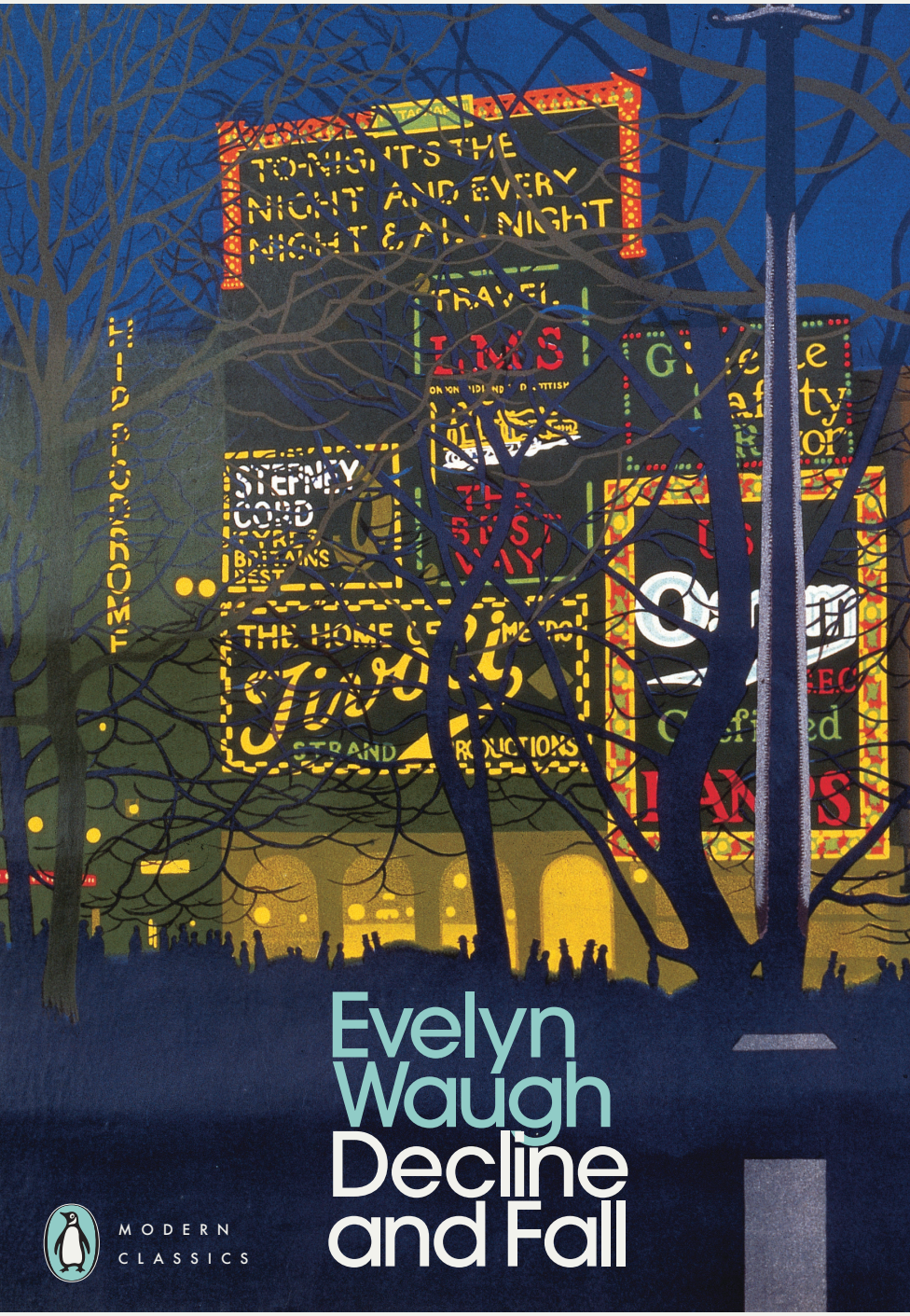


Evelyn Waugh
Decline and Fall

MODERN CLASSICS

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Decline and Fall

Evelyn Waugh was born in Hampstead in 1903 and educated at Hertford College, Oxford. In 1928 he published his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, which was soon followed by *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Black Mischief* (1932), *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and *Scoop* (1938). During these years he also travelled extensively and converted to Catholicism. In 1939 Waugh was commissioned in the Royal Marines and later transferred to the Royal Horse Guards, experiences which informed his *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952–61). His most famous novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), was written while on leave from the army. Waugh died in 1966.

Dr Barbara Cooke is co-executive editor of *The Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh*, for which she has also edited *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (2022) and co-edited *A Little Learning* (2017). She is the author of *Evelyn Waugh's Oxford* (2018).

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EVELYN WAUGH

Decline and Fall

With an Introduction by Barbara Cooke



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To
HAROLD ACTON
IN HOMAGE AND AFFECTION

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Introduction

Decline and Fall is Evelyn Waugh's debut novel, and was first published in 1928. It relates the misadventures of Paul Pennyfeather, an Oxford University scholar, over a period beginning with his unfair expulsion for indecent behaviour and concluding with his secret return to study just over a year later. Despite the fact that Waugh was only twenty-four when it was published, much of the action is inspired by autobiography and his experiences as a student, schoolmaster and peripheral member of London's social elite. Even Paul's stint as a prison inmate deliberately mimics boarding school life. The book is lighter than its successor *Vile Bodies* (1930), but its humour still packs a satirical punch. Its genesis can be traced back through Waugh's student writings at Oxford and the personal diaries he kept during his abortive teaching career, and many hallmarks of his style and technique are present in the narrative: it is by turns absurd and pensive, and its characters are treated with the distinctive blend of fondness and cruelty for which their creator would become famous.

The book's action begins in the fictional Scone College,

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Oxford, where all who are foolish enough to have stayed in for the evening find themselves under siege from a marauding group of obscenely drunk, obscenely wealthy undergraduates. Scone is closely modelled on Waugh's alma mater, Hertford College,* but there is little nostalgia in its depiction. Waugh would often use Oxford as a setting in his works, most famously in the wartime novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), in which 1920s university life is resurrected from the perspective of a middle-aged narrator mourning an idealized youth. However, other, less wistful memories were sharper for the angry young author of *Decline and Fall*.

Waugh studied at Hertford between 1922 and 1924. Although not diligent in terms of his degree, which was not completed, he nevertheless worked hard. His first interest was as a draughtsman – the illustrations in *Decline and Fall* are his own – and he honed his artistic and writerly skills by producing copy for student magazines including the *Isis* and *Cherwell* as well as the short-lived *Oxford Broom*, founded by his charismatic friend Harold Acton. His offerings were diverse: he reported on debates in the Oxford Union, designed covers for the *Broom*, and visited Oxford's 'super cinema' in the

* On his return to Oxford Paul will make friends with Stubbs, a genuine Hertford man, and develop a liking for the 'ugly, subdued little College'.

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pioneering role of film critic. The magazines also published some of Waugh's first short stories. There were six in total, and all but one featured undergraduate characters and settings. The first, 'Portrait of Young Man With Career',* is signed with Waugh's pseudonym 'Scaramel'.† It is a comedy of manners, in which 'Evelyn' is rudely kept from his bath by Jeremy, a thinly-veiled caricature of a school acquaintance also matriculating at Oxford. Forced to listen to Jeremy's monologue, our fictional Evelyn fantasises about braining him with a poker. In 'Edward of Unique Achievement',‡ murder really does occur. Here, the hero stabs a college don who bears more than a passing resemblance to Waugh's detested history tutor, C.R.M.F. Cruttwell. Like 'Portrait', this story is caustically observant; we are told that the murder victim 'had that habit, more fitting for a house master than a don, of continuing to read or write some few words after his visitors entered, in order to emphasize his superiority'. After the

* *Isis*, 30 May 1923, p. xxii.

† Waugh was fond of pseudonyms. Later he would adopt the moniker 'Teresa Pinfold' when corresponding with the press on matters of Catholic doctrine. As he explained to Ian Gilmour, editor of the *Spectator*, he used a pen-name 'because of the awful bore of private correspondence from strangers which always follows the utterance of an ecclesiastical opinion' (cited in Barbara Cooke, introduction to *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, Oxford University Press Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh vol. 14, 2022).

‡ *Cherwell*, 1 August 1923, pp. 14 and 16–18.

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stabbing, Edward inadvertently frames another undergraduate, Lord Poxe, for murder. As it turns out, this is a happy accident: anxious not to sully Poxe's family name (which the young man 'had always found [. . .] of vast value' among tradesmen and dons), the college lets him off with a thirteen-shilling fine.

Waugh's early stories engage with a slapstick violence, classism and material greed that find fuller expression in his first novel. Although he was by no means from a humble background, Waugh's family was distinctly middle class, and he went to Oxford on a scholarship. Once there, he mixed with young men from schools considerably more illustrious than his own Lancing College (like Paul Pennyfeather, Waugh's alma mater was 'a small public school of ecclesiastical temper on the South Downs'). But while he was captivated by the intellectual sophistication of his lover Richard Pares, a Winchester College alumnus, and the precocious Etonian Harold Acton, he was no slavish admirer of the youthful aristocracy. The ghastly 'Bollinger' Club of *Decline and Fall* is a (barely) fictional version of the real-life Bullingdon Club, which boasts several UK Prime Ministers amongst its alumni and appears under its own name in *Brideshead Revisited* and a number of other Waugh works. In the book's prelude, the Scone authorities indulge and even welcome the Bollinger's marauding excesses as if the students were children at a funfair ('they'll enjoy smashing that'), because the

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college will benefit from the financial penalties imposed in the aftermath of their 'beano'. Paul Pennyfeather, by contrast, actually *takes* money from the university through his 'two valuable scholarships': he is socially humble and a financial drain, and hence of 'no importance'. When he falls foul of the Bollinger, it is he who is sent down for indecent behaviour. Paul will encounter just as much snobbery in his next adventure, when he finds work in a disastrous boarding school run by an eccentric headmaster. Augustus Fagan is preoccupied with whether or not the members of his staff are 'gentlemen'. However, Paul is much further up the social hierarchy at Llanabba Castle than he was Scone College, and as such must field unwanted overtures such as Dr Fagan's offers of his daughter's hand in marriage and part-ownership of his business concern.

Part One is the longest section of the novel and is informed by Waugh's brief career as a schoolmaster. It was a miserable time. After coming down from Oxford Waugh was obliged, like Paul, to take several teaching jobs for which he had neither aptitude nor enthusiasm: first at Arnold House in Denbighshire, north-east Wales, and later at Aston Clinton in Buckinghamshire. He lightened his burdens by adding a touch of the absurd to his personal diary, which can as a result be considered more usefully as semi-conscious preparation for *Decline and Fall* than as a faithful account of his day-to-day life:

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> The school is run most curiously. There are no timetables or syllabi or such offal. All that happens is that the Headmaster [. . .] wanders into the common-room in a blank kind of way and says, 'Oh I say. there are some boys in that end classroom. I don't know who they are. They may be set B in History or perhaps the Fourth Form or are they the Dancing Class. Anyway they've got their Latin books and they shouldn't have those so I think it would be best if someone took them in English.'*

Much of Waugh's comedic prowess is derived from his ability to isolate and amplify the ridiculous in the personalities he met, as well as a genius for dialogue and – as here – monologue. Such techniques have aged well, but not everything at Llanabba is as easy to laugh at a century on. Firstly, there is the character of Sebastian Cholmondley, or 'Chokey', an African-American musician who is brought to the school Sports Day by Margot Beste-Chetwynde (pronounced 'beast-cheating'). Margot flaunts and patronises Chokey as if he were a poodle or fashion accessory, while the other guests look on in horror.

Margot is indifferent to the hostility to which she exposes both herself and Chokey. Their detractors, however,

* Entry dated Friday 23 January in Michael Davie (ed.), *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1976), p. 200.

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include bloodthirsty colonels, sex-traffickers and pederasts (of which more later), and amongst this ignominious crowd Chokey is guilty of little more than naivety and over-enthusiasm.* His earnest, evangelical advocacy of black culture is held up for ridicule, but so too is the hypocritical racism of Llannabba's parents, servants and staff. Despite the reaction of bystanders to his presence, it is still possible to read Chokey sympathetically. The same cannot be said, however, of *Decline and Fall*'s Welsh characters, who are presented without subtlety as grotesque and venal. The worst prejudice may be voiced by Dr Fagan but, while the overt racism towards Chokey is primarily rendered in dialogue, here the narrator revels unequivocally in the 'revolting

* In general, representing non-white characters as naïve does play into what Ashis Nandy and others have called the 'doctrine of progress', whereby nations which consider themselves to be more 'advanced' portray others as childlike and therefore supposedly in need of guidance and governance (see *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. London and Oxford: OUP, 1988. 12ff). In Waugh and other mid-twentieth century writers however, this kind of wide-eyed ingenuousness is not limited to Black Americans but extended to all their compatriots; Waugh's 1948 novella *The Loved One* is full of guileless, culturally unstudied young Americans. This element of Chokey's behaviour may also have an autobiographical root. Waugh was at Oxford with Robert Byron, who would become a successful travel writer. Waugh later remembered Byron's 'constantly renewed enthusiasm of discovery, even of quite well-known facts and spectacles' (see John Howard Wilson and Barbara Cooke (eds.), *A Little Learning*, Oxford University Press, Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh, vol. 19 (2017), p. 163.

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appearance' of the musicians hired to play at the Llanabba sports day, who are portrayed in lupine language with slavering mouths and 'loping' gaits.

The introduction and treatment of Chokey is one way in which *Decline and Fall* casts a critical, if problematic gaze over 1920s high society and culture. During and after university Waugh occupied the fringe of the glamorous social set popularly referred to as the 'Bright Young People'. As at Oxford his class background gave him the observational skill of the outsider and he was sometimes enchanted, sometimes repulsed, by their attempts to court moral controversy and undermine the artistic and cultural establishment. Margot Beste-Chetwynde epitomises this attitude. Her behaviour with Chokey resembles that of the more risqué London hostesses such as Waugh's friend Gwen Otter, who delighted in shocking the bourgeoisie with homosexual and non-white guests;* similarly, Margot's weekend party is attended by several flamboyantly camp men including the conceited Miles Malpractice and the shrill, catty Lord Parakeet. Waugh based these characters on the Etonians the Hon. Eddie Gathorne-Hardy and Gavin Henderson respectively. In the first edition of *Decline and Fall* the pair were called Martin Gaythorn-Brodie and Kevin Saunderson; given that homosexuality was then illegal in Brit-

* See *A Little Learning*, Oxford University Press Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh, vol. 19 (2017), p. 248.

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ain, such transparent aliases were dangerous for two real-life gay men. They assumed their current disguises in the second impression, which was published the following month.*

Margot's social provocations are accompanied by her destruction of King's Thursday, ancestral home of the Earls of Pastmaster. This is a literal act of cultural iconoclasm. The local population take pride in the original Tudor building, and Margot adds insult to their injury – and Waugh takes a swipe at Modernist aesthetic philosophy – by employing an architect of the Bauhaus school to replace it with '"[s]omething clean and square"'. Fun is also poked at avant-garde portraiture through the work of David Lennox, who photographs the back of Margot's head and the reflection of her hands in a 'bowl of ink'. These photographs foreshadow Cecil Beaton's 1928 picture 'A Bride and Bridegroom in Duplicate', in which Waugh sits with his first wife, also called Evelyn, in front of a large mirror which reflects 'he-Evelyn' in profile and the back of 'she-Evelyn's' head.†

Although *Decline and Fall* is not compassionate towards any of its cast, characters like Margot nevertheless seem able to command admiration despite – or even because of – their

* See Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903–1939* (J. M. Dent: 1986), p. 161.

† See Martin Stannard, introduction to *Vile Bodies*, Oxford University Press Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh, vol. 2 (2017), p. xxvi.

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catastrophic moral failings. When Paul is jailed, having unwittingly participated in Margot's crimes, he believes 'that there was, in fact, and should be, one law for her and another for himself [. . .] he *saw the impossibility* of Margot in prison'. The most problematic case of this phenomenon concerns the 'immortal' Captain Grimes, a predatory schoolmaster who grooms and ogles the young Percy Clutterbuck. Grimes is objectively repugnant, and yet readers find themselves siding with him against Dr Fagan's snobbery, and root for his success. This is perhaps possible because Grimes's worst offences, like Philbrick's lurid confession and Lord Tangent's eventual fate, occur off-stage. For Grimes and Philbrick, the lacuna is not purely for comic effect. Waugh's original drafts of *Decline and Fall* were considered too smutty for common decency, and his publishers required substantial changes before they would agree to print. In the manuscript, Grimes is more openly homosexual and paedophilic, and the Welsh are further maligned through insinuations of incest and bestiality. While in the published version of the text Grimes's charisma to some extent masks his treatment of Clutterbuck, in the manuscript he is an unequivocal and unrepentant pederast.*

The outrageous behaviour of *Decline and Fall*'s villains and eccentrics completely overshadows the bland Paul Penny-

* See Stannard, pp.156–7.

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feather, our supposed protagonist. He is as worthless as a penny, light as a feather, no 'hero' but simply an accidental 'witness' to 'an unusual series of events'. In one of the novel's most famous passages, the King's Thursday architect Otto Silenus characterises Paul as a 'static' personality thrown onto the crazy 'wheel' of life by the actions of the Bollinger Club. He does not belong there, like the 'dynamic' Margot or Captain Grimes, and so is destined to be 'thrown off again at once with a hard bump'.

Silenus's description of the wheel echoes the circular imagery that can be found throughout *Decline and Fall* and mimics its cyclical plot. A sense in the epilogue of coming full circle is emphasized by its repetition of phrases and situations from the prelude. Unlike Waugh, Paul returns to his university studies, and the book ends as it began with the Bollinger's 'confused roaring and breaking of glass'. Paul has just attended another 'interesting paper' on 'Polish plebiscites', and is in 'his third', as opposed to his second, 'year of uneventful residence'.

Paul's year on the wheel was a sudden injection of chaos into a static life, and his resumption of his previous existence is appropriately low-key. This is not Odysseus's triumphant return to Ithica, nor even Lemuel Gulliver's pensive and melancholic attempt at domesticity after his travels in Lilliput and Laputa. At his homecoming, Odysseus cast off his disguise and slayed his rivals. By contrast Paul must hide

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behind a 'heavy cavalry moustache' and rely on his 'natural diffidence' to avoid exposure as the 'wild young man' who, as college legend has swiftly established, 'used to take off all his clothes' and 'dance in the quad at night'. Moreover, unlike Gulliver, Paul's studied lack of interiority makes it extremely difficult to gauge if his experiences have 'changed' him in any way: what would there be, after all, to change?*

Waugh's refusal to grant Paul any psychological epiphany or growth – or, arguably, any psychology at all – may imply that we should not read too much into this novel. An author's note to the first edition requests its audience to 'bear in mind throughout that it is meant to be funny',† and its capricious plot cautions against taking oneself too seriously. Characters committed to high-minded ideals are liable to find their ideals debunked and themselves roundly punished. Paul himself is the first victim of this pattern, as it is his involvement with the virtuous League of Nations which leads to his confrontation with the Bollinger; later, the former organization will bring about his second downfall too. Prendergast pays gruesomely for fixating on his 'doubts', and the otherwise blameless Chokey is derided for his rhetorical grandeur.

* For a detailed discussion of the way in which Waugh 'ruthlessly expunges interiority' from the characters of his early satirical novels see Naomi Milthorpe, 'Real Tears: *Vile Bodies* and *The Apes of God*' in *Evelyn Waugh's Satire: Texts and Contexts* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press: 2016), pp. 35–53.

† Frontmatter to Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (Chapman & Hall: 1928).

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Readers, however, need not accept this injunction. Waugh had already formed the habit of sneaking in the profound under the cloak of the ridiculous, and would perfect the art as his writing matured. Silenus's sudden revelation harbours the seeds of pathos that will germinate in Basil Seal's avenging of the misguided Emperor Seth in *Black Mischief* (1932), the exile and dispossession of Harold Silk in *Put Out More Flags* (1942), and the explosion of the portable toilet in *Men at Arms* (1952) that will catapult Apthorpe into a spiral of madness and alcoholism. *Decline and Fall* is a comic novel whose humour always teeters on the brink of devastation.

Barbara Cooke

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Preface

This story was written thirty-three years ago. I offered it to the publishers who had commissioned my first book, but they rejected it on what seemed, and still seems to me, the odd grounds of its indelicacy. I carried it down the street to Chapman & Hall. The Managing Director, my father, was abroad and was spared the embarrassment of a decision which was taken in his absence by a colleague, the late Mr Ralph Straus.

Mr Straus read the manuscript carefully to see what could have shocked Duckworth's. He had a few suggestions which I accepted. He thought it, for instance, more chaste that the Llanabba Stationmaster should seek employment for his sister-in-law, rather than for his sister. He also made some literary criticisms which were, perhaps, less valuable. The result was a text differing slightly from the original manuscript.

In this edition I have restored these emendations. The changes are negligible but since the book was being re-set, it seemed a good time to put the clock back a minute or two.

E. W.

Combe Florey 1961

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DECLINE AND FALL

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Prelude

ALMA MATER

Mr Sniggs, the Junior Dean, and Mr Postlethwaite, the Domestic Bursar, sat alone in Mr Sniggs's room overlooking the garden quad at Scone College. From the rooms of Sir Alastair Digby-Vaine-Trumpington, two staircases away, came a confused roaring and breaking of glass. They alone of the senior members of Scone were at home that evening, for it was the night of the annual dinner of the Bollinger Club. The others were all scattered over Boar's Hill and North Oxford at gay, contentious little parties, or at other senior common rooms, or at the meetings of learned societies, for the annual Bollinger dinner is a difficult time for those in authority.

It is not accurate to call this an annual event, because quite often the club is suspended for some years after each meeting. There is tradition behind the Bollinger; it numbers reigning kings among its past members. At the last dinner, three years ago, a fox had been brought in in a cage and stoned to death with champagne bottles. What an evening that had been! This was the first meeting since then, and

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from all over Europe old members had rallied for the occasion. For two days they had been pouring into Oxford: epileptic royalty from their villas of exile; uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairds from wet granite hovels in the Highlands; ambitious young barristers and Conservative candidates torn from the London season and the indelicate advances of debutantes; all that was most sonorous of name and title was there for the beano.

'The fines!' said Mr Sniggs, gently rubbing his pipe along the side of his nose. 'Oh, my! the fines there'll be after this evening!'

There is some very particular port in the senior common room cellars that is only brought up when the College fines have reached £50.

'We shall have a week of it at least,' said Mr Postlethwaite, 'a week of Founder's port.'

A shriller note could now be heard rising from Sir Alastair's rooms; any who have heard that sound will shrink at the recollection of it; it is the sound of the English county families baying for broken glass. Soon they would all be tumbling out into the quad, crimson and roaring in their bottle-green evening coats, for the real romp of the evening.

'Don't you think it might be wiser if we turned out the light?' said Mr Sniggs.

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In darkness the two dons crept to the window. The quad below was a kaleidoscope of dimly discernible faces.

'There must be fifty of them at least,' said Mr Postlethwaite. 'If only they were all members of the College! Fifty of them at ten pounds each. Oh my!'

'It'll be more if they attack the Chapel,' said Mr Sniggs. 'Oh, please God, make them attack the Chapel.'

'It reminds me of the communist rising in Budapest when I was on the debt commission.'

'I know,' said Mr Postlethwaite. Mr Sniggs's Hungarian reminiscences were well known in Scone College.

'I wonder who the unpopular undergraduates are this term. They always attack their rooms. I hope they have been wise enough to go out for the evening.'

'I think Partridge will be one; he possesses a painting by Matisse or some such name.'

'And I'm told he has black sheets in his bed.'

'And Sanders went to dinner with Ramsay MacDonald once.'

'And Rending can afford to hunt, but collects china instead.'

'And smokes cigars in the garden after breakfast.'

'Austen has a grand piano.'

'They'll enjoy smashing that.'

'There'll be a heavy bill for tonight; just you see! But I

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