

John Fowles
POOR KOKO

*Byth dorn re ver dhe'n tavas re hyr,
Mes den hep tavas a-gollas y dyr.*

Certain melodramatic situations derived from the detective story and the thriller have been so done to death by the cinema and television that I suspect a new and nonsensical law of inverse probability has been established - the more frequently one of these situations is shown on the screen, the less chance there is of its taking place in the viewer's real life. Ironically enough I had maintained an analogous argument with a bright young genius from the BBC only a month or two before the deeply distressing experience that is the subject of this narrative. He had been rather humourlessly upset by my cynical declaration that the more abhorrent a news item the more comforting it was to the recipient, since the fact that it had happened elsewhere proved that it had not happened here, was not happening here, and would therefore never happen here. I had to climb down, needless to say, and to admit that the latterday Pangloss in all of us who regards tragedy as a privilege of other people was a thoroughly wicked and anti-social creature.

None the less, when I first woke, that night of my ordeal, I lay as much in a state of incredulity as of fear. I told myself I had been dreaming, that what had seemed to shatter must have done so in my nocturnal unconscious, not in external reality. Propped on one elbow, I surveyed the darkened room, then listened on with straining ears. Yet still reason told me that what I feared was a thousand times more probable in London than where I actually found myself. Indeed I was on the point of sinking back and putting my somewhat childish reaction down to this first night alone in a comparatively strange house. I have never been a lover of silence, in people or in places, and I missed the

familiar all-night sounds from outside my London flat.

But then there came from below a light clink, or clink, as if something metallic had accidentally touched an edge of glass or china. A mere creak, the thump of a door banging gently to, might have allowed of other possibilities. This was a sound that did not. From vaguely alarmed I very swiftly became exceedingly frightened.

A friend of mine once maintained that there is a class of experiences we should all have had before death if we wished to claim to have lived fully. Believing one was certain to be drowned was an example. Being caught in bed - all this took place at a not very serious dinner-party - with someone else's wife was another; seeing a ghost was a third, and killing another human being a fourth. I recall that although I added one or two equally preposterous suggestions of my own I was a little peeved to have to admit in secret that not one of these experiences had ever in reality been mine. My life has had its problems, but murder has never appeared a viable solution to them - or only momentarily, in the case of one or two unforgivably unfair reviews of my books. My atrocious eyesight prevented me from any sort of active service in the Second World War. I had been in bed once with someone else's wife - during that same war - but the husband was safely in North Africa during the whole of our brief liaison. My inadequacy as a swimmer has kept me very secure from any danger of drowning, and ghosts, with an unaccountable lack of interest in their own cause, appear resolutely to shun sceptics like myself. But here I finally was, after a safe sixty-six years of existence, undergoing yet another of those 'vital' experiences: knowing one was not alone in a house where one believed one was.

If books have not taught me to admire and desire truth in writing, I have wasted my entire life, and the last thing I wish to do in this account is to present myself as other than I am. I have never pretended to be a man of action, though I like to think a certain sense of self-humour, an irony, makes the word bookish a little unjust. I learnt very early,

at boarding-school, that a small reputation for wit - or at least a certain skill at puncturing the pretentious - can offset in part the damning labels of 'bookworm' and 'swot' with all but the most crassly athletic. No doubt I have indulged the characteristic malice of the physically deprived, and I certainly won't pretend that I haven't always enjoyed - and, I'm afraid, helped propagate on occasion - the kind of gossip that redounds to another writer's discredit. Nor was my most successful pot-boiler, *The Dwarf in Literature*, quite the model of objective and erudite analysis it pretended to be. Very regrettably I have always found my own faults more interesting than other people's virtues; nor can I deny that books - writing them, reading, reviewing, helping to get them into print - have been my life rather more than life itself. It seems fitting that I should have been where I was that night entirely because of one.

Of the two suitcases that had accompanied me in the taxi from the station at Sherborne the previous day, the larger had been full of paper - notes, drafts and essential texts. I was near the end of a lifetime's ambition - a definitive biography and critical account of Thomas Love Peacock. I must not exaggerate, I hadn't begun serious work until some four years previously; but the desire to have such a book to my credit had been with me since my twenties. There had always been good practical reasons why my other efforts should have had the priority they seemed to demand; but this was the closest to my heart. I had duly cleared decks for the assault on the final summit, only to find London, the abominable new London that seems determined to ape New York, had vetoed my small project. A long-threatened and much larger one was suddenly in course of execution across the street from my Maida Vale flat. It was not only the din and the dust of the initial demolition and the knowledge that the wretched pseudo-skyscraper progress intended to erect on the rubble of what had been a quietly solid Italianate terrace would very soon deprive me of a treasured westward view. I came to see it as the apotheosis of all that Peacock had stood against; all

that was not humane, intelligent and balanced. Resentment at this intrusion began to affect what work I did; certain draft passages merely used Peacock as an excuse for irrelevant diatribes against my own age. I have nothing against such diatribes in their proper place, but I knew that in giving way to them here I was betraying both my subject and my own better judgment.

I expatiated one evening on all this with some distress (and not without some beneficence aforethought) to two old friends in their Hampstead home. I had over the years spent a number of agreeable weekends at Maurice and Jane's cottage in North Dorset, though I must confess my pleasure there was rather more in the company than the rural environment. I am not a country-lover, having always much preferred nature in art to nature in actuality. However, I now thought of Holly Cottage and its isolated combe as nostalgically as one could wish - and as a perfect refuge in my hour of need. My demurs when the refuge was offered were very perfunctory. I smilingly submitted to Jane's teasing over my sudden yearning for a countryside whose presiding genius she adored and for whom I had, in her view, a disgracefully lukewarm regard ... Thomas Hardy has never been my cup of tea. I was duly furnished with keys, an impromptu shopping guide from Jane and a run-down on the functional esoterica of the electric water-pump and the central heating from Maurice. Thus armed and briefed I had, in the late afternoon that preceded this rude awakening in the night, taken possession of my humble temporary version of the Sabine farm with a very genuine sense of joy. A part of my shock - and incredulity - was undoubtedly caused by my having gone to sleep in that prospective certainty of fertile concentration I had so comprehensively lacked during the previous two weeks.

I was acutely aware, as I sat bolt upright in my bed, that the sound I was now listening for was not in the living-room below, but on the stairs. My frozen position was absurd - and of course highly uncourageous. But it was not simply that I was alone. The cottage was alone. There was a

farm four hundred yards down the lane, and beyond that, some half a mile or so on, the village, where no doubt the constable was fast asleep in his bed. The telephone was in the living-room below, so he might as well have been on the other side of the world as regards present assistance. To be sure, I could have made loud noises, in the hope that the intruder would find discretion the better part of burglary. I had a notion that professional thieves eschew violence. But common sense told me that a remote Dorset upland was hardly the place where professional burglars would pursue their *métier*. My visitor was much more likely to be some nervous village amateur. A conversation I had once had with Maurice came wryly to mind: how the only reason the crime rate was so low in rural areas such as this was the close-knit social structure. When everyone knew everyone else, crime was either difficult or desperate.

Nor did some faint last hope that the clinking sound might have had a natural explanation survive long. There came a scrape, as of a chair being moved aside. I had to face the reality: Holly Cottage was being 'done'. It was only too easy to guess why - despite Maurice's statistics - it had been selected. Its isolation was obvious; and it must have been common knowledge locally that it was owned by London weekenders, whose more extended stays were confined to the summer. The day was a Wednesday - now a Thursday, since my watch told me it was after one - and the month November. I do not drive, there was no motor-car outside to warn of occupation; and I had gone to bed early in order to be fresh for a long first day's work.

So far as I knew, there was nothing of great value in the cottage - certainly not by a professional thief's standards. The place had been furnished with Jane's usual simplicity and good taste. I knew there were one or two pieces of nice china, some paintings of the nineteenth-century naïve-pastoral genre that (for reasons beyond my personal comprehension) fetch a price these days. I could recall no silver; and I supposed Jane would hardly have left anything very precious in the jewellery line there.

Yet another sound came - to my small relief, from below still. It seemed vaguely pneumatic, perhaps caused by the sticking of some cupboard door. I lacked the familiarity with the native sounds of houses one gains only from prolonged living in them. However, I did at last take some positive action - that is, I groped for my glasses in the darkness and put them on. Then I got my legs from under the bedclothes and sat on the edge of the bed. No doubt it was symptomatic that I did all this with the greatest caution, as if I were the burglar. But I simply did not see what I could do. I was certain to come off worse if it came to a struggle. I could not reach the telephone without a confrontation and the youth - I had determined it was some long-haired village lout, with fists like hams and a mind to match - would hardly let me use it without a fight. And then I was also listening for something else - for the sound of a low voice. I didn't feel at all sure that I had to deal with just one person. The cheapest form of Dutch courage is an accomplice.

I must confess too, in retrospect, to a purely selfish motive. It was not my property that was being stolen. The only things of overwhelming value to me personally were the papers and the rest to do with my Peacock. I had laid them out on a table in the other downstairs room, the one furthest from me, the sitting-room. They would hardly be in any danger from the semi-illiterate who was rummaging down below. They might conceivably have warned a more intelligent person that the cottage was not after all empty, but as to more obvious signs of occupation ... I had fallen a victim both to my laziness and my always incipient neatness - having cleared away and washed up after the light supper I had cooked for myself, and not having bothered, as Jane had recommended, to light a log fire in the hearth to 'cheer the place up'. The weather was muggy, mild after London, and I had also not bothered with the central heating - merely switched on an electric fire, which would now be quite cold. The refrigerator remained off, since I had not yet shopped for perishables. The red light of the water-

heater glowed in the cupboard beside my bed. Then I had reopened the curtains downstairs ready for the morning, and brought my other suitcase upstairs with me. Even consciously, I could not have erased signs of my presence more effectively.

The predicament grew intolerable. Further sounds came that showed the person below was quite confident that he had the house to himself. True, however much I strained to hear, I caught not the faintest murmur of another voice; but it was increasingly obvious that sooner or later the thief would try his luck upstairs. All my life I have had a hatred of violence, indeed of most kinds of physical contact. I had not been in a fight since early childhood. A master at my preparatory school had once, in the callous manner of his kind, referred to me as a shrimp, and the sobriquet was unanimously adopted by my then friends. It never seemed to me very accurate, since shrimps have at least a certain speed of movement and agility and I had never had even those small compensations for a puny stature and a total lack of 'muscle'. It was only comparatively recently in my life that I had outgrown the family belief that I was constitutionally condemned to an early death. I like to class myself - in no other but a physical sense, I hasten to add - with Pope, Kant and Voltaire. I am trying to explain why I did nothing. It was not so much fear of injury or death as the awareness of how futile any action that provoked them was certain to be.

And then there was that sense of fertile concentration I spoke of just now - it had been an assurance of a still vigorous intellectual life ahead. I felt so eager to kill off the final draft, to have my fascinating and still grossly underrated subject alive and on the polished page. I had seldom been so confident at the three-quarter stage of a book; and I felt an equal determination now, as I sat on that bed, to let nothing in this ridiculous present situation endanger my bringing it to its due completion.

But my dilemma in the quick remained painful. I expected at any moment to hear footsteps mount the stairs.

Then there came a sound that made my heart jump with unexpected relief - a sound that I could place. The cottage front door was closed by a wooden latch. There was a bolt, which could be opened in silence. But the latch was a shade stiff and tended to clack as one forced it up. That was what I had heard. To my joy the next sound came from outside. I recognized the small squeak of the little wicket-gate that led from the narrow front garden to the lane. It seemed that against all expectation my unwelcome visitor had decided that he had got enough. I do not know what impulse made me stand up at this point and feel my way carefully to the bedroom window. It had been very dark outside when I took a brief breath of fresh air - with that smug sense of illegal proprietorship people who have been lent houses have - at the front door before going up to bed. Even in broad daylight my short-sightedness would have made any kind of useful identification dubious. Yet something in me wished to catch a glimpse of a dark shape ... I cannot say why. Perhaps it was merely to be quite sure I was now left in peace.

So I peered down cautiously from beside the small window that overlooked the lane past the cottage. I expected to see very little; to my surprise, and consternation, I could see quite well - and for a very simple reason. The lights in the living-room below were evidently still on. I made out the white slats of the gate. Of the man who had left, no sign. For a few seconds all was still. Then there was the sound of a car door being closed - lightly, with care, but not the absolute care someone who might have suspected my presence would have used. I risked opening the curtain wide, but the car, van, whatever it was, was hidden behind the overgrown clump of holly that gives the cottage its name. I had a brief puzzlement as to how it could have been driven up and parked there without my being woken. But the lane is gently on the mount past the cottage. Very probably it had been coasted down with the engine switched off.

I did not know what to think. The closing car door suggested departure. But the lights left on - no thief, however

inept, would make such a blunder if he were really leaving the scene of the crime. I was not kept in suspense long. There was suddenly a shape at the wicket-gate. It passed through and towards the house, out of my sight, almost before I could start back. Events moved with a chilling rapidity. Quick footsteps mounted the stairs. I had an abrupt access of panic: I must do something, I must act. Yet I stood by the window in a kind of catatonia, quite unable to move. I think I was more frightened of my own terror than of its cause. What kept me frozen there was the saner knowledge that I must not act upon it.

The steps reached the small landing across which the doors to the cottage's two bedrooms face each other. What I should have done if the intruder had first turned to the right instead of the left ... in some strange way it was a distinct mercy to hear the handle of my own door turn. All was darkness, I could see nothing and my state of paralysis endured, as if I still futilely hoped that this unknown presence would turn away. But a torch came on. It discovered at once the disturbed bed I had just left; and a fraction of a second later I was discovered myself by the window - in all my foolishness, barefooted, in pyjamas. I recollect I raised an arm over my eyes to shade them from the dazzling beam, though the gesture must also have seemed one of helpless self-defence.

There was a silence, in which it was evident that the person holding the torch was not going to run. I made a feeble attempt to normalize the situation.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

The questions were respectively stupid and nugatory, of course, and received the answer, or lack of it, they deserved. I tried again.

'You have no right to be here.'

I was spared the torch for a moment. I heard the door of the bedroom opposite open. But then almost at once I was dazzled by the glare of the mirrored bulb again.

There was another pause. Then, at last, a voice.

'Get back into bed.'

The tone reassured me a little. I had expected a Dorset, at any rate an aggressively uneducated accent. This was flat and quiet.

'Go on. Into bed.'

There's no need for violence.'

'Okay. So like I say.'

I hesitated, then went back to the bed and sat nervously on its edge.

'Cover your legs.'

Again I hesitated. But I had no alternative. At least I was being spared physical brutality. I put my legs beneath the bedclothes, and remained sitting upright. The torch still blinded me. There was more silence, as if I were being deciphered and assessed.

'Now the goggles. Take 'em off.'

I removed my glasses and put them on the table beside me. The torch left me for a moment, searching for the switch. The room was filled with light. I made out the blurred shape of a young man of medium height with the most bizarre yellow hands; then that he was in some kind of bluish blouse suit. I detected a kind of loose athleticism, and judged him to be in his early twenties. A certain ectoplasmic quality about his face that I had first put down to my myopia now explained itself. It was covered to his eyes with a woman's nylon stocking. The hair was dark, beneath a red knitwear cap; the eyes brown. They now surveyed me for a long moment.

'Why you so shit scared, man?'

The question was so absurd that I did not attempt to answer it. He reached and picked up my glasses, then tried the lenses briefly. I realized the incongruous yellow of the hands was that of kitchen gloves - of course, to avoid fingerprints. Again the eyes above the mask, like those of some concealed and suspicious animal, stared down at me.

'Never happened to you before?'

'It most certainly has not.'

'Nor me. We'll play it by ear. Right?'

I gave some kind of nod of assent. He turned and went to

where I had been standing when he came in. There he opened the window, then casually tossed my glasses into the night - at least I saw the gesture of his arm that could only mean that. I did feel anger then; and the folly of expressing it. I watched him close the window, then re-latch it and draw the curtains. Now he came back to the foot of the bed.

'Right?'

I said nothing.

'Relax.'

'I do not find this a relaxing situation.'

He folded his arms and contemplated me for a few seconds; then he pointed a finger, as if I had asked him the solution to some problem.

'I'll have to tie you up.'

'Very well.'

'Don't mind then?'

'I unfortunately have no choice.'

Another silence: then he gave a snuffle of amusement.

'Jesus. The number of times I've imagined this. Thousands of ways. But never like this.'

'I'm sorry to disappoint you.'

Again there was a pause for assessment.

'Thought you only used the place weekends.'

'I happen to be borrowing it from the owners.'

He devoted more thought to that, then pointed a yellow finger down at me again.

'I get it.'

'You get what?'

'Who wants to get bashed for just friends. Right?'

'My dear young man, I am half your size and three times your age.'

'Sure. Only kidding.'

He turned and looked round the room. But I seemed to intrigue him more than its professional opportunities. He leant against a chest-of-drawers and addressed me again.

'Just what you read. How the old crumblers always have a go. Come tottering at you with their pokers and carving-

knives.'

I drew a breath.

He said, 'Property. What it does to people. Know what I mean?' He added, 'Doesn't apply in your case. So.'

I found myself staring at my feet beneath the blankets. Of all the fictional horrors connected with the situation that I had ever seen or read of, not one had included motivational analysis of the victim from its prime cause. He gestured with the torch.

'Should have made a noise, man. I'd've been out like a dose of salts. Wouldn't have known who you were.'

'May I venture to suggest you get on with what you came to do?'

Again there was a snuffle. He remained staring at me. Then he shook his head.

'Fantastic.'

I had imagined various forms of action, swift and purposeful, and distinguished only by their degrees of unpleasantness; not this obscene simulacrum of a quiet chat between chance-met strangers. Heaven knows I should have felt relieved; yet I would have preferred a devil I knew - or who at least conformed better to one's general notion of his kind. He must have perceived something of this in my face.

'I knock off empty houses, friend. Not tiny people.'

'Then kindly stop gloating over it.'

I had spoken sharply; and we went a further step in absurdity. There was almost a gentle reproach in his voice.

'Hey. I'm the one who's supposed to be jumpy. Not you.' He opened the yellow hands. 'Just had a terrible shock, man. You could have been up here loading a shotgun. Anything. Blown my guts out the moment I opened that door.'

I gathered strength.

'Isn't it sufficient that you've broken into the house of two decent, law-abiding and not particularly well-off people and intend to rob them of things that have no great value, but which they happen to love and cherish...' I did not finish the sentence, perhaps because I didn't quite know

how to say what it was that was superfluous in his manner. But my own had grown too belatedly indignant. The quietness of his voice was all the more galling for having been invited.

'Nice house in London as well, have they?'

I had realized by then that I was dealing with someone who belonged to that baffling (to my generation) new world of the classless British young. No one detests class snobbery more sincerely than I do and that the young of today have thrown out so many of the old shibboleths does not disturb me in the least. I wish merely that they did not reject so many other things - such as a respect for language and intellectual honesty - because they mistakenly believe them to be shamefully bourgeois. I was familiar with not undissimilar young men on the fringes of the literary world. They too generally had nothing to offer but their airs of emancipation, their supposed classlessness; and so clung to them with a frightening ferocity. In my experience their distinguishing trait was a needle-sharp sensitivity towards anything that smacked of condescension, a phrase that comprehended all that challenged their own new idols of confused thinking and cultural narrowmindedness. I knew the particular commandment I had just transgressed: thou shalt not own more than a grubby backstreet pad.

'I see. Crime as the good revolutionary's duty?'

'Not just the bread alone. Now you mention it.'

Suddenly he picked up a wooden chair from beside the chest-of-drawers, reversed it and sat across it, his arms perched on the back. Again I was accused by the finger.

'Way I see it, my house has had burglars in since the day I was born. You with me? The system, right? You know what Marx said? The poor can't steal from the rich. The rich can only rob the poor.'

I recalled then an oddly similar - in tone if not in content - conversation I had had only a week or two before with an electrician who had come to do some rewiring in my London flat. He had chosen to harangue me for twenty minutes on the iniquity of the trade unions. But he had had

the same air of sublime irrefutability. Meanwhile, the present lecture continued.

Tell you something else. I play fair. I don't take more than I need, right? Never the big stuff. Just places like this. I've had the real class. In my hands. And left it right where I found it. Dear old fuzz, they shake their heads, tell the bereaved owner he's lucky to have had such a ham job done. Like only a clown could have missed the Paul de Lamerie salver. The first-period Worcester teapot. The John Sell Cotman. Right? Except the real clowns are the ones who don't know class is ten to one red-hot from the moment you touch it. So any time I'm tempted, I just think of the system, you with me? What's killing it. Greed. Me too. If I ever let it. So I'm never greedy. Never done time. Never will.'

I have had a good many people try to justify bad behaviour to me; but never in such ridiculous circumstances. Perhaps the greatest absurdity was that red woollen hat. It had to my poor vision a distinct resemblance to a cardinal's biretta. To say that I began to enjoy myself would be very far from the truth. But I did begin to feel that I had the makings of a story to dine out on for months to come.

'Another thing. What I do. Okay, it hurts people ... what you said. Stuff they love. All that. But maybe it helps them see what a fucking fraud the whole business of property is.' He slapped the back of the chair he was sitting across. T mean, you ever thought? It's mad. This isn't my chair or your chair. Your mates' chair. Just a chair. Doesn't really belong to anyone. I often think that. You know, I take stuff home. Look at it. I don't feel it's mine. It's just whatever it is, right? Doesn't change. Just is.' He leant back. 'Now tell me I'm wrong.'

I knew any attempt at serious argument with this young buffoon would be like discussing the metaphysics of Duns Scotus with a music-hall comedian: one could only become his butt. His questions and baits were clumsy invitations to a pratfall; yet I had a growing sense that I must try to humour him.

'I agree that wealth is unfairly distributed.'

'But not with my way of doing something about it.'

'Society wouldn't survive very long if everyone shared your views.'

Again he shifted; then shook his head, as if I had made some bad move in a game of chess. Suddenly he stood up and replaced the chair, and began to open the drawers of the chest. His examination seemed very cursory. I had placed some loose coins and my keys on the top and I heard him finger them apart. But he pocketed nothing; meanwhile I prayed silently that he would overlook the absence of a wallet. It was in my coat, on a hanger behind the door, which opened, and was now opened, against the wall - and was therefore hidden. He turned to face me once more.

'That's like, if everyone did themselves in tomorrow, there wouldn't be a population problem.'

'I'm afraid I don't see the parallel.'

'You're just saying words, man.' He moved nearer the window and stared at himself in a little Regency mirror. 'If everyone did this, if everyone did that. But they don't, do they? Like if the system was different, I wouldn't be here. But I'm here. Right?'

As if to emphasize his hereness, he lifted the mirror off the wall; and I gave up playing Alice to this Wonderland of non-sequiturs. *I am what I am* may be all very well in its most famous context, but it is not a basis for rational conversation. He seemed to accept that I was silenced by his refutation of the categorical imperative, and now moved to a pair of watercolours that hung on the back wall of the room. I saw him unhook and pore over each in turn, for all the world like some prospective bidder at a country auction. He eventually put them under his arm.

'Across the way - anything there?'

I took a breath. 'Not so far as I know.'

But he disappeared with his 'goods' into the other room. He was careless of sound now. I heard more drawers being opened, a wardrobe. There was nothing I could do. A dash

downstairs to the telephone, even with my vanished glasses on, would not have had the faintest chance of success.

I saw him come out and stay bent over a shape on the landing, some bag or grip. There was a rustling of paper. At last he straightened and stood in the doorway of my own room again.

'Not much,' he said. 'Never mind. Just your money, and that's it. Sorry.'

'My money?'

He nodded towards the chest of drawers.

'I'll leave you the change.'

'Haven't you taken enough?'

'Sorry.'

'I have very little with me.'

'Then you won't miss it. Right?'

He made no threatening gesture, there was no obvious menace in his voice, he simply stood watching me. But further prevarication seemed useless.

'Behind the door.'

He pointed his finger at me again, then turned and swung the door to. My sports jacket was revealed. It was absurd, but I felt embarrassed. Wanting to save the bother of finding a bank in Dorset, I had cashed a cheque for fifty pounds just before I left London. Of course he found the wallet and notes at once. I saw him take the latter and flip through them. Then, to my surprise, he came and dropped one on the end of the bed.

'Fiver for trying. Okay?'

He tucked the rest of the money away in a hip-pocket, then fingered idly on through the wallet. At last he took out and scrutinized my banker's card.

'Hey-hey. It's just clicked. That's you on the table down there.'

'On the table?'

'All that typing and stuff.'

The first three chapters had been typed out, and he must have looked at the title page and remembered my name.

'I came here to finish a book.'

'You write books?'

'When I'm not being burgled.'

He went on through the wallet.

'What kind of books?'

I made no reply.

'What's the one downstairs about then?'

'About someone you won't have heard of and please can we get this disgusting business over and done with?'

He closed the wallet and threw it down beside the five-pound note.

'Why you so sure I know nothing?'

'I did not mean to suggest that.'

'You people always get people like me so wrong.'

I tried to hide my mounting irritation. 'The subject of my book is a long-dead novelist called Peacock. He is not greatly read these days. That is all I meant to say.'

He watched me. I had transgressed another new commandment, and I knew I must be more guarded.

'Okay. So why you writing a book about him?'

'Because I admire his work.'

'Why?'

'It has qualities I think our own age rather lacks.'

'Such as?'

'Humanism. Good manners. A strong belief in common ...' it was on the tip of my tongue to say 'decency' ... 'sense'.

'Me, I like Conrad. He's the greatest.'

'Many people share your view.'

'You not?'

'He's a very fine novelist.'

'The greatest.'

'Certainly one of the greatest.'

'I have a thing about the sea. Know what I mean?' I nodded in what I hoped was a suitably approving manner, but his mind was evidently still on my snub over writers he would not have heard of. 'I see books lying around sometimes. Novels. History. Art books. I take 'em home. Read 'em. Like I bet you I know more about antiques than most

dealers. See, I go to museums. Just to look. I'd never do a museum. Way I see it, you don't just do a museum, you do every other poor sod who goes to look.' He seemed to expect some answer. I gave another faint nod. My back was aching, I had sat so tensely through all this nonsense. It was not his manner, but the tempo he set: *andante* when all should have been *prestissimo*. 'Museums is how it ought to be. No private ownership. Just museums. Where everyone can go.'

'As in Russia?'

'Right.'

Literary men are, of course, perennially susceptible to the eccentric. Endearing is hardly the adjective to apply to someone who has just parted you from forty-five pounds you can ill afford. But I have a small skill at mimicking accents - for telling anecdotes that rely on that rather cruel ability - and I was beginning, beneath fear and exasperation, to savour one or two of my tormentor's mental and linguistic quirks. I gave him a thin smile.

'In spite of what they do to thieves there?'

'Man, I wouldn't do this there. Simple as that. You have to hate, yes? Plenty to hate here. No problem. Okay, so they've screwed a lot of things up. But least they're trying. That's what people like me can't stand in this country. Nobody's trying. You know the only people who try in this country? The fucking Tories. I mean, there's a bunch of real pros. Blokes like me, we're peanuts beside them.'

'My friends who own this cottage are not Tories. In fact, very far from it. Nor am I, for that matter.'

'Big deal.'

But he said it lightly.

'We hardly qualify as a blow for the cause.'

'Hey, you trying to make me feel guilty or something?'

'Just a shade more aware of the complexities of life.'

He stood staring down at me for a long moment, and I thought I was in for another bout of his pseudo-Marcusian - if that is not a tautology - naiveties. But suddenly he pulled back the wrist of one of his yellow gloves and

looked at a watch.

'Too bad. It's been fun. Right. Now. I have way-way-way to drive, so I make myself a cup of coffee. Okay? You, you get up, take your time, put on your clothes. Then you trot downstairs.'

My briefly lulled fears sprang back to life.

'Why my clothes?'

'I have to tie you up, man. And we don't want you to get cold waiting. Do we?'

I nodded.

'That's a good boy.' He went to the door, but turned. 'And sir - coffee too?'

'No thank you.'

'Cuppa? I'm easy.'

I shook my head, and he went downstairs. I felt weak, more badly shaken than I had realized; and I knew what I had just experienced was the comparatively pleasant part of the process. I now had to endure hours of being tied up, and I didn't see how I was to be released. Wanting no disruption, I had done nothing about having my mail forwarded, therefore no postman was likely to call. Milk, as Jane had warned me, I had to go and fetch for myself at the farm. I could not imagine why anyone should come anywhere near the cottage.

I got up and started to dress - and to review what I had deduced of the new-style Raffles downstairs. His fondness for his own voice had at least allowed me to form some dim impression of his background. Wherever he originally came from, I felt fairly sure that his normal milieu was now London - a large city, at any rate. I could detect no clear regional accent. That might have argued a less working-class origin than his grotesque language suggested; but on the whole I felt he had climbed rather than fallen. He had very plainly wished to impress on me that he had some pretensions to education. Indeed I could believe that he had, say, passed his A-levels and even perhaps had a year at some Redbrick university. I saw in him many of the defence mechanisms, born of a sense of frustration, that were

familiar to me from some of my own friends' children.

Maurice and Jane's own younger son had (to the intense mortification of his parents, who in characteristic Hampstead-liberal fashion were nothing if not tolerant to the youth revolution) recently taken to showing many of the same airs and ungraces. Having dropped out of Cambridge and the 'total futility' of studying the law - his father's being a solicitor no doubt made that renunciation doubly agreeable - he had announced that he was going to compose folk-music. After a few months of increasing petulance (or so I understood from his parents) at not achieving instant success in that field, he had retired - if that is the word - into a Maoist commune run by some property millionaire's fly-away daughter in South Kensington. I recite his career a little flippantly, but the very genuine and understandable distress of Maurice and Jane at the mess Richard was making of his young life was not a laughing matter. I had had an account of a bitter evening when he first walked out on Cambridge, in which he denounced their way of life and everything to do with it. Their two lifetimes of fighting for sane good causes, varying from nuclear disarmament to the preservation of the plane-trees in Fitzjohn's Avenue, were suddenly thrown back in their faces - their chief crime (according to Jane) being the fact that they still lived in a house they had bought when they first married in 1946 for a few thousand and which now happened to be worth sixty or more. Their kind have become the stock-in-trade of every satirist about, and no doubt there is a dissonance between the pleasant lives they lead in private and the battle for the underprivileged they conduct in public. Perhaps a successful solicitor should not have a fondness for first nights, even though he gives his legal knowledge free to any action group that asks for it; perhaps a Labour councillor (as Jane was for many years) should not enjoy cooking dinners worthy of an Elizabeth David; but their real worst crime in Richard's eyes was to think that this balanced life was intelligently decent, instead of blindly hypocritical.

Though I sympathized with Maurice's outrage and his accusations of selfish irresponsibility, perhaps Jane was more accurate in her final diagnosis. She argued, I think correctly, that though *épater la famille* formed an element in the boy's downfall, the real cancer in him and his like was an intransigent idealism. He was so besotted - or be-potted - by visions of artistic glory and a nobly revolutionary way of life that the normal prospect before him was hopelessly rebarbative. As Jane had rather neatly put it, he wanted Everest in a day; if it took two, he lost interest.

My own specimen of youth in revolt had merely solved his problems a little more successfully - by a kind of perverted logic one could say more convincingly - than young Richard with his Little Red Book. At least he supported himself financially, in his fashion. The sub-sub-Marxism was a joke, of course; a mere trendy justification after the act, as Marx himself, dear old middle-class square that he was, would have been the first to demonstrate.

I need hardly say that I didn't at the time draw the kind of extended parallel with Richard I have just made. But I had thought of the boy as I stood putting my clothes on - and no sooner thought than implicated him. I had already wondered how the young man downstairs had known that Holly Cottage existed. The more I considered, the more improbable a place it seemed for the lightning to strike. Then he had apparently known the owners lived in London. He could have found that out at the farm or the local pub; but he seemed too fly to invite unnecessary risks of that sort. So why should he not have learnt about Maurice and Jane and their cottage from the horse's - to be precise, the rebellious colt's - mouth? I had certainly never seen anything vicious or spiteful in Richard and I couldn't imagine that he would have deliberately urged anyone to 'do' his parents' property - whatever he may have shouted at them in a moment of crisis. But he might have talked about it among his collection of would-be young world-changers ... and I had evidence enough that my own young joker fancied himself as

a political philosopher of the same ilk. He had also just revealed that he had a long drive ahead. That suggested London. The hypothesis shocked me, but it rang plausibly probable.

I was still trying to confirm it by some other chance thing he had let fall when I heard his voice from the foot of the stairs.

'Ready when you are, dad.'

I had to go down. I sought desperately for some innocent question that might help clinch my guess. But none came to mind - and even if I were right, he must have seen the danger as soon as I revealed myself a friend of Richard's parents.

I found him sitting by the solid old farm-table in the centre of the living-room. The front curtains were drawn. He had a mug of coffee in his hand, which he raised when I appeared. Beyond him I saw the lighted doorway through to the kitchen.

'Sure you don't want coffee?'

'No.'

'Nip of brandy then? There's some in the cupboard.'

His mixture of gall and solicitude once more made me take breath.

'No thank you.'

I glanced round the room. I saw two or three paintings were missing and I suspected that there was less china on the dresser beside which I stood than when I had last seen it.

'Better go through there then.' He nodded back at the kitchen, and for a moment I did not understand what he meant. 'Calls of nature and all that.'

Maurice and Jane had had a lavatory and bathroom added at the back of the cottage.

'How long do you...'

'Anyone due round in the morning?'

'No one at all.'

'Okay.'

He crossed to the corner of the room, and I saw him pick

up the telephone directory there and leaf through it.

'Your phone's out, by the way. Sorry.'

He leafed on, then tore a page from the book.

'Right? I'll call the local fuzz round ten. If I wake up.' But he added quickly, 'Just a joke, man. Relax. I promise.' Then he said, 'You going or not?'

I went into the kitchen - and saw the door out into the garden. There was a jagged black hole in its previously smooth expanse of glass; and I secretly cursed my absent hostess for her sacrifice of period accuracy to domestic amenity. My own very present guest came and stood in the doorway behind me.

'And don't lock yourself in by mistake. Please.'

I went into the lavatory and closed the door; and found myself staring at the bolt. There was a narrow window that gave on to the cottage's back garden. I could just have negotiated it, I suppose. But he would have heard me open it; and the garden had a thick banked hedge all round it - the only practicable exit was to come round to the front of the house.

When I returned to the living-room, I saw he had placed a Windsor chair in front of the open hearth, which he now offered to me. I stood by the doorway, trying to escape this last indignity.

'I am perfectly prepared to give you my word. I won't raise the alarm until you've had time for your ... getaway, whatever it is.'

'Sorry.' He offered me the chair again, and held a ring of something up; then realized that I couldn't make it out. 'Sticky tape. It won't hurt.'

Something in me continued to bridle against this final humiliation. I did not move. He came towards me. His wretched nylon-masked face, in some way obscene, as if molten, made me take a step back. But he didn't touch me.

I pushed past him and sat down.

'Good boy. Now put your mits along the rests, will you?' He held up two strips of coloured paper he must have torn

out of some magazine in readiness. 'Over your wrists, right? Then you won't get your hairs tweaked when the tape comes off.'

I watched him bend the paper round my left wrist. Then he began to tape it tightly to the chair-arm. In spite of myself I could not stop my hands trembling. I could see his face, even - it was my impression - the shadow of a moustache under the nylon.

'I should like to ask one thing.'

'Go on then.'

'What made you pick on this house?'

'Thinking of taking it up, are you?' But he went on before I could answer. 'Okay. Curtains. Colour of paintwork. For a start.'

'What does that mean?'

'Means I can smell weekend places a mile off. Nice classy piece of fabric hanging in a window. Twenty quid's worth of oil-lamp on the sill. Dozens of things. How's that, then? Not too bad?'

It seemed very tight, but I shook my head. 'And why this part of the world?'

He started on the other wrist. 'Anywhere there's daft gits who leave their houses empty.'

'You come from London?'

'Where's that then?'

Very plainly I would extract nothing of significance from him. Yet I detected a faint unease beneath the facetiousness. It was confirmed when he rather hurriedly changed the subject from his life to mine.

'Written a lot of books, have you?'

'A dozen or so.'

'How long's it take?'

'That depends on the book.'

'What about the one you're doing now?'

'I've been researching it for several years. That takes more time than the actual writing.'

He was silent for a few moments as he finished the taping of the other wrist. Then he bent down. I felt him push my

left ankle back against the chair-leg; then the constriction of the adhesive tape began there.

'D like to write books. Maybe I will one day.' Then, 'How many words is a book?'

'Sixty thousand is the normal minimum.'

'Lot of words.'

'I haven't found you short of them.'

He glanced up briefly from his work.

'Not how you expected. Right?'

'I won't attempt to deny that.'

'Yeah. Well...'

But again he fell silent, winding the tape. He had found a pair of scissors somewhere, and now he severed the end round my left ankle, and moved to the other foot.

'I'd tell it how it really is. Not just this. Everything. The whole scene.'

'Then why don't you try?'

'You're joking.'

'Not at all. Crime fascinates people.'

'Sure. Lovely. Then look who comes knocking on my door.'

'You'd have to disguise actual circumstances.'

'Then it wouldn't be how it is. Right?'

'Do you think Conrad —'

'He was Conrad, wasn't he?'

I heard the snip of the scissors that showed my final limb was secured; then he pulled outwards on my legs to ensure that the tape did not give.

'Anyway. Several years. Yes? That's a lot of time.'

He stood and stared down at his work. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I had now become a parcel, a mere problem in safe packaging. Yet there was a relief, too. No violence could take place now.

He said, 'Right.'

He went into the kitchen, but came back almost at once with a length of washing-line and a kitchen knife. He stood in front of me, measuring off a couple of arms' widths, and began to cut and saw at the cord with the knife.

'Maybe you ? Write about me - how about that?'

'I'm afraid I couldn't write about something I don't begin to understand.'

With a sharp tug he finally detached the end he wanted. He passed behind the chair, and I heard his voice from above my head.

'What don't you understand?'

'How someone who is apparently not by any means a fool can behave as you are.'

He laced the washing-line through the slats at the back of the chair. His arm came over my shoulder and led it round my chest and under my other arm.

'Back straight, will you?' I felt the line tighten. Then the free end was passed round again. 'Thought I explained all that.'

'I can understand young people who go in for left-wing violence - even when they disrupt public life. At least they are acting for a cause. You seem to be acting purely for your private profit.'

In saying that I was, of course, hoping for some more substantial clue to confirm my hypothesis over Richard. But he didn't rise to the bait. I felt him knotting the cord behind the chair. Then once again he came in front of me and looked me over.

'How's that?'

'Extremely uncomfortable.'

He stood watching me a moment. Then there came another of his pointed fingers.

'Man, your trouble is you don't listen hard enough.'

I said nothing. He contemplated me a moment further.

'Now I load up. I'll be back to say tara.'

He picked up a large grip from beneath the window on the lane, and went to the front door, which I could partly see through the living-room doorway. He propped it open with the grip, then disappeared for a moment into the sitting-room. He came out of there with something pale and square under his arm, I think a carton box; picked up the grip, then went on out into the night. The front door swung

gently to. There was silence for nearly a minute. Then I heard the faint sound of a car door being closed. The wicket-gate squeaked, but he did not come straight into the house. I saw why, when he did reappear. He showed me my glasses, which he put on the table.

'Your pebbles,' he said. 'Still in good nick. Sure you don't want a brandy?'

'No thank you.'

'Electric fire?'

'I'm not cold.'

'Right. Just got to gag you then.'

He picked up the tape and the scissors.

'There's no one within earshot. I could shout all night.'

He seemed to hesitate a moment, then shook his head.

'Sorry, man. Must do.'

I now watched him peel and cut four or five lengths from the tape, which he laid in a row on the table beside us. When he reached forward with the first of them I instinctively jerked my head aside.

'This is totally unnecessary!'

He waited. 'Come on. Let's end as we began.'

I am sure I should have struggled if he had used force. But he was like some bored nurse with a recalcitrant patient. In the end I closed my eyes and turned my head to face him. I felt the plaster pressed obliquely against my grimly resentful mouth. Then it was smoothed down on my cheeks; then the other lengths. I felt near panic again, that I should not be able to breathe through my nose alone. Perhaps he had something of the same fear, for he watched me closely in silence for several moments. Then he picked up the knife and scissors and went into the kitchen. I heard them replaced in a drawer. The kitchen light was switched off.

I am going to state what followed as baldly as possible. I could not in any case find adequate words to describe what I suffered.

I had every reason to suppose that he was now going to leave me to my miserable vigil. He would walk out, and

that would be the last of him. But when he came back from the kitchen he stooped by the dresser and opened one of its bottom doors. Then he stood up with an armful of the old newspapers Jane kept there for lighting the fire. I watched, still baffled by what he was doing - I had said I wasn't cold - as he knelt at the hearth of the old chimney that ran half the length of the wall beside me. He began to ball and crumple the newspaper on the central hearthstone. Through this, and all that followed, he did not once look at me. He behaved exactly as if I had not been there.

When he rose and disappeared through to the sitting-room, I knew ... and did not know - or could not believe. But I had to believe when he returned. I recognized only too well the red covers of the large ledger in which I had my master plan and longhand drafts of various key passages; and the small brown rectangular box that held my precious card-index of references. I strained violently at my wrists and ankles, I attempted to cry out through the tape over my mouth. Some kind of noise must have emerged, but he took no notice.

Monstrously, I was obliged to watch as he crouched and set my four years of intermittent but irreplaceable work on the hearth beside him, then calmly leant forward, lighter in hand, and set fire to two or three ends of the newspaper. When it began to blaze he quietly fed batches of typescript to the flames. There followed a thick folder of photostat documents - copies of manuscript letters, of contemporary reviews of Peacock's novels that I had laboriously tracked down, and the like. I made no further sound, I was beyond it - what was the use? Nothing would stop him now from this bestial and totally gratuitous act of vandalism. It is absurd to speak of dignity when one is bound hand and foot, and I felt tears of helpless rage only too close at hand; but my last resort was to suppress them. I closed my eyes for a few moments, then opened them again at the sound of pages being torn from the ledger. With the same insufferably methodical calmness he fed them to the mounting holocaust, whose heat I now felt through my clothes and

on my face, or what was left bare of it. He retreated a little and started tossing new fuel forward rather than dropping it on the pyre as hitherto. The reference cards were shaken out and fluttered down to be consumed. After a while he reached for a poker that lay beside the fireplace and pushed one or two merely charring sheets and cards to where they also caught flame. If only I had had that poker in a free hand! I would happily have smashed his skull in with it.

Still without looking at me, he went back to the sitting-room. This time he returned with the ten volumes of my copiously annotated *Collected Works* and various previous biographies and critical books on Peacock that I had brought with me and piled on the table. They all had countless slips of paper jutting out, their importance had been only too conspicuously declared. They too were consigned one by one to the flames. He waited patiently, juggling the books open with the poker when they seemed slow to catch. He even noticed that my copy of Van Doren's *Life* was broken-spined and duly wrenched it apart to aid it on its way. I thought he would now wait till every page, every line of print was burnt to nothingness. But he straightened when he threw the last volume on the top of the rest. Perhaps he realized that books burn much less easily than loose paper; or relied on them to char and smoulder away through the night; or did not care, now that the major damage had been done. He stared down for a long moment into the hearth. Then at last he turned to me. His hand moved, I thought he was going to strike me. But all I was presented with, a foot from my face, as if to make sure that even someone as 'blind' as I was could not mistake the gesture, was the yellow hand clenched into a fist - and, incomprehensibly, with the thumb cocked high. The sign of mercy, when there was no mercy.

He must have left his hand in that inexplicable position for at least five seconds. Then he turned away and went to the door. He cast a last look round the room, seemingly without anger, a mere neat workman's check that everything was left in order. I think I was not included in his

glance.

The light went out. I heard the front door open, then close. The wicket-gate squeaked, and then that too was shut. I sat distraught, with the flames and malevolently licking shadows; with the acrid smell, surely the most distressing of all after burnt human flesh, of cremated human knowledge. A car door was shut, an engine started - a manoeuvring, a changing of gears as he turned in the lane, a flicker of headlights on the drawn curtains. Then I heard the car pull up the hill away from the village. In that direction the lane (I knew, since the taxi that had brought me the previous evening had taken it) eventually joined the main road to Sherborne; and passed nowhere in the process.

I was left to silence, catastrophe and the dying flames.

I shall not labour the agonies of those next nine or ten hours; of watching that fire die away, of increasing discomfort, of raging anger at the atrocious blow that had fallen. I refused all thought of building on the only too literal ashes before me. The world was insane, I no longer wished to have anything to do with it. I would devote the rest of my life to revenge, to tracking that sadistic young fiend down. I would comb every likely coffee-bar in London, I would make Maurice and Jane give the most exact description of everything that had been stolen. I would ruthlessly pursue my suspicions over Richard. Once or twice I dropped off, only to awaken again a minute or two later, as though from a nightmare - only to learn that the nightmare was the reality. I moved arms and legs as much as I could to keep my circulation going. Repeated attempts to loosen either bonds or the gag failed completely; and so did my efforts to shift the chair. Again I cursed Jane, or the matting she had had lain over the stone floor. The legs refused to slide on it, and I could not get any sort of purchase. I knew numbness, and then great cold - made all the more bitter for my having refused his offer to prevent it.

An intolerably slow dawn crept through the curtains. Soon afterwards an early car passed down towards the vil-

lage. I made a vain attempt to shout through my gagged mouth. The car swept on and out of hearing. Once more I tried to edge the chair towards the window, but made barely a yard of distance after a quarter of an hour of effort. A last jerk of frustration nearly overbalanced the chair backwards, and I gave up. A little later I heard a tractor coming up the lane, no doubt from the farm. Again I made every attempt to cry for help. But the machine dragged slowly past and up the hill. I began then to be seriously afraid. Whatever confidence I had invested in the young man had been completely lost in those final minutes. If he could do that, he could do anything. To break his promise about telling the police would be nothing to him.

It eventually occurred to me that in edging forwards, towards the front of the cottage, I was making a mistake. There were knives in the kitchen behind; and indeed I found it easier to proceed backwards, as I could exert a better pressure with the soles of my shoes. I started to inch my way back towards the kitchen. There was an edge of rush mat that proved hideously difficult to negotiate. But by eleven I had at last crept through into the kitchen - and felt very near weeping. Already I had had to pass water as I sat; and try as I would, I could not get my fingers up to any drawer where cutlery was kept. I was finally reduced to an inert despair.

Then at last, soon after midday, I heard another car approach - the seventh or eighth of the morning. But this one stopped outside the cottage. My heart leapt. A few moments later I heard a knock on the front door. I cursed myself for not having followed my original plan of movement. There was a further knock, then silence. I seethed at the stupidity of country policemen. But I did the man an injustice. Very soon afterwards there was a concerned official face staring at me through the jagged hole in the glass of the kitchen door.

And that was that.

Nearly a year has passed now since that moment of rescue,

and I will be brief over the factual aftermath.

The constable who released me proved kind and efficient - indeed I had nothing but kindness and efficiency from everyone else that day. As soon as he had cut me free, he insisted on providing the immemorial English answer to all the major crises of existence. Only when he had watched me down two cups of his dark brown tea did he return to his car and radio in a report. I had hardly changed into clean clothes before a doctor arrived, very soon followed by two plainclothes men. The doctor declared me none the worse, and I then had a long questioning from the detective sergeant. The constable went off meanwhile to telephone Maurice and Jane from the farm.

At least I found that I was not mistaken in believing that I had a story to dine out on. 'The cheeky devil!' and similar comments interrupted all my account. The burning of my book completely nonplussed the sergeant - had I, like, any enemies? I had to disillusion him as to the lengths to which the London literary *mafiosi* will go to gain their foul ends; but that the cottage had been 'chosen' surprised him rather less. This kind of crime, and of criminal, was increasingly frequent. I even detected a certain grudging admiration. These 'random loners' were smart customers, it seemed; never 'did a job' near where they lived, but based themselves on some big city and exploited the new mania for the weekend cottage. The sergeant confessed it was difficult to know where to look. It could be London ... or Bristol, Birmingham, anywhere. He blamed it all on the motorways and the new mobility they allowed the 'villains'.

Of Richard, on reflection I said nothing. I felt I owed it at least to Maurice and Jane to discuss the matter with them in private first - the constable had spoken to Jane in Hampstead, and she had sent her commiseration, with the assurance that they would come down at once. Then the farmer and his wife appeared, full of apologies for not having heard anything; then a telephone engineer ... I was grateful for all the coming and going, which at least took my mind off the blow I had suffered.

Maurice and Jane arrived by car. soon after seven, and I had to go through my story all over again. Ignorant of my personal loss until they arrived, they were kind enough then to treat their own misfortune as nothing beside mine. I introduced my suspicion as regards Richard as obliquely as possible, but I did not spare them the details of the political philosophizing I had received. In the end I saw Jane look at Maurice, and knew that four had been reached. A few minutes later Maurice took the bull by the horns and was on the telephone to his son in London. He was diplomatic - naturally he didn't accuse him of conscious complicity - but as firmly probing as a good solicitor should be. He came away from the receiver to say that Richard swore he had never even mentioned the cottage - and that he (Maurice) believed him. But I could see he was troubled. When the sergeant appeared again a little later to take a full list of what had been stolen, I heard Maurice lay the matter before him. I understand the 'commune' was subsequently raided, but nothing more incriminating was found than the inevitable cannabis. No young man there matched my description who had not a sound alibi; and nothing resulted from this line of investigation.

Nor indeed from any other in the weeks and months that followed; it has remained, in public terms, no more than an unsolved minor crime. I cannot even claim that it has irreparably affected my writing self. I spent a month of misery - I suppose in something very like a profound sulk - which no one who had known what the book meant to me was allowed to alleviate. But I hadn't taken everything to do with it to Dorset. A carbon of the first three typed-out chapters had remained in London; and I found that my memory was a good deal better than I had previously suspected. Some kind of challenge was involved. I decided one day that my friends were right and that the Peacock could be reconstituted; and already I am more than halfway on the road to doing just that.

This must seem a very flat end to my adventure. But I have not quite finished what I want to say. There is a sense

in which what I have so far written is no more than a preamble.

Just as my reconstituted Peacock cannot be quite the same as the one that was torn, so to speak, from the womb, I cannot be sure that I have reproduced the events of that night with total accuracy. I have tried my best, but I may have exaggerated, especially in the attempts to transcribe my persecutor's dialogue. He did not perhaps employ the idiot argot of Black Power (or wherever it derives from) quite as repetitively as I have described; and I may have misread some of his apparent feelings.

But what concerns me far more than one or two minor misinterpretations or inaccuracies of memory is my continuing inability to make sense of what happened. I have written it down principally to try to come to some sort of positive conclusion. What haunts me most can be put as two questions. Why did it happen? Why did it happen to me? In essence: What was it in me that drove that young demon to behave as he did?

I cannot regard it merely as some offbeat incident in the war between the generations. I cannot even see myself as typical of my generation and (in spite of what I may have said in my first weeks of anger) I do not think he is typical of his - or to be more precise, I do not think that that last unforgivable action is typical of his. They may despise us; but young people in general seem to me much more averse to hating than we were at their age. Everyone knows their attitude to love, the horrors of the permissive society and all the rest of it; very few have noted that in devaluing love, they have also rather healthily devalued hate. The burning of my book was in some way linked to the need - presumably on both sides - for anathema. In that I believe he was very far from typical.

There comes next an enigma; the fact that his unforgivable act was preceded by a surprisingly mild, almost kind, course of behaviour. When he said he did not want to hurt me physically, I believed him. It was not said ambiguously,

as some kind of threat by paradox. He meant. I am virtually sure, exactly what he said. Yet that cannot square with the vicious cruelty (to a powerless older man) of what he finally did. I tended at first to read a cold calculation into his behaviour : from the start he was kind only to deceive - or at least from the moment when he linked me with the book downstairs. But now I simply do not know. I would give a very great deal - I think even an absolution, if that were a condition of putting the question - to know when he truly decided to do it. My unfortunate moment of condescension in the bedroom annoyed him; and my questioning of his motives, compared to that of genuine young political revolutionaries, also no doubt stung. But neither seemed, or seems still, to have merited quite such savage retribution.

Then there is the other enigma - of that distinct air of reproach at my behaviour he showed at the very beginning. I have some guilty conscience here, because this is the first time I have told the truth about it. I claimed to the police, and to Maurice and Jane, that I was surprised asleep in bed. No one blamed me for not trying to resist - in that, intruder and victim have been in a minority of two. I am still not sure that I really blame myself. What regrets I have depend on my crediting his own assertion : that if I had only made a noise, he would have decamped. In any case it makes no sense that he burnt my book because I failed to attack him. Why should he punish me for making things easy? And what in his actual behaviour, with its very apparent touchiness, suggested that standing up to him would have helped prevent what happened? Supposing I had been sarcastic and insulting, what you will ... should I have got off any better?

I have tried to list what he might have hated in me, both reasonably and unreasonably : my age. my physical puniness, my myopia, my accent, my education, my lack of guts, my everything else. I must certainly have seemed precious, old-fashioned, square, and all the rest of it, but surely all that could not have added up to much more than the

figure of a vaguely contemptible elderly man. I can hardly have stood for what he called 'Them', the 'system' : capitalism. I belonged to a profession he seemed to have some respect for - he liked books, he liked Conrad. So why could he not like - or rather, why did he have to hate me? If he regarded my book on Peacock in the puritanical kind of way of the *New Left Review*, as mere parasitism on a superseded bourgeois art form, he would surely have said so. And he was not even remotely like an intellectual Marxist.

To Maurice and Jane this quasi-political is the most convincing explanation. But I think they are a little biased by the trauma in their own family that Richard has caused. I regard it as no true analogy with my young man at all. He at no time linked me personally with 'Them'. He showed no interest in my political views. He attacked something quite plainly apolitical : my book.

There remains strongly with me the impression of a better mind than his language suggested, as if he half knew he was talking nonsense and was partly doing so to test me : if I gave him so much rope to play the clown, then I deserved to be made a fool of in my turn. But I suspect that this is being over-complicated. At heart, what he said and how I reacted to it had no importance. In hindsight I can imagine quite other courses our conversation might have taken, and yet ended with the same dire result.

I must mention one other theory of Maurice's : that the boy was some kind of schizophrenic and that the effort and stress of being restrained with me built up until the more violent side of his personality had to be displayed. But *after* he must have made the decision, he was still pressing brandy on me and offering to put on the fire for warmth. This seems altogether too conscious for schizophrenia. Besides, at no point did he offer me personal physical violence or suggest that the point of the exercise was to show me that he had such a side. I was bound and gagged. He could have punched me, slapped my face, done what he liked. But I am convinced that my body was always safe from him.

What was under attack was something else.

Now there is. I believe, an important clue in that curious last gesture - the aggressive cocked thumb thrust in my face. Very plainly it was not meant to convey its classical significance: no mercy was being extended. Equally obviously it cannot have carried its most common modern meaning: 'everything is all right'. I noticed it used frequently by the demolition workmen opposite my flat when I returned to London - a spectacle that I found now earned a certain morbid fascination for me, since death and destruction were much on my mind; and I was struck by the variety of meanings they extracted from the cocked thumb. It said simply 'yes', when noise made shouting difficult; or 'I understand, I will do what you want'; it could also rather paradoxically convey both the instruction to carry on (if, for instance, held continuously raised to a backing lorry-driver) and that of 'stop - perfect' (when suddenly raised in the same manoeuvre). But what was lacking in all these uses was aggression. It was not till some months later that I saw the light.

I have a small vice, I am rather fond of watching association football matches on television. Quite what I derive from this vacuous pursuit beyond the intellectual's sense of superiority at the sight of so much mindless energy devoted to the modern equivalent of the Roman circus, I am not sure. But what caught my attention one evening was a player running out of the 'tunnel' on to the arena who showed just this aggressive thumb to a band of screaming supporters in the stands nearby; one or two even responded in kind. The significance (the game had not started) was clear: our courage is high, we are going to beat the enemy, we shall win. The echo was very sharp. I suddenly saw my thief's gesture as a warning: a grim match was about to start, and the opposing team he represented was determined to win. He was effectively saying, you are not going to get away with this so easily as you think. It may seem that such a message might with much more cause have been mine to him. But I think not. Burning my papers was simply

a supporting proof of the cocked thumb; what underlay both was a fear, or certainly a detestation of the fact that in this particular match I entered the field with the odds on my side. However improbably, in the actual physical circumstances, in some way I remained in his view the over-dog.

All this leads me to a tentative conclusion. I have very little evidence for it, and what I do I have already undermined by confessing that I cannot swear to its complete accuracy. But I think some of his linguistic usages (certainly recurrent, if not quite so much as I have suggested) are very significant. One was that use of 'man'. I know it is very common among young people. But it seemed just a shade deliberate in its application to myself. Though partly insulting in intention, I think it also disguised a somewhat pathetic attempt to level. It wished to convey that there was nothing between us despite the differences in age, education, background and all the rest; but in reality it showed a kind of recognition, perhaps even a kind of terror of all that did separate us. It may not be too farfetched to say that what I failed to hear ('Man, your trouble is you don't listen hard enough') was a tacit cry for help.

The other usage is that of 'right' as a ubiquitous tag to all manner of statements that do not require it. I know it is also so commonplace among the young that it may be dangerous to see more in it than a mere psittacism - a mindless parroting. For all that, I suspect it is one of the most revealing catch-phrases of our century. It may grammatically be more often an ellipsis for 'Is that right?' than for 'Am I right?' - but I am convinced the psychological significance is always of the latter kind. It means in effect, *I am not at all sure that I am right*. It can, of course, be said aggressively: 'Don't you dare say I am wrong!' But the thing it cannot mean is self-certainty. It is fundamentally expressive of doubt and fear, of so to speak hopeless *parole* in search of lost *langue*. The underlying mistrust is of language itself. It is not so much that such people doubt what they think and believe, but they doubt profoundly their ability

to say it. The mannerism is a symptom of a cultural breakdown. It means 'I cannot, or I probably cannot, communicate with you'. And that, not the social or economic, is the true under-privilege.

It is very important, or so I have read, when faced with primitive tribes, to know the significances they attach to facial expression. Many a worthy and smiling missionary died because he did not realize he was greeting men to whom the baring of the teeth is an unmistakable sign of hostility. I believe something of the same kind takes place when 'right'-users face those who manage to get by without the wretched word. I won't be so absurd as to maintain that if I had interspersed my own remarks with a few reciprocal 'mans' and 'rights' the night would then have taken a different path. But I am convinced that the fatal clash between us was of one who trusts and reveres language and one who suspects and resents it. My sin was not primarily that I was middle-class, intellectual, that I may have appeared more comfortably off financially than I am in fact; but that I live by words.

I must very soon have appeared to the boy as one who deprived him of a secret - and one he secretly wanted to possess. That rather angry declaration of at least some respect for books; that distinctly wistful desire to write a book himself (to 'tell it how it really is' - as if the poverty of that phrase did not *ab initio* castrate the wish it implied!); that striking word-deed paradox in the situation, the civil chat while he went round the room robbing; that surely not quite unconscious incoherence in his views; that refusal to hear, seemingly even to understand, my mildly raised objections; that jumping from one thing to another ... all these made the burning of my book only too justly symbolic in his eyes. What was really burnt was my generation's 'refusal' to hand down a kind of magic.

My fate was most probably sealed from the moment I rejected his suggestion that I write about him myself. I took the wish at the time as a kind of dandyism, a narcissism, call it what you will - print as a mirror for the ego. But I

think what he really invited - at any rate subconsciously - was the loan of some of this magic power ... and perhaps because he could not really believe in its existence until he saw it applied to himself. In a sense he placed his own need in the scales against what I had called a long-dead novelist; and what he must have resented most was the application of this precious and denied gift of word-magic to no more than another obscure word-magician. I presented a closed shop, a select club, an introverted secret society; and that is what he felt he had to destroy.

I do not say this was all, but I am convinced it was the heart of it. The charge against all of us, old and young, who still value language and its powers, is unjustified to be sure. Most of us have willy-nilly done our best to see that the word, its secrets and its magics, its sciences and its arts, survive. The true villains of the piece are well beyond individual control: the triumph of the visual, of television, the establishment of universal miseducation, the social and political (can any ancient master of language be groaning louder in his grave than Pericles?) history of our unmanageable century and heaven knows how many other factors. Yet I do not want to portray myself as an innocent scapegoat. I believe my young demon was right in one thing.

I *was* guilty of a deafness.

I have quite deliberately given this account an obscure title and an incomprehensible epigraph. I did not elect for the first without trying it out on various guinea-pigs. The general impression seemed to be that Koko must be some idiosyncratic spelling for the more usual Coco, and that the phrase therefore meant something to the effect of 'poor clown'. That will do for a first level of meaning, though I shouldn't like to see it attached to only one of the two participants - or for that matter to have the adjective taken in only one of its senses. Koko has in fact nothing whatever to do with Coco of the red proboscis and the ginger wig. It is a Japanese word and means correct filial behaviour, the proper attitude of son to father.

My incomprehensible epigraph shall have the last word,
and serve as judgment on both father and son. It comes
with a sad prescience from an extinct language of these
islands, Old Cornish.

Too long a tongue, too short a hand;
But tongueless man has lost his land.