

EVELYNN



GUIDE
READERS' PICK
INSIDE

WAUGH

EVELYN WAUGH

*Unconditional
Surrender*



A Novel



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To my daughter MARGARET

Child of the Locust Years

Locust Years

When Guy Crouchback returned to his regiment in the autumn of 1941 his position was in many ways anomalous. He had been trained in the first batch of temporary officers, had commanded a company, had been detached for special duties, had been in action and acquitted himself with credit; he had twice put up captain's stars and twice removed them; their scars were plainly visible on his shoulder straps. He had been invalided home on an order direct from GHQ ME and the medical authorities could find nothing wrong with him. There were rumors that he had "blotted his copybook" in West Africa. When he was commissioned in 1939 his comparative old age had earned him the sobriquet of "uncle." Now he was two years older and the second batch of officers in training were younger than those who had joined with him. To them he seemed a patriarch; to him they seemed a generation divided by an impassable barrier. Once he had made the transition, had thrown himself into the mêlée on the ante-room floor, had said "cheerio" when he drank with them, and had been accepted as one of themselves. He could not do it a second time. Nor were there any longer mêlées and guest nights, nor much drinking. The new young officers were conscripts who liked to spend their leisure listening to jazz on the wireless. The first battalion, his battalion, followed Ritchie-Hook biffing across the sands of North Africa. A draft of reinforcements were sent out to them. Guy was not posted with them. Hookforce, all save four, had been taken prisoner in Crete. He had no comrades in arms in England except Tommy Blackhouse who returned to raise another Special Service Force. They met Tommy in Bellamy's and he offered him a post on his staff, but the shadow of Ivor Claire lay dark and long over Commandos, and Guy answered that he was content to soldier on with the Halberdiers.

This he did for two blank years. A Second Brigade was formed, and Guy followed its fortunes in training, with periodic changes of quarters from Penkirk in Scotland to Brook Park in Cornwall. Home Forces no longer experienced the shocks, counter-orders, and disorders of the first two years of war. The army in the Far East now suffered as they had done. In Europe the initiative was now with the allies. They were laboriously assembled and equipped and trained. Guy rose to be second-in-command of his battalion with the acting rank of major.

Then in August 1943 there fell on him the blow that had crushed Jumbo at Mugg: "I'm sorry, uncle, but I'm afraid we shan't be taking you with us when we go to foreign parts. You've been invaluable in training. Don't know what I should have done without you. But I can't risk taking a chance of your age into action."

"Am I much older than you, colonel?"

"Not much, I suppose, but I've spent my life in this job. I get hit, the second-in-command will have to take over. Can't risk it."

"I'd gladly come down in rank. Couldn't I have a company? Or a platoon?"

"Be your age, uncle. No can do. This is an order from brigade."

The new brigadier, lately arrived from the Eighth Army, was the man to whom, briefly, Guy had been attached in West Africa when he encompassed the death of Apthorpe. On that occasion the brigadier had said: "I don't want to see you again ever." He had fought long and hard since then and won a DSO, but throughout the dust of war he remembered Guy. Apthorpe, that brother-uncle, that

ghost, laid, Guy had thought, on the island of Mugg, walked still in his porpoise boots to haunt him; the defeated lord of the thunder-box still worked his jungle magic. When a Halberdier said: "No can do," it was final.

"We shall need you for the embarkation, of course. When you've seen us off, take a spot of leave. After that you're old enough to find yourself something to do. There's always 'barrack duties,' of course, or you might report to the War House to the pool of unemployed officers. There's plenty of jobs going begging for chaps in your position."

Guy took his leave and was at Matchet when Italy surrendered. News of the king's flight came on the day the brigade landed at Salerno. It brought Guy some momentary exhilaration.

"That looks like the end of the Piedmontese usurpation," he said to his father. "What a mistake the Lateran Treaty was. It seemed masterly at the time—how long? Fifteen years ago? What are fifteen years in the history of Rome? How much better it would have been if the Popes had sat it out and then emerged saying: 'What was all that? Risorgimento? Garibaldi? Cavour? the House of Savoy? Mussolini? Just some hooligans from out of town causing a disturbance. Come to think of it wasn't there once a poor little boy whom they called King of Rome?' That's what the Pope ought to be saying today."

Mr. Crouchback regarded his son sadly. "My dear boy," he said, "you're really talking the most terrible nonsense, you know. That isn't at all what the Church is like. It isn't what she's *for*."

They were walking along the cliffs returning at dusk to the Marine Hotel with Mr. Crouchback's retriever, ageing now, not gamboling as he used but loping behind them. Mr. Crouchback had aged too, and for the first time showed concern with his own health. They fell silent, Guy disconcerted by his father's rebuke, Mr. Crouchback still, it seemed, pondering the question he had raised; for when at length he spoke it was to say: "Of course it's reasonable for a soldier to rejoice in victory."

"I don't think I'm interested in victory now," said Guy.

"Then you've no business to be a soldier."

"Oh, I want to stay in the war. I should like to do some fighting. But it doesn't seem to matter now who wins. When we declared war on Finland..."

He left the sentence unfinished, and his father said: "That sort of question isn't for soldiers."

As they came into sight of the hotel, he added: "I suppose I'm getting like a schoolmaster. Forgive me. We mustn't quarrel. I used often to get angry with poor Ivo; and with Angela. She was rather a tiresome girl the year she came out. But I don't think I've ever been angry with you."

Matchet had changed in the last two years. The army unit for whom Monte Rosa had been cleared had gone as quickly as they came, leaving the boarding-house empty. Its blank windows and carpeted floors stood as a symbol of the little town's brief popularity. Refugees from bombing returned to their former homes. Mrs. Tickeridge moved to be near a school for Jennifer. The days when the Cuthberts could "let every room twice over" were ended and they reluctantly found themselves obliged to be agreeable. It was not literally true, as Miss Vavasour claimed, that they "went down on their knees" to keep their residents, but they did offer Mr. Crouchback his former sitting room at its former price.

"No, thank you very much," he had said. "You'll remember I promised to take it again *after* the war, and unless things change very much for the worse I shall do that. Meanwhile my few sticks are in store and I don't feel like getting them out again."

"Oh, we will furnish it for you, Mr. Crouchback."

"It wouldn't be quite the same. You make me very comfortable as I am."

His former rent was now being paid as a weekly allowance to an unfrocked priest.

The Cuthberts were glad enough to accommodate parents visiting their sons at Our Lady of

Victories and obscurely supposed that if they antagonized Mr. Crouchback, he would somehow stop their coming.

*

Guy left next day and reported to the Halberdier barracks. He had little appetite for leave now. Three days later a letter came from his father:

*Marine Hotel
Matchet
20 September 1943*

*My Dear Guy,
I haven't been happy about our conversation on your last evening. I said too much or too little. Now I must say more.*

Of course in the 1870s and 80s every decent Roman disliked the Piedmontese, just as the decent French now hate the Germans. They had been invaded. And, of course, most of the Romans we know kept it up, sulking. But that isn't the Church. The Mystical Body doesn't strike attitudes and stand on its dignity. It accepts suffering and injustice. It is ready to forgive at the first hint of compunction.

When you spoke of the Lateran Treaty did you consider how many souls may have been reconciled and have died at peace as the result of it? How many children may have been brought up in the faith who might have lived in ignorance? Quantitative judgments don't apply. If only one soul was saved that is full compensation for any amount of loss of "face."

I write like this because I am worried about you and I gather I may not live very much longer. I saw the doctor yesterday and he seemed to think I have something pretty bad the matter.

As I say, I'm worried about you. You seemed so much enlivened when you first joined the army. I know you are cut up at being left behind in England. But you mustn't sulk.

It was not a good thing living alone and abroad. Have you thought at all about what you will do after the war? There's the house at Broome the village calls "Little Hall"—quite incorrectly. All the records refer to it simply as the "Lesser House." You'll have to live somewhere and I doubt if you'll want to go back to the Castello even if it survives, which doesn't seem likely the way they are bombing everything in Italy.

You see I am thinking a lot about death at the moment. Well that's quite suitable at my age and condition.

*Ever your affec. father,
G. Crouchback*

When Hookforce sailed without him, Jumbo Trotter abandoned all hope of active service. He became commandant of No. 6 Transit Camp, London District, a post which required good nature, sobriety, and a little else except friends of influence—in all of which qualities Jumbo was rich. He no longer bore resentment against Ben Ritchie-Hook. He accepted the fact that he was on the shelf. The threat of just such a surrender of his own condition overcast Guy.

Jumbo often took a drive to the Halberdier barracks to see what was on. There in late September he found Guy disconsolately installed as PAD officer and assistant adjutant.

“Put in to see the Captain Commandant,” he advised. “Say there is something coming through for you any day but you have to be in London. Get posted to the ‘unemployed pool’ and come and stay at my little place. I can make you quite comfortable.”

So Guy moved to Jumbo’s little place—Little Hall? Lesser House?—No. 6 Transit Camp, London District, and for a few days looked into the depths of the military underworld. There was a waiting-room in an outlying dependency of the War Office where daily congregated officers of all ages whose regiments and corps had no use for them.

There had been a “Man-power Directive” from the highest source which enjoined that everyone in the country should be immediately employed in the “war effort.” Guy was interviewed by a legless major who said: “You seem to have done all right. I don’t know why they’ve sent you to this outfit. First Halberdier I’ve had through my hands. What have you been up to?”

He studied the file in which was recorded all Guy’s official biography of the last four years.

“Age,” said Guy.

“Thirty-nine, just rising forty. Yes, that’s old for your rank. You’re back to captain now of course. Well all I can offer at the moment is a security job at Aden and almoner at a civilian hospital. I don’t suppose either particularly appeals to you?”

“No.”

“Well, stick around. I may find something better. But they don’t look for good fellows in my office. Look about outside and see what you can find.”

And, sure enough, one evening early in October, after his third attendance on the legless major (who offered him, with undisguised irony, an administrative post in Wales at a school of air photography interpretation) he met Tommy Blackhouse once more in Bellamy’s. Tommy now had a brigade of Commandos. He was under orders to sail shortly for Italy to rehearse the Anzio landings and was keeping dead quiet about his movements. He only said, “Wish you’d decided to come to me, Guy.”

“Too late now?”

“Far too late.”

Guy explained his predicament.

“That’s the hell of a mess.”

“The fellow at the War Office has been very civil.”

“Yes, but you’ll find he’ll get impatient soon. There’s a flap about man-power. They’ll suddenly pitch you into something awful. Wish I could help.”

Later that evening he said: “I’ve thought of something that might do as a stop-gap. I keep a liaison officer at HOO HQ. God knows what he does. Anyway I’m taking him away somewhere else. There

are a few odd bodies that have got attached to me. They came under HOO. You could liaise with them for a bit if you liked.”

When Jumbo heard of it, he said: “Strictly speaking I suppose you aren’t ‘in transit’ anymore.”

“I hope I am.”

“Well, anyway, stay on here as long as you like. We’ll find a way of covering you in the returns. London District is never much trouble. All stock-brokers and wine merchants from the Foot Guards. Awfully easy fellows to deal with.”

But it was not for this that he had dedicated himself on the sword of Roger of Waybroke that hopeful morning four years back.

State Sword

In all the hosts of effigies that throng the aisles of Westminster Abbey one man only, and he a sailor strikes a martial attitude. The men of the middle ages have sheathed their swords and composed their hands in prayer; the men of the age of reason have donned the toga. A Captain Montagu alone, in Flaxman's posthumous statue, firmly grips his hilt, and, because they had so many greater treasures to protect, the chapter left him to stand there throughout the war unencumbered by sand bags, gazing across the lower nave as he had gazed at the ships of revolutionary France in the waters of Ushant on the day of victory and death.

His name is not well remembered and his portrait, larger than life and portly for his years, has seldom attracted the notice of sightseers. It was not his sword but another which on Friday, 29 October 1943, drew the column of fours which slowly shuffled forward from Millbank, up Great College Street, under a scarred brick wall, on which during the hours of darkness in the preceding spring a zealous, arthritic communist had emblazoned the words, SECOND FRONT NOW, until they reached the door under the blasted and bombed west window. The people of England were long habituated to queues; some had joined the procession ignorant of its end—hoping perhaps for cigarettes or shoes—but most were in a mood of devotion. In the street a few words were exchanged; no laughter.

The day was overcast, damp, misty, and still. Winter overcoats had not yet appeared. Each member of the crowd carried a respirator—valueless now, the experts secretly admitted, against any gas the enemy was likely to employ, but still the badge of a people in arms. Women predominated; here and there a service man—British, American, Polish, Dutch, French—displayed some pride of appearance; the civilians were shabby and grubby. Some, for it was their lunch hour, munched “Woolton Pies”; others sucked cigarettes made of the sweepings of canteen floors. Bombing had ceased for the time being but the livery of air-raid shelter remained the national dress. As they reached the Abbey church which many were entering for the first time in their lives, all fell quite silent as though they were approaching a corpse lying in state.

The sword they had come to see stood upright between two candles, on a table counterfeiting an altar. Policemen guarded it on either side. It had been made at the King's command as a gift to “the steel-hearted people of Stalingrad.” An octogenarian, who had made ceremonial swords for five sovereigns, rose from his bed to forge it; silver, gold, rock-crystal, and enamel had gone to its embellishment. In this year of the Sten gun it was a notable weapon and was first exhibited as a feat of craftsmanship at Goldsmith's Hall and at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Some few took comfort at this evidence that ancient skills survived behind the shoddy improvisation of the present. It was not thus that it affected the hearts of the people. Every day the wireless announced great Russian victories while the British advance in Italy was coming to a halt. The people were suffused with gratitude to their remote allies and they venerated the sword as the symbol of their own generous and spontaneous emotion.

The newspapers and the Ministry of Information caught on. *The Times* “dropped into poetry.”

... *I saw the Sword of Stalingrad,*
Then bow'd down my head from the Light of it,
Spirit to my spirit, the Might of it

Silently whispered—O Mortal, Behold...

I am the Life of Stalingrad,

*You and its people shall unite in me,
Men yet unborn, in the great Light in me
Triumphs shall sing when my Story is told.*

The gossip-writer of the *Daily Express* suggested it should be sent round the kingdom. Cardiff, Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester, Glasgow, and Edinburgh paid it secular honors in their Art Galleries and Guild Halls. Now, back from its tour, it reached its apotheosis, exposed for adoration hard by the shrine of St. Edward the Confessor and the sacring place of the kings of England.

Guy Crouchback drove past the line of devotees on his way to luncheon. Unmoved by the popular enthusiasm for the triumphs of “Joe” Stalin, who now qualified for the name of “uncle,” as Guy had done and Apthorpe, he was not tempted to join them in their piety. 29 October 1943 had another and more somber significance for him. It was his fortieth birthday and to celebrate the occasion he had asked Jumbo Trotter to luncheon.

It was through Jumbo’s offices that he now sat at ease behind a FANNY driver instead of traveling by bus. After four years of war Jumbo preserved his immunity to sumptuary regulations. As also did Ruben. In a famine-stricken world the little fish-restaurant dispensed in their seasons Colchester oysters, Scotch salmon, lobsters, prawns, gulls’ eggs, which rare foods were specifically exempt from the law which limited the price of hotel meals to five shillings, and often caviar, obtained, only Ruben knew how, through diplomatic channels. Most surprising of all there sometimes appeared cheeses from France, collected by intrepid parachutists and conveyed home by submarine. There was an abundance of good wine, enormously costly, at a time when the cellars of the hotels were empty and wine merchants dealt out meager monthly parcels only to their oldest customers. Ruben had for some years enjoyed a small and appreciative clientèle. Once he had served in Bellamy’s and there were always tables for its members. There was also an increasing dilution of odd-looking men who called the proprietor “Mr. Ruben” and carried large quantities of bank-notes in their hip pockets. That restaurant was a rare candle in a dark and naughty world. Kerstie Kilbannock, who had made noxious experiments with custard powder and condiments, once asked: “Do tell me, Ruben, how do you make your mayonnaise?” and received the grave reply: “Quite simply, my lady, fresh eggs and olive oil.”

Guy led Jumbo to a corner table. He had spent little time in London since his return from Egypt and he could seldom afford to feast, but Ruben was loyal to old faces and familiar names.

“Rather a change from the Senior,” Jumbo remarked as he surveyed the company. “A *great* change,” he added as he read the menu. They consumed great quantities of oysters. As they rose surfeited from their table, it was seized by a couple who had just come in; Kerstie Kilbannock and an American soldier. As though playing musical chairs, she was in Jumbo’s warm place before he had taken his cap from the peg above him.

“Guy, how are you?”

“Forty.”

“We’ve been lunching with Ruby at the Dorchester and are so hungry we had to pop in here and fill up. You know the Lootenant?”

“Yes, indeed. How are you, Loot?”

Everyone knew Lieutenant Padfield; even Guy who knew so few people. He was a portent of the Grand Alliance. London was full of American soldiers, tall, slouching, friendly, woefully homesick

young men who seemed always in search of somewhere to sit down. In the summer they had filled the parks and sat on the pavements round the once august mansions which had been assigned to them. For their comfort there swarmed out of the slums and across the bridges multitudes of drab, ill-favored adolescent girls and their aunts and mothers, never before seen in the squares of Mayfair and Belgravia. These they passionately and publicly embraced, in the blackout and at high noon, and rewarded with chewing-gum, razorblades, and other rare trade-goods from their PX stores. Lieutenant Padfield was a horse of a different color; not precisely, for his face, too, was the color of putty; he too slouched; he, too, was a sedentary by habit. But he was not at all homesick; when not in a chair he must have been in rapid motion, for he was ubiquitous. He was twenty-five years old and in England for the first time. He had been one in the advanced party of the American army and there was no corner of the still intricate social world where he was not familiar.

Guy first met him when on leave he went reluctantly to call on his uncle Peregrine. This was during the Loot's first days in England.

"... Brought a letter from a fellow who used to come to Cowes. Wants to see my miniatures...."

Then during the same week Guy was asked to dinner at the House of Commons by his brother-in-law Arthur Box-Bender. "... Told we ought to do something about some of these Americans. They're interested in the House, naturally. Do come along and give a hand...." There were six young American officers, the Loot among them.

Very soon he had ceased to be a mere member of the occupying forces to whom kindness should be shown. Two or three widows survived from the years of hospitality and still tried meagerly to entertain. The Lieutenant was at all their little parties. Two or three young married women were staking claims to replace them as hostesses. The Loot knew them all. He was in every picture gallery, every bookshop, every club, every hotel. He was also in every inaccessible castle in Scotland, at the sick bed of every veteran artist and politician, in the dressing-room of every leading actress and in every university common-room, and he expressed his thanks to his hosts and hostesses not with the products of the PX stores but with the publications of Sylvia Beach and sketches by Fuseli.

When Guy went to have his hair cut the Loot seemed always to be in the next chair. One of the few places where he was never seen was HOO HQ. He had no apparent military function. In the years of peace he had been the junior member of an important firm of Boston lawyers. It was said that the Loot's duties were still legal. Either the American army was exceptionally law-abiding or they had a glut of advocates. The Loot was never known to serve on a court martial.

Now he said: "I was at Broome yesterday."

"Broome? You mean our Broome? What on earth took you there, Loot?"

"Sally Sackville-Strutt has a daughter at the school. We went to see her play hockey. She's captain of 'Crouchback.' You knew the school was divided into two houses called 'Crouchback' and the 'Hollis Family'?"

"The invidious distinction has been remarked on."

"'Crouchback' won." He began beckoning to Ruben. "Do we meet tonight at the Glenobans?"

"No."

"Did you go to see the Sword of Stalingrad? I went when it was first on view at the Goldsmiths' Hall. I think it is a very lovely gesture of your king's but there was a feature no one could explain to me—the escutcheon on the scabbard will be upside down when it is worn on a baldric."

"I don't suppose Stalin will wear it on a baldric."

"Maybe not. But I was certainly surprised at your College of Arms passing it. Well I'll be seeing you around."

“Around” was the right word.

“~~Pretty fair cheek that young American finding fault with the sword,~~” said Jumbo as they left the restaurant. “What’s more *he* didn’t discover the mistake. There was a letter about it in *The Times* weeks ago. I’ll drop you back at your office. Can’t have you using public transport on your birthday. haven’t anything much on this afternoon. That was the best lunch I’ve had for three years. I may take a little nap.”

*

In the autumn of 1943 Hazardous Offensive Operations Headquarters was a very different organization from the modest offices which Guy had visited in the winter of 1940. The original three flats remained part of their property—an important part, for they housed Ian Kilbannock’s busy press service—as did numerous mansions from Hendon to Clapham in which small bands of experts in untroubled privacy made researches into fortifying drugs, invisible maps, noiseless explosives, and other projects near to the heart of the healthy schoolboy. There was a Swahili witch-doctor in rooms off the Edgware Road who had been engaged to cast spells on the Nazi leaders.

“D’you know, Charles, I sometimes think that black fellow’s something of a charlatan,” General Whale once remarked to Major Albright in a moment of confidence. “He indents for the most extraordinary stores. But we know Hitler’s superstitions and there’s a good deal of evidence that with superstitious people these curses do sometimes work.”

Even Dr. Glendening-Rees, fully recovered from the privations of Mugg, had a dietary team in Upper Norwood, from whose experiments batches of emaciated “conscientious objectors” were from time to time removed to hospital. But the ostensible authority of these activities resided in the Venetian-Gothic brick edifice of the Royal Victorian Institute, a museum nobly planned but little frequented in the parish of Brompton. Its few valuable exhibits had been removed to safe storage. Other less portable objects had been left to the risks of bombardment and still stood amid the labyrinth of ply-board partitions with which the halls were divided.

The compartment assigned to the Special Service Forces Liaison Office—Guy’s—was larger than most but there was little floor space for he shared it with the plaster reconstruction of a megalosaurus under whose huge flanks his trestle table was invisible from the door. This table carried three wire trays “In,” “Out,” and “Pending,” all empty that afternoon—a telephone, and a jig-saw puzzle. For the first few days of his occupancy he had had an AT secretary but she had been removed by a newly installed civilian efficiency-expert. Guy did not repine, but to fill his time, he prosecuted a controversy on the subject. Tommy had said he did not know what the liaison office was supposed to do; nor did Guy.

A captain of Marines peered round the giant carnivore and presented him with a file marked: *Operation Hoopla. Most Secret. By Hand of Officer only.*

“Will you minute this and pass it on to ‘Beaches’?”

“I thought ‘Hoopla’ had been canceled.”

“Postponed,” said the Marine. “The party we had in training was sent to Burma. But we’re still working on it.”

The intention of “Hoopla” was to attack some prodigious bomb-proof submarine-pens in Brittany. A peremptory demand for Immediate Action against these strongholds had been received from the War Cabinet. “If the Air Force can’t destroy the ships, we can kill the crews.” General Whale had suggested. Twelve men were to perform this massacre after landing in a Breton fishing boat.

The latest minute read:

In view of Intelligence Report C/806/RT/12 that occupied France is being supplied with ersatz motor fuel which gives an easily recognizable character to exhaust fumes, it is recommended that samples of this fuel should be procured through appropriate agency, analyzed, reproduced, and issued to Hoopla Force for use in auxiliary engine of fishing boat.

Someone before Guy had added the minute: *Could not a substance be introduced into standard fuel which would provide a characteristic odor of ersatz?*

Someone else, an admiral, had added: *It was decided (see attached minute) that auxiliary engine should be used only under a strong offshore wind. I consider risk of detection of odor negligible in such circumstances.*

Guy more modestly wrote: *Noted and approved. Guy Crouchback, Capt. for Brig. Commander S.S. Forces, and squeezed past the megalosaurus to carry the file on its way.*

“Beaches” was rather a jovial room. It housed an early Victorian locomotive engine, six sailors, and a library of naval charts. The reappearance of “Hoopla” was here greeted with ironic applause. Some time back General Whale had forfeited the kindly sobriquet of “Sprat” and was now known in the lower and more active regions of his command as “Brides-in-the-Bath”; for the reason that all the operations he sponsored seemed to require the extermination of all involved.

Next door to “Beaches” there lived three RAF sergeants in what was called “the studio.” Here beaches were constructed in miniature, yards and yards of them, reproducing from air-photographs miles and miles of the coast of occupied Europe. The studio was full of tools and odd scraps of material, woods, metals, pastes, gums, pigments, feathers, fibers, plasters, and oils many of them strongly aromatic. The tone was egalitarian in an antiquated, folky way distantly derived from the disciples of William Morris. Two of the sergeants were mature craftsmen; one, much younger, wore abundant golden curls such as the army would have cropped. He was addressed as “Susie” and like his predecessors in the Arts and Crafts movement professed communism.

In their ample spare time these ingenious men were building a model of the Royal Victorian Institute. Guy took every opportunity to visit them and admire their work, as it daily grew in perfection. He paused there now.

“Been to see the Stalingrad sword?” Susie asked. “Nice bit of work. But I reckon a few machine guns would be more to the point.”

He was addressing a tall, gray civilian dandy who stood nonchalantly posed beside him twirling a single eyeglass on its black cord. This was Sir Ralph Brompton, the diplomatic adviser to HOO HQ. He seemed a figure of obsolescent light comedy rather than of total war.

“It affords the People an opportunity for self-expression,” said Sir Ralph.

He was a retired ambassador who daily patrolled the building in the self-imposed task of “political indoctrination”; an old man with a mission, but in no hurry.

He had called on Guy and after a very few words had despaired of him as a sympathetic subject. He did not now disguise his annoyance at being found with Susie.

“I just dropped in,” he said, half to Guy, half to the senior sergeant, “to see if you were getting the *Foreign Affairs Summary* regularly.”

“I don’t know,” said the senior sergeant. “Are we, Sam?” He looked vaguely round the littered work-benches. “We don’t get bothered with much paper work here.”

“But you *should*,” said Sir Ralph. “I make a special point of it being circulated to *all* ranks. Much devoted labor went into the last issue. You have to read between the lines sometimes. I’m at a disadvantage in saying quite all that needs saying in black and white. There is still a certain amount of

prejudice to be cleared up—not in the highest quarters, of course, or among the People. But *half way down*,” he said, gazing at Guy through his single eye-glass, without animosity seeing him with his back to a wall, facing a firing squad. “One learns a certain amount of professional discretion in my absurd occupation. There will be no need for that after the war. Meanwhile one can only hint. I can tell you the main points: Tito’s the friend, not Mihajlovic. We’re backing the wrong horse in Malaya. And in China too. Chiang is a collaborationist. We have proof. The only real resistance is in the northern provinces—Russian trained and Russian armed, of course. They are the men who are going to drive out the Japs. It’s all in the *Summary* if you read it attentively. I’ll get you a copy. Don’t forget this evening, Susie. I’m afraid I can’t be there myself, but they are counting on you.”

He sauntered out twirling his eyeglass.

“What are you and that old geezer up to?” asked Sam.

“Party meeting,” said Susie.

“I know better things to do in the blackout than meetings.”

“So does the old geezer, it seems,” said the third sergeant.

“He’s a bit of a bourgeois at heart for all his fine talk,” Susie admitted. All the time he spoke he was concentrating on his small lathe, turning tiny spiral columns with exquisite precision.

“You’ll soon have that finished,” said Guy to the senior sergeant.

“Yes, barring interruptions. You can never tell when they’ll come asking for more beaches. There isn’t the same satisfaction in beaches.”

“They ought to have landed on them this summer,” said Susie. “That’s what was promised.”

“I didn’t give no promises,” said Sam, busy with the fretsaw cutting little mahogany flagstones.

Guy left these happy, industrious men and paused in his progress at the room of Mr. Oates, the civilian efficiency expert.

No one could be reasonably described as “out of place” in HOO HQ, but Mr. Oates, despite his unobtrusive appearance (or by reason of it), seemed bizarre to Guy. He was a plump, taciturn little man and he alone among all his heterogeneous colleagues proclaimed confidence. Of the others some toiled mindlessly, passing files from tray to tray, some took their ease, some were plotting, some hiding, some grousing; all quite baffled. But Mr. Oates believed he was in his own way helping to win the war. He was a profoundly peaceful man and his way seemed clear before him.

“Any result of my application for the return of my typist?”

“Negative,” said Mr. Oates.

“Kilbannock has three typists.”

“Not now. I have just withdrawn two of them. There is another, Mrs. Troy, who is officially attached to him but her work seems mainly extramural. In fact her position is somewhat anomalous in this headquarters. I shall raise it at the next manpower conference.”

There had been a showy addition to Mr. Oates’s furniture since Guy’s last visit; an elaborate machine of more modern construction than any permanent exhibit in the museum.

“What have you got there?”

Mr. Oates made a little grimace of gratification.

“Ah! You have found my tender spot. You might call it my pet. Absolutely new. It’s just been flown in from America. It took 560 man hours to install. The mechanics came from America, too. There isn’t another like it in the country.”

“But what is it?”

“An Electronic Personnel Selector.”

“Have we any electronic personnel?”

“It covers every contingency. For example, suppose I want to find a lieutenant-colonel who is a long-distance swimmer, qualified as a barrister, with experience in catering in tropical countries, instead of going through all the records I just press these buttons, one, two, three, four, and...” there was a whirring noise from the depths of the engine, a series of clicks as though from a slot-machine telling fortunes on a pier, a card shot up. “You see—totally blank—that means negative.”

“I think I could have guessed that.”

“Yes, I was illustrating an extreme example. Now here”—he picked up a chit from his tray—“is a genuine inquiry. I’ve been asked to find an officer for special employment; under forty, with a university degree, who has lived in Italy, and had Commando training—one, two, three, four, five—” whirr, click, click, click, click, click. “Here we are. Now that *is* a remarkable coincidence.”

The card he held bore the name of A/Ty. Captain Crouchbank, G., RC, att. HOO HQ.

Guy did not attempt to correct the machine on the point of his age, or of the extent of his Commando training.

“I seem the only one.”

“Yes. I don’t know what it’s for, of course, but I will send your name in at once.”

Thirty-seven years old, six foot two in height, upright, powerful, heavier than he had been in the Middle East and paler, with a hint of flabbiness in the cheeks, wearing service dress, a well-kept Sam Browne belt, the ribbon of the MM and the badges of a Major in the Intelligence Corps; noticeable, if at all, for the pink-gray irises of his eyes; the man whom Hookforce had known as Corporal Major Ludovic paused reminiscently by the railings of St. Margaret's, Westminster.

This was the place where he and others of his regiment had paraded twelve years and a few months ago, in King's Guard order as guard of honor for the wedding of one of their officers. Ludovic was a corporal then. The crowds had been enormous, less orderly and lighter of heart than those who now shuffled forward towards the Abbey, for the bride was a fashionable beauty and the bridegroom's name was familiar on advertisement hoardings and the labels of beer bottles.

They had lined the aisle; then while the register was being signed, had formed up along this path which led from the door to the motor car. Their finery had excited cries of admiration. As the organ sounded the first notes of the Wedding March they had drawn their swords and held them in a posture for which no drill-book has a name, forming an arch over the wedded couple. The bride had smiled right and left looking up at each of them in the eyes, thanking them. The bridegroom held his top hat in his hand and greeted by name those of his squadron he recognized. Two manikins carried the train clothed at enormous cost in replicas of Ludovic's own uniform; then the bridesmaids, plumper and plainer than the bride but flowery in full June. Then they had lowered their swords to the "carry"; a royal party had passed between them smiling also; then parents, and after them a long stream of guests; scarcely visible under the peak of the helmet behind and all round them were reporters and photographers and a cheering, laughing London crowd.

It was after that wedding, in the tented yard behind a house in St. James's Square (now demolished by a bomb), that Sir Ralph Brompton had first accosted Ludovic. The royal party sat in the ballroom on the first floor, where the young couple received their guests. A temporary wooden stair had been built from the ballroom balcony to the tent (for it was a rule that no member of the royal family should be in a room without an alternative egress) and the guests, after they had made their salutations, went below, leaving that still little pool of humble duty for the noisier celebrations under the canvas. Later, when they discussed the question, as they often did, neither Sir Ralph nor Ludovic was able to explain what distinguished the young corporal from his fellows, except that he stood a little apart from them. He did not like beer, and great jugs of special brew, made by the bridegroom's father for the occasion, were being pressed on the guard of honor, the tenants, and foremen and old servants who segregated themselves in their own corner of the marquee. Sir Ralph, as tall as any trooper and almost as splendid in gray tail suit and full cravat, had joined the convivial, plebeian group and said: "You're much better off with the ale. The champagne is poison," and so had begun an association which developed richly.

Sir Ralph was then doing a spell at the Foreign Office. When the time came for him to go abroad on post, he arranged for Ludovic's release from the regiment, who were sorry to lose him; he had lately been promoted corporal of horse at an early age. Then had begun five years' life abroad in Sir Ralph's company, as "valet" at the embassy, as "secretary" when they traveled on leave. Sir Ralph discreetly attended to his protégé's education, lending him books on psychology which he relished and on Marxist economics which he found tedious; giving him tickets for concerts and the opera, leading

him, when they were on holiday, through galleries and cathedrals.

~~The marriage did not last long. There was an unusually early divorce. Ludovic, as he now was, constituted the sole progeny of that union.~~

*

It was 5 o'clock. At 5.30 the Abbey had to be shut for the night. Already the police were turning away the extremity of the queue saying: "You won't get in today. Come back tomorrow morning—early," and the people obediently drifted into the dusk to join other queues elsewhere.

Major Ludovic went straight to the Abbey entrance, laid his blank oyster gaze on the policeman and raised his gloved hand to acknowledge a salute that had not been given.

"'Ere, just a moment, sir, where are you going?"

"The—er—King's present to the—er—Russians—they tell me it's on show here."

"Got to wait your turn. There's others before you, sir."

Ludovic spoke with two voices. He had tried as an officer; now he reverted to the tones of the barrack-room. "That's all right, cock. I'm here on duty same as yourself," and the puzzled man stood back to let him by.

Inside the Abbey it seemed already night. The windows gave no light. The two candles led the people forward, who, as they were admitted in twenties, broke their column of fours, advanced in a group and then fell into single file as they reached the sword. They knew no formal act of veneration. They paused, gazed, breathed, and passed on. Ludovic was the tallest of them. He could see the bright streak from above their heads. He held his cap and his cane behind his back and peered intently. He had a special interest there, but when he came to the sword and tried to linger he was pressed silently on, not jostled resentfully, but silently conscribed into the unseeing, inarticulate procession who were asserting their right to the fair share of everything which they believed the weapon symbolized. He had no time to study the detail. He glimpsed the keen edge, the sober ornament, the more luxurious scabbard, and then was borne on and out. It was not five minutes before he found himself once more alone, in the deepening fog.

Ludovic had an appointment with Sir Ralph for 5.30. He had to meet by appointment in these days. They were no longer on the old easy terms, but Ludovic did not lose touch. In his altered and exalted status he did not look for money, but there were other uses to which their old association could be put. Whenever he came to London he let Sir Ralph know and they had tea together. Sir Ralph had other companions for dinner.

They met at their old place of assignation. Once Sir Ralph had a house in Hanover Terrace, and his retreat in Ebury Street—rooms over a shop, which had something of the air of expensive undergraduate digs—had been a secret known to barely fifty men. Now these rooms were his home; he had moved the smaller pieces of his furniture there; but not many more people—fewer perhaps—knew the way there than in the old days.

Ludovic walked down Victoria Street, crossed the shapeless expanse at the bottom and reached the familiar doorstep at the same moment as his host. Sir Ralph opened the door and stood back for Ludovic to enter. He had never lacked devoted servants. "Mrs. Embury," he called, "Mrs. Embury," and his house-keeper appeared above them on the half landing. She had known Ludovic in other days.

"Tea," he said, handing her a little parcel "Lapsang Suchong—half a pound of it. Bartered in what strange eastern markets, I know not. But the genuine article. I have a friend at our headquarters who gets me some from time to time. We must go easy with it, Mrs. Embury, but I think we might 'brew

up' for 'the Major.' ”

They went upstairs and sat in the drawing-room.

“No doubt you want to hear my opinion of your ‘*Pensées*.’ ”

“I want to hear Everard Spruce’s.”

“Yes, of course, I deserved that little snub. Well, prepare yourself for good news—Everard is *delighted* with them and wants to publish them in *Survival*. He is quite content to leave them anonymous. The only thing he doesn’t quite like is the title.”

“*Pensées*,” said Ludovic. “D’you know what they call our badge?” He tapped the floral device on the lapel of his tunic. “ ‘A pansy sitting on its laurels.’ ”

“Yes, yes. Very good. I have heard the witticism before. No; Everard thinks it dated. He suggests ‘Notes in Transit’ or something of the sort.”

“I don’t see it matters.”

“No. But he’s definitely interested in you. Wants to meet. In fact I tentatively accepted an invitation for you this evening. I shan’t, alas, be able to introduce you. But you’re expected. I’ll give you the address. I am expecting another visitor here.”

“Curly?”

“They call him ‘Susie’ at the headquarters. No, not Susie. He’s a dear boy and a stalwart party member but a little earnest for the long blackout. I am packing him off to a meeting. No I expect a very intelligent young American named Padfield—an officer, *like you*.”

Mrs. Embury brought in the tea, and the little, over-furnished room was full of its fragrance.

“I can’t offer you anything to eat I’m afraid.”

“I know better than come to London for food,” said Ludovic. “We do all right at my billet.” He had learned his officer’s voice from Sir Ralph but seldom used it when they were alone. “Mrs. Embury isn’t very matey these days?”

“It’s your high rank. She doesn’t know how to take it. And you, what have you been up to?”

“I went to the Abbey before I came here—to see the sword.”

“Yes, I suppose like everyone else you are coming to appreciate the Soviet achievement. You usen’t to have much share in my ‘red’ sympathies. We nearly had a tiff once, remember? about Spain.”

“There were Spaniards in the Middle East—proper bastards.” Ludovic stopped short remembering what he resolutely strove to forget. “It wasn’t anything to do with politics. That sword is the subject of this week’s literary competition in *Time and Tide*—a sonnet. I thought if I went to see it, I might get some ideas.”

“Oh dear, don’t tell Everard Spruce about that. I’m afraid he would look down his nose at literary competitions in *Time and Tide*.”

“I just like writing,” said Ludovic. “In different ways about different things. Nothing wrong with that, I suppose?”

“No, indeed. The literary instinct. But don’t tell Everard. *Did* you get any ideas?”

“Not what I could use in a sonnet. But it set me thinking—about swords.”

“That wasn’t quite their idea; not, as they say now, the object of the exercise. You were meant to think about tanks and bombers and the People’s Army driving out the Nazis.”

“I thought of *my* sword,” said Ludovic stubbornly. “Technically, I suppose, it was a saber. *We* called them ‘swords’—‘state swords.’ Never saw it again after I left the regiment. They weren’t reissued when we were recalled. Took a lot of looking after, a sword. Every now and then the armorer had them in and buffed them; ordinary days it was Bluebell and the chain-burnisher. Mustn’t leave a

spot on it. You could always tell a good officer. On a wet day he didn't give the order 'Return swords' but 'With drawn swords, prepare to dismount.' You took it half way up the blade in your left hand and transferred to the near side of the withers. That way you didn't get water into the scabbard. Some officers didn't think of that; the good ones did."

"Yes, yes, most picturesque," said Sir Ralph. "Not much bearing on the conditions at Stalingrad."

Then Ludovic suddenly assumed his officer's voice and said "After all, it was the uniform first attracted you, don't you remember?"

Only a preternaturally astute reader of Ludovic's aphorisms could discern that their author had once been at heart—or rather in some vestigial repository of his mind—a romantic. Most of those who volunteered for Commandos in the spring of 1940 had other motives besides the desire to serve their country. A few merely sought release from regimental routine; more wished to cut a gallant figure before women; others had led lives of particular softness and were moved to re-establish their honor in the eyes of the heroes of their youth—legendary, historical, fictitious—that still haunted their manhood. Nothing in Ludovic's shortly to be published work made clear how he had seen himself. His early schooling had furnished few models of chivalry. His original enlistment in the Blues, so near the body of the king, so flamboyantly accoutered, had certainly not been prompted by any familiarity or affection for the horse. Ludovic was a townsman. The smell of stables brought no memories of farm or hunt. In his years with Sir Ralph Brompton he had lived soft; any instinct for expiation of which he was conscious, was unexpressed. Yet he had volunteered for special service at the first opportunity. His fellow volunteers now had ample leisure in their various prison camps to examine their motives and strip themselves of illusion. As also had Ludovic, at liberty; but his disillusionment (if he ever suffered from illusion) had preceded the débâcle at Crete. There was a week in the mountains, two days in a cave, a particular night in an open boat during the exploit that had earned him his MM and his commission, of which he never spoke. When questioned, as he had been on his return to Africa, he confessed that his memory of those events was almost blank; a very common condition, sympathetic doctors assured him, after a feat of extreme endurance.

His last two years had been as uneventful as Guy's.

After his rapid discharge from hospital he had been posted to the United Kingdom to be trained as an officer. At the board who interviewed him, he had expressed no preference for any arm of the service. He had no mechanical bent. They had posted him to the Intelligence Corps, then in process of formation and expansion. He had attended courses, learned to interpret air-photographs, to recognize enemy uniform, and compute an order of battle, to mark maps, to collate and summarize progress-reports from the field; all the rudimentary skills. At the end his early peace-time training as a trooper impressed the selection-board that he was a "quartermaster type" and an appointment was found for him far from the battle, far from the arcane departments whose existence was barely hinted at in the lecture room; in a secret place, indeed, but one where no secrets were disclosed to Ludovic. He was made commandant of a little establishment where men, and sometimes women, of all ages and nations, military and civilian, many with obviously assumed names, were trained at a neighboring aerodrome to jump in parachutes.

Thus whatever romantic image of himself Ludovic had ever set up was finally defaced.

In his lonely condition he found more than solace, positive excitement, in the art of writing. The further he removed from human society and the less he attended to human speech, the more did words printed and written, occupy his mind. The books he read were books about words. As he lay unshrive his sleep was never troubled by the monstrous memories which might have been supposed to lie in wait for him in the dark. He dreamed of words and woke repeating them as though memorizing a

foreign vocabulary. Ludovic had become an addict of that potent intoxicant, the English language.

Not laboriously, luxuriously rather, Ludovic worked over his note-books, curtailing, expanding, polishing; often consulting Fowler, not disdaining Roget; writing and rewriting in his small clerkly hand on the lined sheets of paper which the army supplied; telling no one what he was up to, until at length there were fifty foolscap pages, which he sent to Sir Ralph, not asking his opinion, but instructing him to find a publisher.

It was in miniature a golden age for the book-trade; anything sold; the supply of paper alone determined a writer's popularity. But publishers had obligations to old clients and an eye to the future. Ludovic's *pensées* stirred no hopes of a sequel of best-selling novels. The established firms were on the look out for promise rather than accomplishment. Sir Ralph therefore sent the manuscript to Everard Spruce, the founder and editor of *Survival*; a man who cherished no ambitions for the future, believing, despite the title of his monthly review, that the human race was destined to dissolve in chaos.

The war had raised Spruce, who in the years preceding it had not been the most esteemed of his coterie of youngish, socialist writers, to unrivaled eminence. Those of his friends who had not fled to Ireland or to America had joined the Fire Brigade. Spruce by contrast had stood out for himself and in that disorderly period when Guy had sat in Bellamy's writing so many fruitless appeals for military employment, had announced the birth of a magazine devoted "to the Survival of Values." The Ministry of Information gave it protection, exempted its staff from other duties, granted it a generous allowance of paper, and exported it in bulk to whatever countries were still open to British shipping. Copies were even scattered from aeroplanes in regions under German domination and patiently construed by partisans with the aid of dictionaries. A member who complained in the House of Commons that so far as its contents were intelligible to him, they were pessimistic in tone and unconnected in subject with the war effort, was told at some length by the Minister that free expression in the arts was an essential of democracy. "I personally have no doubt," he said, "and I am confirmed in my opinion by many reports, that great encouragement is given to our allies and sympathizers throughout the world by the survival" (laughter) "in this country of what is almost unique in present conditions, a periodical entirely independent of official direction."

Spruce lived in a fine house in Cheyne Walk cared for by secretaries to the number of four. It was there that Ludovic was directed by Sir Ralph. He went on foot through the lightless streets, smelling the river before him in the deepening fog.

He was not entirely unacquainted with men of letters. Several had been habitués of Ebury Street; he had sat at café tables with them on the Mediterranean coast; but always in those days he had been an appendage of Sir Ralph's, sometimes ignored, sometimes punctiliously brought into the conversation often impertinently studied; never regarded as a possible confrère. This was the first time that Ludovic had gone among them in his own right. He was not the least nervous but he was proudly conscious of a change of status far more gratifying than any conferred by military rank.

Spruce was in his middle thirties. Time was, he cultivated a proletarian, youthful, aspect; not successfully; now, perhaps without design, he looked older than his years and presented the negligent elegance of a fashionable don. One of his friends, on joining the Fire Brigade, had left a trunk under Spruce's protection and when he was buried by a falling chimney Spruce had appropriated his wardrobe; the secretaries had adjusted the Charvet shirts and pajamas; the suits were beyond their skill; Spruce was, thus, often seen abroad in a voluminous furlined overcoat, while at home, whenever the temperature allowed, he dispensed with a jacket. Tonight he wore a heavy silk, heavily striped shirt and a bow tie above noncommittal trousers. The secretaries were dressed rather like him though

in commoner materials; they wore their hair long and enveloping, in a style which fifteen years later was to be associated by the newspapers with the King's Road. One went bare-footed as though to emphasize her servile condition. They were sometimes spoken of as "Spruce's veiled ladies." They gave him their full devotion; also their rations of butter, meat, and sugar.

One of these opened the door to Ludovic and without asking his name said through a curtain of hair: "Do come in quick. The blackout's not very efficient. They're all upstairs."

There was a party in the drawing-room on the first floor.

"Which is Mr. Spruce?"

"Don't you know? Over there, of course, talking to the Smart Woman."

Ludovic looked round the room where, in a company of twenty or so, women predominated, but none appeared notably dressy, but the host identified himself by coming forward with an expression of sharp inquiry.

"I am Ludovic," said Ludovic. "Ralph Brompton said you were expecting me."

"Yes, of course. Don't go until we have had the chance of a talk. I must apologize for the crowd. Two anti-fascist neutrals have been wished on me by the Ministry of Information. They asked me to collect some interesting people. Not easy these days. Do you speak Turkish or Portuguese?"

"No."

"That's a pity. They are both professors of English Literature but not very fluent in conversation. Come and talk to Lady Perdita."

He led Ludovic to the woman with whom he had been standing. She was wearing the uniform of an air-raid warden and had smudges of soot on her face. "Smart," Ludovic perceived denoted rank rather than chic in this milieu.

"I was at your wedding," said Ludovic.

"Surely not? No one was."

"Your first wedding."

"Oh, yes, of course, everyone was *there*."

"I held my sword over your head when you left the church."

"That was a long time ago," said Lady Perdita. "Think of it; *swords*."

The bare-footed secretary approached with a jug and a glass.

"Will you have a drink?"

"What is it?"

"There's nothing else," she said. "I made it. Half South African sherry and half something called 'Olde Falstaffe Gin.'"

"I don't think I will, thank you," said Ludovic.

"Snob," said Lady Perdita. "Fill me up, Frankie, there's a dear."

"There's hardly enough to go round."

"I'll have this chap's ration."

The host interrupted: "Perdita, I want you to meet Dr. Iago from Coimbra. He talks a bit of French."

Ludovic was left with the secretary, who kept custody of her eyes. Addressing her bare toes she said: "One thing about a party, it does warm the room. Who are you?" she asked.

"Ludovic. Mr. Spruce has accepted something I wrote for *Survival*."

"Yes, of course," she said. "I know all about you now. I read your manuscript too. Everard is awfully impressed with it. He said it was as though Logan Pearsall Smith had written Kafka. Do you know Logan?"

“Only by his writing.”

“You must meet him. He’s not here tonight. He doesn’t go out now. I say, what a relief to meet a real writer instead of all these smarties Everard wastes his time on” (this with a dark glance from her feet to the air-raid warden). “Look; there *is* some whisky. We’ve only got one bottle so we have to be rather careful with it. Come next door and I’ll give you some.”

“Next door” was the office, a smaller room austerely, even meanly furnished. Back-numbers of *Survival* were piled on the bare floorboards, manuscripts and photographs on the bare table; a black sheet was secured by drawing-pins to cover the window. Here, when they were not engaged on domestic tasks—cooking, queueing, or darning—the four secretaries stoked the cultural beacon which blazed from Iceland to Adelaide; here the girl who could type answered Spruce’s numerous “fan letters” and the girl who could spell corrected proofs. Here it seemed some of them slept for there were divan beds covered with blankets only and a large, much undenticulated, comb.

Frankie went to the cupboard and revealed a bottle. Many strange concoctions of the “Olde Falstaffe” kind circulated in those days. This was not one of them.

“Not opened yet,” she said.

Ludovic was not fond of spirits nor was whisky any rarity at his well-found station; nevertheless he accepted the offered drink with a solemnity which verged on reverence. This was no mere clandestine treat. Frankie was initiating him into the occult company of Logan and Kafka. He would find time in the days to come to learn who Kafka was. Now he drained the glass swallowing almost without repugnance the highly valued distillation.

“You seemed to want that,” said Frankie. “I daren’t offer you another yet I’m afraid. Perhaps later. It depends who else turns up.”

“It was just what I wanted,” said Ludovic; “*all* that I wanted,” repressing a momentary inclination to retch.

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