinctively that we were getting to the essence, I pressed on with the zeal of a Spanish Inquisitor and lo and behold! the truth came tumbling out of him.

‘It’s all to do with this blasted Ophelia female.’

‘I might’ve guessed,’ I said at the inevitability of this. I popped on the blindfold. ‘Do go on.’

‘I was having an innocent chuckle with what’s-his-name—’

‘Whose name?’

‘That gentleman I fall out with to the death.’

‘Fall out with to the death...’ I repeated, wondering which of the Bard’s creations he was referring to. As I generally preferred the classics, I clutched a few straws.

‘Duncan?’

‘No.’

‘Mercutio?’

He thought for a second.

‘No.’

I shrugged in the end.

‘Laertes!’ he said, suddenly remembering.

‘Oh, you mean Miles.’

‘Who?’

‘Miles Partington-Smythe. He’s the chap you mean. Looks like—’

‘Goliath. That’s the chap. Anyway, we were getting along swimmingly until I said that if I didn’t know better, I was convinced this Ophelia minx had been giving me the come on.’

I heard Monty pouring himself another moderate skinful.

‘And?’

‘Well, you could’ve knocked me down with a feather,’ he said, taking a generous swig. ‘Until then, he’d been a paragon of gentleness. Then that innocent little remark of mine seemed to unleash his inner beast.’

‘Oh, how so?’

‘The blighter threatened to savage me.’

‘Go on,’ I said. ‘What else?’

‘What else?’ he said, aghast. ‘Spencer, he wants to tear my ruddy limbs off.’

I stole a peek under the blinkers at his weedy extremities.

‘Legs or arms?’ I said, settling back under them. ‘I’m trying to picture the scene.’

‘Will you take that blasted thing off!’ he snapped, whipping the blindfold off me.

An awkward lull ensued. I couldn’t help feel that he was getting a bit hot under the collar over the whole business.

‘Hang on,’ I said, some of the story coming back to me, ‘aren’t fisticuffs part of the plot?’

He beamed in the manner of a mentor seeing his slow-witted protégé finally grasp the elementals.

‘Glory be!’ he said, throwing his hands in the air.

I humoured the fellow. It's the only way with Monty.

'I see,' I said, catching on. 'So, this playful badinage was your way of binding the company in ties of friendship, was it?'

'Exactly! But Miles didn't see it that way. He said I'd besmirched his good wife's name.'

I exercised my cousinly right and issued a disapproving tut.

'Had you?'

'Of course not,' said Monty indignantly. 'I said that I hadn't said a word against his good wife. But, beckoning him closer for a friendly word in his ear, I said, "But if I were you, old man, I'd stick closely to the good one".'

'Sounds friendly enough to me.'

'You'd think so,' he said in an aggrieved tone. 'But he didn't. He just turned purple in the cheeks and vented, "Ophelia is my good wife, you son of a—" something I won't repeat.'

'Crikey.'

The way Monty had set out the scene, it was all beginning to sound a bit Greek to me.

'Just a minute,' I said, revisiting an important detail. 'Exactly how many wives are there in this harem?'

'I don't care and I told him so. I said I couldn't remember how many merry wives he blasted well had, but, "Let's stick to the same play, shall we?"'

'Quite,' I said, suddenly needing a top-up. 'No good if he keeps changing the script. What's she got to do with it anyway?'

'Who?'

'This Osenia wench.'

'Ophelia.'

'That's the one.'

'She's his sister.'

Well, I mean to say, his wife and his sister! This was one beastly revelation too many for my delicate constitution. Frankly, this didn't surprise me in the least. I'd always had my doubts about Shakespeare. And fond as I am of the classics, I'd always hurriedly glossed over any suggestion of this sort of element in the ancient narratives. Anyway, that's where the matter rested for the nonce.

Two days later, during another maddening conversational tussle with Monty, the telephone sprang to life and a formidable female voice demanded to speak to him. Monty shuffled to the telephone and cautiously placed the receiver to his ear. After some stern-sounding one-way conversation pouring into him, I couldn't help notice his countenance undergo a marked change. By the time he'd replaced the receiver he'd taken on the stunned expression of a man who suddenly sees all.

'Oh,' he said, slapping his thighs and breaking into unrestrained mirth. 'Good heavens. You'll never guess.'

He was soon roaring like an imbecile and in the several minutes he took to gather himself I wondered if the day had arrived when the authorities would be called to take him away. Eventually, he put an end to his cackling and, I must say, it was a bit of a jolt to hear him resume this business of the play, loath as I was to hear any more about it, but he seemed intent to persevere deeper into the sordid details.

'I say, do you remember this rotten Ophelia business?'

'Now look here—'

'It's all been straightened out.'

I paused my wriggling.

'Oh,' I said, cheerily. 'With the other wives, you mean?'

I wondered if some sort of entente cordiale had been arranged, but as I studied Monty's demeanour, I noticed a distinct change come over the man. Forty-eight hours ago he had resembled an outcast who had been cruelly misjudged, but now he had the air of a juvenile in the dock confessing before his mother.

'It seems,' he said, suppressing a laugh, 'that it was all a misunderstanding. Ophelia is his good wife, but she's also his only wife.'

I was briefly nonplussed by this.

'So, he's not a profligate cad after all?'

'I know, surprising, isn't it?' confirmed Monty. 'Still, there it is.'

'And this business of Ophelia giving you the come on?'

'Oh, yes, she explained that. She was giving me the come on, but it's what happens in the play, apparently.'

‘Apparently,’ I repeated. ‘So you haven’t read it?’

‘Of course not,’ he scoffed. ‘Imagine doing all that by rote. I glance over my lines before each wotsit...’

‘Act?’

‘Scene. And when others are looking at me expectantly, I know it’s my next line.’

I understand this labour-saving method had enjoyed a brief spell of popularity at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, but had come to an end, like all good things. Thinking back, Monty had always claimed he was destined for the limelight ever since his track record for raising Cain made him a shoo-in to play Pandora in our prep school. And here he was, front and centre this time, in similarly tragic vain. But there was still one burning question preying on my mind.

‘So, does this mean you’ll be returning forthwith?’ I said, hopefully.

He sat bolt upright again, as if reminded of the gravity of the situation.

‘No fear.’

‘Why not?’

‘Miles still wants to pulp me to a paste.’

I was fogged. I mean, I had started out wondering why on earth Miles would be after Monty’s blood in the first place, but as the conversation had drawn on, as any conversation with Monty is apt to do, I had begun to feel deeply for Miles. So much so, I’d started to wonder if the right and proper thing wouldn’t be to hand Monty over and let the limbs fall where they may.

‘It’s better for all that I stay right here,’ he said, ferreting in the liquor cabinet. ‘Do you have any more brandy?’

And that was all there was to it. It didn’t take long for Monty to put the incident behind him. It never does, of course, such is his carefree disposition. If there’s one thing I admire about the old fruit, it’s his natural ability to forget almost anything.

In the present circumstances, however, as I rose from the effects of being dosed and my eyes adjusted to the scene before me, I couldn’t help feel a little miffed at how my modest, but decorous

quarters had taken on a distinctly distressed appearance. Childlike drawings of an unfortunate-looking sleeping human subject appeared to have been flung about the floor, beakers of hellish fluids scattered the dining table and, for reasons that still escape me, a pair of knickerbockers poked out from under the chaise longue, as if it had all got too much and Monty had felt the need to air his lower half. An involuntary shudder ran through me at the grizzly prospect, but in doing so I was able to shake off the immediate signs of chaos and banish them from my mind. A few moments later, as I pondered the looming clouds on the horizon, I came to reflect that I ought to savour this time before the new term at Lockwood officially dawned.

My Cambridge abode is where you'll find me when my services are not required at the family estate in the town of Winsbrook. There doesn't seem to be much call for a co-bursar between the seasons, but lately my time away had become a sort of exile after the commandant – my father – had suggested I go and mind a lighthouse somewhere. So, in all but letter, those were the instructions I'd been carrying out.

Monty's arrival, on the other hand, is as predictable as the flight of the birds and his appearance is assured whenever he can wangle a spot of leave. This is on account of him being employed, if you can fathom such a thing, at Lockwood Institute in the admissions department.

You see, it's like this: we both put in some little time in the employ of my father and in season are resident at Lockwood Institute – a family-owned estate set deep in the heart of Suffolk. Billed as a premier retreat, this secluded nook specialises in the appreciation of humanities, international diplomacy, culture and languages, tailored for late developing youths whose well-meaning parents spend their days idling as civil servants, ministers, freemasons, industrialists, diplomats and dignitaries. Assuring its residents a path to society's most coveted positions, it is, some would say, a fallback option finishing school for the gentry who have failed to acquire the ways of their kith and kin and been denied entry everywhere else. For an establishment whose core mission is to carve out the seasoned men and women of tomorrow, to my mind, a fouler assembly of

merrymaking layabouts you'd be hard-pressed to find in all of creation. Since its inception, like a moth to a bulb, it has attracted a great many obnoxious upstarts on their grand tours. Recognised all over, Lockwood was seen as a byword for the training of men of affairs. That is before it opened its doors to both sexes and gained notoriety for training men in affairs.

Be that as it may, this hive of activity is a kaleidoscopic mix and attracts visitors from all four corners, as it were. It might also be said that Lockwood is to the loafing offspring of dignitaries what a penal colony is to the skulking vagrant. My father maintains that just as the resemblance of Lockwood Institute to a correctional facility is not entirely without substance since it was formerly used in that capacity, when his thoughts turn to the sum total of my contribution, as he puts it, he is struck by how my admission to it seemed destined. And this is just the sort of cutting jibe that I have come to expect tumbling off his lips over the years.

'Chai!' exclaimed Monty as he re-entered hotfooting a tea tray and sloshing the beverage over the length of the carpet. Still under the effects of his latest creation, I was poised to decline, but I was parched and his other propensity for brewing concoctions is well known. By the by, Monty takes a particular pride in the art of tea-making and makes a point to consume this wholesome beverage far more than a man with an occupation ought. To him it is the elixir of health and wisdom. The medicine which breathes life into virtually any stone. He has thought this way ever since he was first sent to stay with his father, my Uncle Cedric, who was on a tour of duty in India. Seeing the young being weaned on it and the sick being healed by it, what other conclusion is there to be drawn? And since his return Monty has been an insatiable glugger of the stuff.

We were just about to settle into it when we heard something shatter. Then came another fracture and for a moment I wondered if it might not be Mrs Fanshaw's brutes next door slinging things. I dashed to the back window, but there was nothing amiss as far as I could see. I hurried to the front window. Ah-ha. There was the saboteur. A hideous black sedan of some description appeared to be

clambering up the driveway and, in front of it on the gravel, lay the remains of a ceramic plant pot.

Monty joined me at the window and I wondered who this interloper was. The reprobate at the wheel, I mean, not Monty.

‘Spencer, the pot.’

I thought this hardly the time to be concerned with the tea. Then he pointed to the heap of broken crockery.

‘Never mind that,’ I said, ‘do you recognise the car?’

He shook his head and we stood watching. The front portion had scaled the drive, but the rear wheels spun endlessly on the gravel. In frustration, the driver floored the accelerator, which sent a spray of pebbles high into the air peppering a local septuagenarian with grit as he passed by. Now, I defy anyone to stand idly by at the sight of an elderly gentleman receiving a blast of gravel to the upper regions without giving some thought to action, so I reasoned pretty firmly as he floundered to scrape the muck from his eyes that if nobody else went to his aid sharpish, I might be forced to take it upon myself. But I hadn’t advanced much further in my thinking when from my peripheral vision I noticed the approaching bus. Looking back to the drive, I couldn’t help notice the car had begun sliding backwards and what with the old man stooping behind it to retrieve his fallen hat, I held my breath and closed my eyes to avoid the inevitable concatenation when there came a loud wrench and the handbrake took hold. The man shambled on, soiled, but unharmed.

In one final push, the driver gave everything until the wheels suddenly gripped and the car surged forward and butted the front wall with the force of a battering ram. It slid back down just enough to leave its rump jutting out, forcing pedestrians into the road.

Monty and I stood frozen in horror wondering which squadron of the local military had come to obliterate my ashram when the car began rocking violently, its springs straining under the apparent bulk contained within. After a struggle the driver’s door swung open and sprang violently back on the fingers clasping the sides. In the months that followed neighbouring streets told of the bloodcurdling cry they had heard that day. A moment later a hefty boot stamped the gravel followed by an almost spherical bald dome. I recognised it

immediately. It was my father's. Sons soon do well to recognise their fathers from all angles, especially such substantial figures as mine.

He rose to his stocky five foot nine and after inspecting his stubby bruised digits, kicked the wheel arch and muttered something which, reading from his lips, I took to be 'foreign junk'. Looking upwards, he squinted and popped his pipe – a comforter for all occasions – into his mouth to survey the surroundings of my suburban retreat. Chez Lockwood Junior consisted of the upper half of a tall terrace of late Victorian construction situated on a road of lively aspect and character. It was evident to me from the way he was squinting from house to house scratching his crown that he was of the mind that in all his puff, of all the hovels most abundantly in need of controlled explosion, mine was top of the list.

He stood for a moment shaking his head and inspecting his bruised hand. As he leaned back, the driver's door clunked shut. Instantly there came panicked knocking from the passenger side window and he began clodhopping round to the other side, his boots sliding on the gravel.

'Just a minute, my love. Let me just, Jesus!' he cried, whipping his hand away from the scalding bonnet. 'I'm moving as fast as I can, my love.'

I took it that this token of affection was intended for Kristina Aptula – odds-on favourite as my stepmother-in-waiting.

If you had said that the old commandant would pair up with one of the more mature inmates at Lockwood Institute, I'd have said the chances were remote but not outside the bounds of possibility. If, on the other hand, you'd said that he would take up with a Bulgarian duchess émigré who would become a permanent fixture in our lives, I'd have taken it as a sign of an irreversible mental condition. But, there in a nutshell, as Monty keeps reminding me, is why my streak at the card table is a losing one.

Sir Walter, as he insists on being called, stomped moodily across the gravel and rang the doorbell. You're familiar with the sort of ringer, I mean. Matrons use them on malingering patients during bed shortages. We didn't dare answer it. It rang again with more gusto this time.

‘Spencer! I know Monty’s in there,’ thundered the voice through the letterbox. ‘I can see his revolting breath steaming up the window.’

I’d always considered Monty’s breathing the source of much trouble. Spurred on by guilt, I suppose, Monty broke the silence.

‘You have the wrong house.’

‘Monty?’ boomed Sir Walter.

Monty gulped hard.

‘I think he’s onto you, Spence.’

The bell rang with more urgency.

‘Monty,’ I said, cursing him for the foundling he must have been, ‘let’s make a point to discuss this later, shall we?’

After taking a few deep breaths I answered the door.

‘Wally,’ I said, aiming for a son’s radiant welcome.

‘I told you not to call me that,’ he said, tramping past. ‘It’s father so long as there are no strangers present and Sir Walter if there are.’

Try as I might, I had never got him to drop this absurd policy. After all, I couldn’t help it if he was my father.

‘Ah,’ I said, feeling my geniality had been a trifle stymied.

In the time that I’d closed the door he’d stooped and risen quickly for a man of his deportment.

‘Here,’ he said, handing me his boots.

‘Oh,’ I said, grasping the beastly things. ‘Throw them away?’

‘Put them away, you imbecile.’

‘Right you are,’ I said, opening the door to the nearest cupboard. As I flung them inside there came the sound of breaking glass. I glanced within to see the remains of several smashed beakers. I’d evidently unearthed the storage den for Monty’s life sciences lab.

‘What was that?’ asked Sir Walter.

‘Pot fell off the windowsill, I expect,’ I said, nonchalantly.

‘Place is a death trap,’ he muttered.

I was gearing up to ask to what I owed the pleasure when he stamped into the living room. I joined him and was pleased to find that Monty had made things look more presentable.

‘Nose to the grindstone?’ asked Sir Walter, lifting my blindfold from the chaise longue. ‘Well, put the kettle on, man.’

It took but an instant for Monty to dash off into the kitchen. He never needs to be asked twice.

‘New car?’ I asked.

‘Hmm? No. Well, yes. A gift from an attendee,’ he said, fiddling with some loose threading on the settee, ‘in lieu of payment.’

‘Ah.’

‘No wonder I didn’t recognise it.’

‘Hmm.’

I could feel the conversation beginning to sag somewhat, so I sought to touch on the purpose of his visit when something struck me.

‘Good heavens! Kristina’s still in the car.’

At these words Sir Walter appeared singularly unmoved.

‘Well, isn’t she coming in?’ I asked, after a spell.

‘No, I, er, shouldn’t think so.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘perhaps she’d appreciate some tea. I’ll take her some.’

‘No, that won’t be necessary.’

‘It’s no trouble,’ I insisted.

‘I would be deeply obliged,’ he said, holding up a hand, ‘if you would put an end to this drivél.’

As Monty re-entered, scattering biscuits on the floor, Sir Walter explained that he and Kristina were returning from a business event that would do wonders for putting the institute on the map, as it were. Roughly translated to you and me, this boils down to some festivities with embassy types – the sort of function in which Kristina is expected to pull her feather-light weight by working her charms on potential clientele.

‘Ah, yes,’ I said, still trying for a note of bonhomie, ‘raise the profile, did it?’

‘Yes, our reputation is once again rising. Looks like your extended purdah was just the ticket.’

‘Kristina is a sweetheart for suggesting it,’ I said.

‘Still, why you insist on this clerk’s cesspit is beyond me. Look at the state of it. You should be ashamed of yourself.’

Monty suppressed a giggle. We'd been expecting it and there it was – my father's favourite broadside, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' When it concerned my best efforts in any capacity, my father's *raison d'être* was to be able to weave his favourite put-down into every conversation.

'Anyway, I hate to drag you away from your vocation, Spencer,' he said, sipping from the cup. 'Good lord, that's poison. But I must ask you to return at once.'

'Eh?'

This seemed to be anathema to everything I had heard so far. I was grappling with this unlikely plea when the penny dropped and his motives became clear to me. The ship must've sprung a leak somewhere and he'd evidently called on me to steer the vessel into calmer waters.

'Ah-ha,' I said, savouring this fatherly cry for help. 'The balloon has gone up, has it?'

'What?'

'Oh, come, come, this is no time to be coy,' I said, slurping Monty's hell-brew and holding back the tears. 'The war chest is no longer leaking. It's elementary. The coffers are being replenished and you want me to be your outright treasurer. Well, as you know, to me, refusing a plea for help is not unlike a Benedictine monk refusing a sip—'

'Francis Spencer Lockwood, it is owing to your prolonged absence that the institute's coffers are now flourishing. It is also the reason the job is no longer left solely in your hands. Nothing would compel me to ask you to return were it not an emergency. I have a special duty for you.'

I didn't like the sound of this at all.

'What sort of special—'

'Never mind that now.'

'You don't mean to say you want me to be your chief taster in sampling your cutlets and puddings again, do you? Nobody was trying to poison you—'

'Just return directly. And as for our tea aficionado here,' he said, turning towards the source of the slurping. 'Monty, your

characteristic dereliction of duty has left me without my leading man and put the entire production in jeopardy.'

'Ah, yes,' began Monty, unfurling what he'd been rehearsing in his mind for several minutes. 'About that Ophelia and Laertes mix-up, I mean, that ghastly incest business was—'

'Spare me the bilge, Monty. I have no wish to know about your depravities, but lucky for you the way has been paved for you to rejoin the production without, you'll be glad to hear, any act of retribution by Partington-Smythe.'

Monty was so bucked by the news that he leapt to his feet and seized Sir Walter's hand and began vigorously shaking it.

'Yaow-ooh-ooh!' yelped Sir Walter, examining his bruise.

'Oh, I say,' said Monty, noticing the crushed digits. 'I had no idea.'

'The day you have an idea that will not strike terror into those around you, Monty, we shall all commemorate it.'

Monty flopped into the armchair with the relief of a man who discovers his terminal diagnosis had been meant for someone else.

'Good heavens.'

'Till after the play anyway. And, I can't say the same for Ophelia. Now, you will return with Spencer forthwith and assume your former responsibilities. Is that clear?'

'But—'

'But me no buts!' sneered Sir Walter.

And without waiting to hear any more, he stood up to leave.

'On the double!' he shouted, rattling the door in its frame.

So there it was. The writ had been served. I remained frozen in shock for some time. As I sat down reeling from this encounter, Monty yipped and, springing up, dashed towards the kitchen. It was only when smoke billowed into the hallway that I realised something must be ablaze in the kitchen, which is inclined to happen when Monty plays mother. Thank heavens father had already left.