

JOHN  
LE CARRÉ

*Absolute  
Friends*



PENGUIN  
CLASSICS

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Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published by Hodder & Stoughton 2004  
Published in Penguin Books 2018  
This edition published 2020  
001

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-33724-0

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



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On the day his destiny returned to claim him, Ted Mundy was sporting a bowler hat and balancing on a soapbox in one of Mad King Ludwig's castles in Bavaria. It wasn't a classic bowler, more your Laurel and Hardy than Savile Row. It wasn't an English hat, despite the Union Jack blazoned in Oriental silk on the handkerchief pocket of his elderly tweed jacket. The maker's grease-stained label on the inside of the crown proclaimed it to be the work of Messrs Steinmatzky & Sons, of Vienna.

And since it wasn't his own hat – as he hastened to explain to any luckless stranger, preferably female, who fell victim to his boundless accessibility – neither was it a piece of self-castigation. 'It's a hat of office, madam,' he would insist, garrulously begging her pardon in a set piece he had off perfectly. 'A gem of history, briefly entrusted to me by generations of previous incumbents of my post – wandering scholars, poets, dreamers, men of the cloth – and every man jack of us a loyal servant of the late King Ludwig – hah!' The *hah!* perhaps being some kind of involuntary throwback to his military childhood. 'Well, what's the alternative, I mean to say? You can hardly ask a thoroughbred Englishman to tote an *umbrella* like the Japanese guides, can you? Not here in Bavaria, my goodness, no. Not fifty miles from where our own dear Neville Chamberlain made his pact with the devil. Well, *can* you, madam?'

And if his audience, as is often the case, turns out to be too pretty to have heard of Neville Chamberlain or know which devil is referred to, then in a rush of generosity the thoroughbred Englishman will supply his beginners' version of the shameful Munich Agreement of 1938, in which he does not shy from remarking how even our beloved British monarchy, not to mention our aristocracy and the Tory Party here on earth, favoured practically *any* accommodation with Hitler rather than a war.

'British establishment absolutely terrified of Bolshevism, you see,' he blurts, in the elaborate telegraphese that, like *hah!*, overcomes him when he is in full cry. 'Powers-that-be in America no different. All *any of 'em* ever wanted was to turn Hitler loose on the Red Peril.' And how in German eyes, therefore, Neville Chamberlain's rolled-up umbrella remains *to this very day, madam*, the shameful emblem of British appeasement of *Our Dear Führer*, his invariable name for Adolf Hitler. 'I mean frankly, in this country, *as* an Englishman, I'd rather stand in the rain without one. Still, *that's* not what you came here for, is it? You came to see Mad Ludwig's favourite castle, not listen to an old bore ranting on about Neville Chamberlain. What? What? Been a pleasure, madam' – doffing the clown's bowler in self-parody and revealing an anarchic forelock of salt-and-pepper hair that bounces out of its trap like a greyhound the moment it's released – 'Ted Mundy, jester to the Court of Ludwig, at your service.'

And who do they think they've met, these punters – or *Bil-lies*, as the British tour operators prefer to call them – if they think at all? Who is this Ted Mundy to them as a fleeting memory? A bit of a comedian, obviously. A failure at something – a professional English bloody fool in a bowler and a Union Jack, all things to all men and nothing to himself, fifty in the shade,

nice enough chap, wouldn't necessarily trust him with my daughter. And those vertical wrinkles above the eyebrows like fine slashes of a scalpel, could be anger, could be nightmares: Ted Mundy, tour guide.

It's three minutes short of five o'clock in the evening, late May, and the last tour of the day is about to begin. The air is turning chilly, a red spring sun is sinking in the young beech trees. Ted Mundy perches like a giant grasshopper on the balcony, knees up, bowler tipped against the dying rays. He is poring over a rumpled copy of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that he keeps rolled up like a dog-chew in an inner pocket of his jacket for these moments of respite between tours. The Iraqi war officially ended little more than a month ago. Mundy, its unabashed opponent, scrutinises the lesser headlines: Prime Minister Tony Blair will travel to Kuwait to express his thanks to the Kuwaiti people for their cooperation in the successful conflict.

'Humph,' says Mundy aloud, brows furrowed.

During his tour, Mr Blair will make a brief stopover in Iraq. The emphasis will be on reconstruction rather than triumphalism.

'I should *bloody well* hope so,' Mundy growls, his glower intensifying.

Mr Blair has no doubt whatever that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction will shortly be found. US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, on the other hand, speculates that the Iraqis may have destroyed them before the war began.

'Why don't you make up your stupid minds then?' Mundy harrumphs.

His day thus far has followed its usual complex and unlikely course. Prompt at six he rises from the bed he shares with his young Turkish partner Zara. Tiptoeing across the corridor he

wakes her eleven-year-old son Mustafa in time for him to wash and clean his teeth, say his morning prayers, eat the breakfast of bread, olives, tea and chocolate spread that Mundy has meantime prepared for him. All this is done in an atmosphere of great stealth. Zara works late shift in a kebab café close to Munich's main railway station, and must not on any account be woken. Since starting her night job she has been arriving home around three in the morning, in the care of a friendly Kurdish taxi driver who lives in the same block. Muslim ritual should then permit her to say a quick prayer before sunrise and enjoy eight hours of good sleep, which is what she needs. But Mustafa's day begins at seven, and he too must pray. It took all Mundy's powers of persuasion, and Mustafa's also, to convince Zara that Mundy could preside over her son's devotions, and she could get her hours in. Mustafa is a quiet, cat-like child, with a cap of black hair, scared brown eyes and a raucous boing-boing voice.

From the apartment block – a shabby box of weeping concrete and external wiring – man and boy pick their way across wasteland to a bus shelter covered in graffiti, much of it abusive. The block is what these days is called an ethnic village: Kurds, Yemenis and Turks live packed together in it. Other children are already assembled here, some with mothers or fathers. It would be reasonable for Mundy to consign Mustafa to their care, but he prefers to ride with him to the school and shake his hand at the gates, sometimes formally kissing him on both cheeks. In the twilight time before Mundy appeared in his life, Mustafa suffered humiliation and fear. He needs rebuilding.

Returning from school to the apartment takes twenty minutes of Mundy's huge strides, and he arrives with one half of him hoping Zara is still asleep and the other half that she is

just awake, in which case she will make at first drowsy, then increasingly passionate love with him before he leaps into his elderly Volkswagen Beetle and joins the southbound traffic for the seventy-minute drive to the Linderhof and work.

The journey is irksome but necessary. A year ago, all three members of the family were separately in despair. Today they are a fighting force bent upon improving their collective lives. The story of how this miracle came about is one that Mundy recounts to himself whenever the traffic threatens to drive him mad:

He is on his uppers.

Again.

He is practically on the run.

Egon, his business partner and co-principal of their struggling Academy of Professional English, has fled with the last of the assets. Mundy himself has been obliged to creep out of Heidelberg at dead of night with whatever he can cram into the Volkswagen, plus 704 euros of petty cash that Egon has carelessly left unstolen in the safe.

Arriving in Munich with the dawn, he leaves the Volkswagen with its Heidelberg registration in a discreet corner of a high-rise car park in case his creditors have served an order on it. Then he does what he always does when life is closing in on him: he walks.

And because all his life, for reasons far back in his childhood, he has had a natural leaning towards ethnic diversity, his feet lead him almost of their own accord to a street full of Turkish shops and cafés that are just beginning to wake up. The day is sunny, he is hungry, he selects a café at random, lowers his long body cautiously onto a plastic chair that refuses to sit still on the uneven pavement, and asks the waiter for a large medium-sweet Turkish coffee and two poppyseed

rolls with butter and jam. He has barely begun his breakfast when a young woman settles on the chair beside him and with her hand held half across her mouth asks him, in a faltering Turkish-Bavarian accent, whether he would like to go to bed with her for money.

Zara is in her late twenties and improbably, inconsolably beautiful. She wears a thin blue blouse and black brassière, and a black skirt skimpy enough to display her bare thighs. She is dangerously slim. Mundy wrongly assumes drugs. It is also to his later shame that, for longer than he cares to admit, he is half inclined to take her up on her offer. He is sleepless, jobless, womanless and near enough penniless.

But when he takes a closer look at the young woman he is proposing to sleep with, he is conscious of such desperation in her stare and such intelligence behind her eyes, and such a lack of confidence in her part, that he quickly takes a hold of himself, and instead offers her breakfast, which she warily accepts on condition she may take half of it home to her sick mother. Mundy, now hugely grateful to be in contact with a fellow human being in low water, has a better suggestion: she shall eat all the breakfast, and they will together buy food for her mother at one of the halal shops up and down the road.

She hears him without expression, eyes downcast. Desperately empathising with her, Mundy suspects she is asking herself whether he is just crazy or seriously weird. He strains to appear neither of these things to her, but patently fails. In a gesture that goes straight to his heart, she draws her food with both hands to her own side of the table in case he means to take it back.

In doing so, she reveals her mouth. Her four front teeth are sheared off at the root. While she eats, he scans the street for a pimp. She doesn't seem to have one. Perhaps the café owns

her. He doesn't know, but his instincts are already protective. As they rise to leave, it becomes apparent to Zara that her head barely reaches up to Mundy's shoulder, for she starts away from him in alarm. He adopts his tall man's stoop, but she keeps her distance from him. She is by now his sole concern in life. His problems are negligible by comparison with hers. In the halal shop, under his urgent entreaty, she buys a piece of lamb, apple tea, couscous, fruit, honey, vegetables, halva and a giant triangular bar of Toblerone chocolate on special offer.

'How many mothers have you got, actually?' he asks her cheerfully, but it's not a joke she shares.

Shopping, she remains tense and tight-lipped, haggling in Turkish from behind her hand, then stabbing her finger at the fruit – not this one, that one. The speed and skill with which she calculates impress him deeply. He may be many kinds of man, but he is no sort of negotiator. When he tries to carry the shopping bags – there are two by now, both weighty – she fights them from him in fierce tugs.

'You want sleep with me?' she asks again impatiently, when she has them safely in her hands. Her message is clear: you've paid for me, so take me and leave me alone.

'No,' he replies.

'What you want?'

'To see you safely home.'

She shakes her head vigorously. 'Not home. Hotel.'

He tries to explain that his purposes are friendly rather than sexual but she is too tired to listen to him and begins weeping without changing her facial expression.

He chooses another café and they sit down. Her tears keep rolling but she ignores them. He presses her to talk about herself and she does so without any particular interest in her subject. She seems to have no barriers left. She is a country girl

from the plains of Adana, the eldest daughter of a farming family, she tells him in her faltering Bavarian argot while she stares at the table. Her father promised her in marriage to the son of a neighbouring farmer. The boy was held up as a computer genius, earning good money in Germany. When he came home to visit the family in Adana, there was a traditional wedding feast, the two farms were declared to be joined, and Zara returned to Munich with her husband, only to discover he was not a computer genius at all, but a full-time, round-the-clock armed bandit. He was twenty-four, she was seventeen and expecting a child by him.

‘It was gang,’ she declares simply. ‘All boys were bad crooks. They are crazy. Steal cars, sell drugs, make nightclubs, control prostitutes. They do all bad things. Now he is in prison. If he would not be in prison, my brothers will kill him.’

Her husband had been sent to prison nine months ago, but had found time to terrify the wits out of his son and smash his wife’s face in before he went. A seven-year sentence, other charges pending. One of the gang turned police witness. Her story continues in a monotonous flow as they walk through the town, now in German, now in snatches of Turkish when her German fails her. Sometimes he wonders whether she knows he is still beside her. *Mustafa*, she says, when he asks the boy’s name. She has asked him nothing about himself. She is carrying the shopping bags and he makes no further attempt to carry them for her. She is wearing blue beads, and he remembers from somewhere far back in his life that for superstitious Muslims blue beads ward off the evil eye. She is sniffing but the tears are no longer rolling down her cheeks. He guesses she has made herself cheer up before meeting someone who mustn’t know she has been crying. They are in Munich’s Westend, which hardly accords with its elegant London

equivalent: drab, pre-war apartment houses in old greys and browns; washing hanging out to dry in the windows, kids playing on a patch of moulting grass. A boy sees their approach, breaks free of his friends, picks up a rock and advances on them menacingly. Zara calls to him in Turkish.

‘What do you want?’ the boy yells.

‘A piece of your Toblerone please, Mustafa,’ Mundy says.

The boy stares at him, talks again to his mother, then edges forward, keeping the rock in his right hand while he pokes in the bags with his left. Like his mother, he is gaunt, with shadowed eyes. Like his mother, he seems to have no emotions left.

‘And a cup of apple tea,’ Mundy adds. ‘With you and all your friends.’

Led by Mustafa who is by now carrying the bags, and escorted by three stalwart dark-eyed boys, Mundy follows Zara up three flights of grimy stone stairs. They reach a steel-lined door, Mustafa delves inside his shirt and with a proprietorial air pulls out a front-door key on a chain. He steps into the house, accompanied by his friends. Zara steps after them. Mundy waits to be invited.

‘You will please come in,’ Mustafa announces in good Bavarian. ‘You will be most welcome. But if you touch my mother, we shall kill you.’

For the next ten weeks Mundy sleeps on Mustafa’s sofa bed in the living room with his legs hanging over the end while Mustafa sleeps with his mother, keeping a baseball bat beside him in case Mundy tries anything on. At first Mustafa refuses to go to school, so Mundy takes him to the zoo and plays ball games with him on the moulting grass while Zara stays home and lapses gradually into a state of convalescence, which is Mundy’s hope. Bit by bit he assumes the rôle of secular father

to a Muslim child and platonic guardian to a traumatised woman in a state of religious shame. The neighbours, initially suspicious of this gangling English intruder who laughs so much, begin to tolerate him, while Mundy for his part does everything he can to separate himself from his country's hated colonialist reputation. For money they use the rest of his seven hundred euros and the pittance that Zara receives from her Turkish family and German social security. In the evenings she likes to cook and Mundy plays kitchen boy to her. At first she objects to this, then grudgingly allows it. Cooking together becomes the main event of the day. Her rare laughter is like God's gift to him, broken teeth and all. Her life's ambition, he learns, is to qualify as a nurse.

A morning comes when Mustafa announces that he will go to school. Mundy escorts him, and is proudly introduced by Mustafa as his new father. The same week, all three make their first appearance together at the mosque. Expecting a gilded dome and a minaret, Mundy is startled to find himself in a tiled room on an upper floor of a down-at-heel house sandwiched between bridal costumiers, halal shops and stores selling used electrical goods. From his past he remembers that he mustn't point his feet at anyone, or shake hands with women, but place his right hand over his heart and drop his head in respect. With Zara consigned to the women's room, Mustafa takes his hand, guides him to the men's prayer-line and instructs him when to stand, when to make an obeisance, and when to kneel and press his brow to the strip of rush matting that does duty for the soil.

Mustafa's gratification in Mundy is immense. Until now, he has been obliged to sit upstairs with his mother and the younger kids. Thanks to Mundy he is now downstairs with the men. When prayers are over, Mustafa and Mundy may now shake

hands with all the men around them, while each expresses the hope that the other's prayers have found a good reception in Heaven.

'Study and God will make you wise,' the enlightened young imam advises Mundy as he leaves. 'If you do not study, you will become the victim of dangerous ideologies. You are married to Zara, I believe?'

Mundy has the grace to blush, and mutters something about, well, hope to one day.

'The formality is not important,' the young imam assures him. 'Responsibility is all. Be responsible and God will reward you.'

A week later Zara gets herself a night job at the kebab café by the station. The manager, having failed to go to bed with her, decides instead to depend on her. She wears the scarf and becomes his star employee, allowed to handle cash and protected by a very tall Englishman. A couple more weeks and Mundy too finds himself a place in the world: as English tour guide at the Linderhof. Next day, Zara pays a solitary visit to the enlightened young imam and his wife. Returning, she closets herself for an hour alone with Mustafa. The same night Mustafa and Mundy exchange beds.

Mundy has known stranger passages in his life, but none, he is convinced, has filled him with such satisfaction. His love for Zara knows no bounds. He loves Mustafa no less, and loves him best for loving his mother.

The English-Spoken cattle pen is opening, the usual multicultural gaggle of sightseers shuffles forward. Canadians with red maple leaves on their backpacks, Finns in anoraks and tartan golf caps, Indian women in saris, Australian sheep farmers with air-dried wives, Japanese elders who grimace at him with a pain he has never learned the source of: Mundy knows them

all by heart, from the colours of their tour buses to the first names of their rapacious minders who wish only to lure them to the gift shops for the greater good of their commissions. All that is missing from this evening's mix is platoons of Midwestern teenagers with barbed wire round their teeth, but America is celebrating its Victory over Evil at home, to the dismay of the German tourist industry.

Removing his bowler and brandishing it above his head, Mundy places himself at the front of his flock and leads the march to the main entrance. In his other hand he clutches a home-built soapbox of marine plywood that he has knocked together in the boiler room beneath the apartment block. Other guides employ the staircase as a speaker's platform. Not Ted Mundy, our Hyde Park Corner orator. Plonking the box at his feet, he steps smartly onto it, to reappear taller than his audience by eighteen inches, the bowler once more aloft.

'English speakers to *me* then, please, *thank you*. English *listeners*, I should be saying. Though by this time in the day I wish you *were* the speakers. Hah! Not true, really' – the voice kept deliberately low at this stage so that they have to quieten down to hear him – 'not running out of steam yet, I promise you. Cameras welcome, ladies and gents, but no videos, please – that's you too, please, sir, thank you – don't ask me why, but my masters assure me that the merest *whiff* of a video camera will land us in the intellectual-property courts. The normal penalty is a public hanging.' No laughter but he doesn't expect it yet from an audience that has spent the last four hours wedged into a bus, and another hour queuing in the heat of the sun. 'Gather round me, *please*, ladies and gentlemen, a little closer, if you *will*. Plenty of room here in front of me, ladies' – to a bunch of earnest schoolmistresses from Sweden – 'can you hear me over there, young sirs?' – to a clutch of bony

teenagers from across the invisible border to Saxony who have wandered into the wrong pen by mistake, but have decided to stay and get a free English lesson – ‘You can. Good. And can you see me, sir?’ – to a diminutive Chinese gentleman – ‘You can. One *personal* request, if you don’t mind, ladies and gents. *Handies* as we call them here in Germany, known otherwise as your mobile telephones. Kindly make sure they’re switched off. All done? Then perhaps the last one in will close those doors behind you, sir, and I’ll begin. Thank you.’

The sunlight is cut off, an artificial dusk is lit by myriad candle-bulbs reflected in gilt mirrors. Mundy’s finest moment – one of eight in every working day – is about to begin.

‘As the most observant among you will see, we are standing in the relatively modest entrance hall of the *Linderhof*. Not *Linderhof Palace*, please, because *hof* here means *farm*, and the palace where we are standing was built on the land where the Linder farm once stood. But why *Linder*? we ask ourselves. Do we have a philologist among us? A professor of words? An expert on the old meanings?’

We do not, which is as well, because Mundy is about to embark on one of his illicit improvisations. For reasons that escape him, he never seems quite to have got his head round the plot. Or perhaps it’s a blind spot he has. Sometimes he takes himself by surprise, which is part of the therapy when he is fighting other, more persistent thoughts, such as Iraq, or a threatening letter from his Heidelberg bank which this morning coincided with a demand note from the insurance company.

‘Well now, we do have the German word *Linde* meaning a lime tree. But does that explain the R? I ask myself.’ He’s flying now. ‘Mind you, the farm may just have belonged to Mr Linder, and that’s the end of it. But I prefer a different

explanation, which is the verb *lindern*, to relieve, to alleviate, to assuage, to soothe. And I like to think it's the interpretation that appealed most to our poor King Ludwig, if only subliminally. The Linderhof was his *soothing place*. Well, we all need a bit of soothing, don't we, especially these days? Ludwig had had a rough deal, remember. He was nineteen when he took the throne, he was tyrannised by his father, persecuted by his tutors, bullied by Bismarck, cheated by his courtiers, victimised by corrupt politicians, robbed of his dignity as a king, and he hardly knew his mother.'

Has Mundy been similarly mistreated? By the throb in his voice, you would believe so.

'So what does he *do*, this handsome, over-tall, sensitive, abused, *proud* young man who believes he was appointed by God to rule?' he asks, with all the pained authority of one over-tall man empathising with another. 'What does he *do* when he is systematically stripped bit by bit of the power he was born to? Answer: he builds himself a string of fantasy castles. And who wouldn't?' – warming to his subject – 'Palaces with attitude. Illusions of power. The less power he's got, the bigger the illusions he builds – rather like my gallant Prime Minister, Mr Blair, if you want my opinion, but don't quote me' – bemused silence – 'And that's why personally I try not to call Ludwig *mad*. The King of Dreamers is what I prefer to call him. The King of Escape Artists, if you like. A lonely visionary in a lousy world. He lived at night, as you probably know. Didn't like people on the whole and certainly not the ladies. Oh *dear* me, no!'

The laughter this time comes from a group of Russians who are passing a bottle between them, but Mundy prefers not to hear them. Raised on his home-made soapbox, his bowler hat tilted slightly forward, Guards-style, over his unmanageable

mop of hair, he has entered a sphere as rarefied as King Ludwig's. Only seldom does he bestow a glance on the upturned heads below him, or pause to let a child bawl or a bunch of Italians resolve a private disagreement.

'When Ludwig was inside his own head, he was ruler of the universe. Nobody, but *nobody*, gave him orders. Here at the Linderhof he was the reincarnation of the Sun King, that bronze gentleman you see riding his horse on the table: Louis in French is Ludwig in German. And at Herrenchiemsee a few miles from here, he built his very own Versailles. At Neuschwanstein up the road he was Siegfried, the great German mediaeval king-warrior, immortalised in opera by Ludwig's idol Richard Wagner. And high up in the mountains, if you're feeling athletic, he built the palace of Schachen, where he duly crowned himself King of Morocco. He'd have been Michael Jackson if he could, but fortunately he hadn't heard of him.'

Laughter from round the room by now, but once again Mundy ignores it.

'And His Majesty had his *little ways*. He had his food put on a gold table and sent up to him through a hole in the floor – which in a minute I'm going to show you – so that nobody could watch him eat. He kept the servants up all night and if they annoyed him he'd order them to be flayed alive. If he had one of his antisocial moods on him, he'd talk to you from behind a screen. And kindly bear in mind, please, that all this is happening in the nineteenth century, not the Dark Ages. Out there in the real world they're building railways and iron ships and steam engines and machine-guns and cameras. So don't let's fool ourselves that this is long-long-ago and once-upon-a-time. Except for Ludwig, of course. Ludwig had put his life into reverse. He was going back into history just as fast as his

money would carry him. Which was the problem, because it was also Bavaria's money.'

A downward peek at his wristwatch. Three and a half minutes gone. By now he should be walking up the staircase, his audience trailing after him. He is. Through adjoining walls he can hear the voices of his colleagues, raised like his own: boisterous Frau Doktor Blankenheim, retired teacher, recent Buddhist convert and doyenne of the reading circle; pallid Herr Stettler, cyclist and erotomane; Michel Delarge from Alsace, unfrocked priest. And behind him, coming up the stairs, wave after wave of invincible Japanese infantry led by a tight-stepping Nipponese beauty queen brandishing a puce umbrella that is a far cry from Neville Chamberlain's.

And, somewhere close to him, and not for the first time in his life, the ghost of Sasha.

Is it here on the staircase that Mundy first feels the familiar prickle on his back? In the throne room? In the royal bedchamber? In the Hall of Mirrors? Where does the awareness, like an old premonition, steal over him? A hall of mirrors is a deliberate bastion against reality. Multiplied images of reality lose their impact as they recede into infinity. A figure who face to face might instil stark fear or perfect pleasure becomes, in his numberless reflections, a mere premise, a putative form.

Besides which, Mundy is by necessity and training a most watchful man. Here in the Linderhof he does not undertake the simplest manoeuvre without checking his back and front and all the other approaches to him, either for unwelcome traces of previous lives or for errant members of his present one, such as art thieves, vandals, pickpockets, creditors, writ-servers from Heidelberg, senile tourists struck down by heart attacks, children vomiting on priceless carpets, ladies with

small dogs concealed in their handbags, and latterly – on the urgent insistence of the management – suicidally disposed terrorists. Nor must we exclude from this roll of honour the welcome relief, even to a man so happily paired, of a shapely girl whose attributes are best appreciated indirectly.

To assist him in this vigil, Mundy has covertly appointed certain vantage points or static posts: here a dark painting, conveniently glazed, that looks backward down the stairs; there a bronze urn that supplies a wide-angle image of whoever is to either side of him; and now the Hall of Mirrors itself, where a multitude of replicated Sashas hovers in miles and miles of golden corridor.

Or not.

Is he but a Sasha of the mind, a Friday-night mirage? Mundy has seen his share of almost-Sashas in the years since they took leave of one another, as he is quick to remind himself: Sashas down to their last euro who spot him from across the street and, spidery with hunger and enthusiasm, come hobbling through traffic to embrace him; prosperous, sleek Sashas with fur on their coat collars, who wait artfully in doorways to spring out at him or clatter down public stairways yelling, *Teddy, Teddy, it's your old friend, Sasha!* Yet no sooner does Mundy stop and turn, his smile faithfully aloft, than the apparition has vanished or, transmuted itself into an entirely different person, slunk off to join the common crowd.

It is in his quest for solid verification therefore that Mundy now casually changes his vantage point, first by flinging out a rhetorical arm, then by spinning round on his box to point out to his audience the view, the splendid, the magnificent view, afforded from the royal bedstead – just follow my arm, ladies and gents – of the Italian waterfall descending the northern slopes of the Hennenkopf.

‘Imagine you’re lying there!’ he urges his audience with a rush of exuberance to match the spectacular torrent – ‘With somebody who loves you! Well, probably *not* in Ludwig’s case’ – gusts of hysterical laughter from the Russians – ‘but lying there anyway, surrounded by all that royal Bavarian gold and blue! And you wake up one sunny morning, and you open your eyes, and you look out of the window at – *bang*.’

And on the word *bang* nails him: *Sasha – good God, man, where the hell have you been?* – except that Mundy says none of this, neither does he indicate it by so much as a slip of the eye, because Sasha in the Wagnerian spirit of the place is wearing his invisibility hat, his *Tarnkappe* as they used to call it, the black Basque beret worn severely across the brow that warns against the slightest indiscretion, particularly in time of war.

In addition to which – lest Mundy has by any chance forgotten his clandestine manners – Sasha has placed a curled and pensive forefinger to his lips, not in warning but rather in the dreamy pose of a man relishing the vicarious experience of waking up one sunny morning and looking out of the window at the waterfall coming down the Hennenkopf. The gesture is superfluous. Not the keenest watcher, not the smartest surveillance camera in the world would have caught a hint of their reunion.

But Sasha all the same: Sasha the midget-sentry, vital even when he is motionless, poised that little bit apart from the person nearest him in order to escape the comparison of height, elbows lifted from his sides as if he’s about to take off, his fiery brown eyes aimed just above your eyeline – never mind that, like Mundy, you’re taller than he is by a head and a half – bonding, accusing, searching, challenging, eyes to inflame you, question and unsettle you. Sasha, as I live and breathe.

The tour is ending. House rules forbid guides to solicit but

allow them to hover at the doorway, nodding their departing audience into the sunlight and wishing them a safe and simply *marvellous* holiday. The take has always varied, but war has reduced it to a trickle. Sometimes Mundy stands empty-handed till the end, his bowler roosting on a convenient bust lest it be mistaken for anything as vulgar as a begging bowl. Sometimes a devoted middle-aged couple or a schoolteacher with unruly charges will dart shyly forward and press a banknote on him, then dart back into the throng. This evening it's a genial building contractor from Melbourne and his wife Darlene who need to explain to Mundy that their daughter Tracey did this *very same tour* way back in the winter, with the *self-same travel company*, would you believe it? And had just *loved* every minute of it – maybe Mundy remembered her, because she sure as hell remembered the big tall Pom in the Bowler Hat! Blonde girl, freckles and a ponytail, boyfriend a medical student from Perth, plays rugby for his university? And it is while Mundy is putting on a show of hunting for Tracey in his memory – the boyfriend's name was Keith, the building contractor confides, in case it's any help – that he feels a hard small hand encircle his wrist, turn it palm upward, insert a folded note and close his fingers over it. In the same moment, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpses Sasha's beret disappearing into the crowd.

'Next time you're in Melbourne, right?' the Australian building contractor yells, tucking a card into the pocket behind Mundy's Union Jack.

'It's a date!' Mundy agrees with a cheery laugh, and deftly palms the note into a side pocket of his jacket.

*It is wise to sit down before you start a journey, preferably on your luggage.* The superstition is Russian but the axiom originates with Nick Amory, who is Mundy's long-time advisor in matters

of self-preservation: if something big is in the air, Edward, and you're part of it, then for pity's sake curb your natural impetuosity and give yourself a break before you jump.

The Linderhof's day is over, staff and tourists are hurrying towards the car park. Like a benign host, Mundy hovers on the steps bestowing multilingual benedictions on his departing colleagues. *Auf Wiedersehen, Frau Meierhof! Still haven't found them then!* He is referring to Iraq's elusive weapons of mass destruction. *Fritz, Tschüss! Love to your dear lady! Marvellous speech she made the other night at the Poltergeist!* – our local culture and debating club where Mundy occasionally goes to let off political steam. And to his French and Spanish colleagues, a married male couple – *Pablo, Marcel, we'll commiserate together next week. Buenas noches, bonsoir the both of you!* The last stragglers disappear into the twilight as he withdraws into the shadows of the western prospect of the palace, immersing himself in the blackness of a stairwell.

He stumbled on the place by luck soon after he took up the job.

Exploring the castle's precincts one evening – a moonlight concert is to be held in the grounds and, Mustafa allowing, he has a mind to stick around and hear it – he discovers a humble basement staircase that leads nowhere. Descending it, he meets a rusted iron door, and in the door a key. He knocks and, hearing nothing, turns the key and steps inside. To anyone but Mundy, the space he enters is no more than a grubby plant room, a dumping ground for watering cans, old hosepipes and ailing plants. No window, just a grille high in the stone wall. Air heavy with the stink of putrid hyacinth and the rumblings of a boiler next door. But to Mundy it is everything Mad Ludwig was looking for when he built the Linderhof in the first place: a sanctuary, a place of escape from his other places of

escape. He steps back outside, relocks the door, puts the key in his pocket and for seven working days bides his time while he mounts a systematic reconnaissance of his target. By 10 a.m. when the castle gates open, all healthy plants in the public rooms have been watered and unhealthy plants removed. The plant contractor's van, a flower-painted minibus, leaves the grounds at 10.30 a.m. latest, by which time ailing plants have been consigned to the plant room, or to the van for hospitalisation. The disappearance of the key has raised no eyebrows. The lock has not been changed. It follows that from eleven every morning the plant room is his private property.

It is his tonight.

Standing his full height beneath the frugal ceiling lamp, Mundy extracts a pen-torch from his pocket, unfolds the note until it becomes a rectangle of plain white paper, and sees what he expects to see: Sasha's handwriting, as it always was and ever shall be: the same spiky Germanic Es and Rs, the same adamant downstrokes that declare the man. The expression on Mundy's face as he reads its message is hard to parse. Resignation, anxiety and pleasure all play a part. A rueful excitement dominates. Thirty-four bloody years, he thinks. We're men of three decades. We meet, we fight a war, we separate for a decade. We meet again, and for a decade we're indispensable to each other while we fight another. We part for ever, and a decade later you come back.

Fishing in his jacket pockets he takes out a scuffed book of matches from Zara's kebab café. He plucks a match, strikes it and holds the note in the flame by one corner then another until it's a twisted flake of ash. He lets it fall to the flagstones and grinds it to black dust with his heel, a necessary observance. He looks at his watch and does the arithmetic. One hour and twenty minutes to kill. No point in ringing her yet.

She'll just have started work. Her boss goes crazy when the staff take personal calls in peak hours. Mustafa will be at Dina's house with Kamal. Mustafa and Kamal are bosom pals, leading lights of the Westend's all-Turkish national cricket league, President, Mr Edward Mundy. Dina is Zara's cousin and good friend. Scrolling through a mildewed cellphone, he locates her number and dials it.

'Dina. Greetings. The bloody management have called a meeting of tour guides for tonight. I totally forgot. Can Mustafa sleep over at your place in case I'm late?'

'Ted?' Mustafa's croaking voice.

'*Good evening to you, Mustafa! How are you doing?*' Mundy asks, slowly and emphatically. They are speaking the English that Mundy is teaching him.

'I – am – doing – very – very – well, Ted!'

'Who is Don Bradman?'

'Don – Bradman – is – greatest – batsman – ever – the – world – was – seen, Ted!'

'Tonight you stay at Dina's house. Yes?'

'Ted?'

'Did you understand me? I have a meeting tonight. I will be late.'

'And – I – sleep – at – Dina.'

'Correct. Well done. You sleep at Dina's house.'

'Ted?'

'What?'

Mustafa is laughing so much he can hardly speak. 'You – very – bad – bad – man, Ted!'

'Why am I a bad man?'

'You – love – other – woman! I – tell – Zara!'

'How did you guess my dark secret?' He has to repeat this.

'I – know – this! I – have – big – big – eyes!'

'Would you like a description of the other woman I love?  
To tell to Zara?'

'Please?'

'This other woman I've got. Shall I tell you what she looks like?'

'Yes, yes! You – tell – me! You – bad – man!' More hoots of laughter.

'She's got very beautiful legs –'

'Yes, yes!'

'She's got *four* beautiful legs, actually – very *furry* legs – and a long golden tail – and her name is –?'

'Mo! You love Mo! I tell Zara you love Mo more!'

Mo the stray Labrador, thus named by Mustafa in honour of himself. She took up residence with them at Christmas, to the initial horror of Zara, who has been brought up to believe that touching a dog makes her too dirty to pray. But under the concerted pressure of her two men, Zara's heart melted, and now Mo can do no wrong.

He rings the apartment and hears his own voice on the answerphone. Zara loves Mundy's voice. Sometimes, when she's missing him in the daytime, she says, she plays the tape for company. I may be late, darling, he warns her in their common German over the machine. There's a meeting of staff tonight and I forgot all about it. Lies like this, told protectively and from the heart, have their own integrity, he tells himself, wondering whether the enlightened young imam would agree. And I love you quite as much as I loved you this morning, he adds severely: so don't go thinking otherwise.

He glances at his watch – one hour and ten minutes to go. He advances on a worm-eaten gilded chair and puts it in front of a dilapidated Biedermeier wardrobe. Balancing on the chair, he gropes behind the wardrobe's pediment and extracts an

ancient khaki kitbag thick with dust. He pats the dust off, sits down on the chair, sets the kitbag on his lap, yanks the webbing straps free of their tarnished buckles, lifts the flap and peers dubiously inside as if uncertain what to expect.

Gingerly he unpacks the contents onto a bamboo table: one ancient group photograph of an Anglo-Indian family with its many native servants posed on the steps of a grand Colonial house; one buff folder marked FILE in aggressive hand-inked capitals; one bundle of ill-written letters of a similar period; one twist of woman's hair, dark brown, bound round a sprig of dried heather.

But these objects attract only a curt acknowledgement from him. What he is looking for, and has perhaps deliberately left till last, is a plastic folder in which float as many as twenty unopened letters addressed to Mr Teddy Mundy care of his bank in Heidelberg in the same black ink and spiky hand as the note he has this minute burned. No sender's name is supplied, but none is needed.

Floppy blue air-letters.

Coarse-grained Third World envelopes reinforced with sticky tape and blazoned with stamps as radiant as tropical birds from places as far apart as Damascus, Djakarta and Havana.

First he sorts them into chronological order according to their postmarks. Then he slits them open, one by one, with an old tin penknife, also from the kitbag. He starts reading. For what? *When you are reading something, Mr Mundy, first ask yourself why you are reading it.* He is hearing the accented voice of his old German teacher, Dr Mandelbaum, forty years ago. *Are you reading something for information? That is one reason. Or are you reading it for knowledge? Information is only the path, Mr Mundy. The goal is knowledge.*

I'll settle for knowledge, he's thinking. And I promise I

won't fall for dangerous ideology, he adds, with a mental doff of the cap to the imam. I'll settle for knowing what I didn't want to know, and I'm still not sure I want to. How did you find me, Sasha? Why must I not recognise you? Who are you avoiding this time, and why?

Folded among the letters are press cuttings torn impatiently from newspapers and bearing Sasha's byline. The salient passages are highlighted, or indicated by exclamation marks.

He reads for an hour, returns the letters and press cuttings to the kitbag and the kitbag to its hiding place. The mixture as expected, he silently tells himself. No quarter given. One man's war continues as planned. Age is not an excuse. It never was and never will be.

He puts the gilded chair where he found it, sits down again and remembers he's wearing his bowler hat. He takes it off, turns it upside down and peers into it, a thing he does in pensive moments. The maker Steinmatzky's first name is Joseph. He owns to sons, no daughters. His firm's address in Vienna is *No. 19 Dürerstrasse above the Baker's*. Or it was, because old man Joseph Steinmatzky liked to date his handiwork and this example boasts a vintage year: 1938.

Staring into the hat, he watches the scene unfold. The cobbled alley, the little shop above the baker's. The smashed glass, the blood between the cobblestones as Joseph Steinmatzky, his wife and many sons are dragged away to the vociferous approval of Vienna's proverbially innocent bystanders.

He rises, squares his shoulders, lowers them and wriggles his hands around to loosen himself up. He steps into the stairwell, relocks the door, mounts the stone steps. Strips of dew hover over the palace lawns. The fresh air smells of mown grass and damp cricket field. Sasha, you mad bastard, what do you want now?

★

Urging his Volkswagen Beetle over the hump between Mad Ludwig's golden gates, Mundy turns onto the road to Murnau. Like its owner, the car is no longer in its first youth. Its engine wheezes, tired wipers have etched half-moons on its windscreen. A home-made sticker on the back, written by Mundy in German, reads *The Driver of This Car Has No Further Territorial Claims in Arabia*. He crosses two small intersections without mishap and as promised encounters a blue Audi with a Munich registration pulling out of the lay-by ahead of him with a silhouetted Sasha in his beret crouched at the wheel.

For fifteen kilometres by the unreliable gauge of the Volkswagen Mundy clings to the Audi's tail. The road sinks, enters forest and divides. Without signalling, Sasha takes a left fork and Mundy in his Volkswagen scrambles after him. Avenues of black trees lead downward to a lake. Which lake? According to Sasha, the only thing Mundy has in common with Leon Trotsky is what the great man called topographical cretinism. At a parking sign the Audi descends a ramp and skids to a halt. Mundy does the same, glancing in his mirror to see what, if anything, comes after him, or what went by slowly without stopping: nothing. Sasha with a carrier bag in his hand is scurrying unevenly down a flight of paved steps.

Sasha believes that before he was born he lacked oxygen in the womb.

A jingle-jangle of fairground music is coming up the path. Fairy lights are twinkling through the trees. A village festival is in progress and Sasha is heading towards it. Scared of losing him, Mundy closes the gap. With Sasha fifteen yards in front they plunge into an inferno of roistering humanity. A merry-go-round belches honky-tonk, a matador on a hay cart undulates before a cardboard bull while crooning in broad Silesian about *amor*. Beer-sodden revellers, oblivious to the war, blow

feathered snakes at each other. Nobody is out of place here, not Sasha, not me. Everyone's a citizen for a day and Sasha hasn't forgotten his skills either.

Over a loudspeaker, the *Grossadmiral* of a flag-bedecked steamer is ordering stragglers to forget their troubles and report *immediately* for the romantic cruise. A rocket bursts above the lake. Coloured stars cascade onto the water. Incoming or outgoing? Ask Bush and Blair, our two great war leaders, neither of whom has seen a shot fired in anger.

Sasha has vanished. Mundy looks up and to his relief sees him hauling himself and his carrier bag Heavenwards by way of a spiral iron staircase attached to an Edwardian villa painted in horizontal stripes. His strides are frantic. They always were. It's the way he ducks his head each time he lunges with the right leg. Is the bag heavy? No, but Sasha is careful to nurse it as he negotiates the curves. A bomb perhaps? Not Sasha, never.

After another casual look round for whoever else may be coming to the party, Mundy climbs after him. MINIMUM LET ONE WEEK, a painted sign warns him. A *week*? Who needs a week? These games finished fourteen years ago. He glances down. Nobody is coming up after him. The front door of each apartment as he works his way up is painted mauve and lit by fluorescent strip. At a half-landing a hollow-faced woman in a Sherpa coat and gloves is fumbling in her handbag. He gives her a breathless *grüss Gott*. She ignores him or she's deaf. Take your gloves off, woman, and maybe you'll find it. Still climbing, he glances wistfully back at her as if she were dry land. She's lost her door key! She's locked her grandchild in her flat. Go back downstairs, help her. Do your Sir Galahad act, then go home to Zara and Mustafa and Mo.

He keeps climbing. The staircase turns another corner. On mountain tops around him eternal snow-pastures bask under

a half-moon. Below him the lake, the fair, the din – and still no followers that he's aware of. And before him a last mauve door, ajar. He pushes it. It opens a foot but he sees only pitch darkness. He starts to call out *Sasha!* but the memory of the beret restrains him.

He listens and hears nothing except the noise of the fair. He steps inside and pulls the door shut behind him. In the half-darkness, he sees Sasha standing crookedly to attention with the carrier bag at his feet. His arms are as straight to his sides as he can get them and his thumbs pressed forward in the best tradition of a Communist Party functionary on parade. But the Schiller face, the fiery eyes, the eager, forward-leaning stance, even in the flickering dusk, have never appeared so vivid or alert.

'You talk a lot of bullshit these days, I would say, Teddy,' he remarks.

The same smothered Saxon accent, Mundy records. The same pedantic, razor-edged voice, three sizes too big for him. The same instant power of reproach.

'Your philological excursions are bullshit, your portrait of Mad Ludwig is bullshit. Ludwig was a fascist bastard. So was Bismarck. And so are you, or you would have answered my letters.'

But by then they are hastening towards each other for the long-delayed embrace.

The swirling river that winds from Mundy's birth to Sasha's re-incarnation at the Linderhof has its source not in the shires of England but in the accursed mountain ranges and ravines of the Hindu Kush that under three centuries of British Colonial administration became the North-West Frontier Province.

'This young sahib of mine you see here,' the retired major of infantry who was Mundy's father would announce in the private bar of the Golden Swan in Weybridge to anybody unfortunate enough not to have heard the story before, or who had heard it a dozen times but was too courteous to say, 'is by way of being a bit of an historical *rarity*, aren't you, boy, aren't you?'

And, slipping an affectionate arm round the adolescent Mundy's shoulder, would muss his hair before turning him to the light for ease of scrutiny. The Major is small, fiery and impassioned. His gestures, even in love, are never less than pugilistic. His son is a beanstalk, already taller than his father by a head.

'And I'll tell you for *why* young Edward here is a rarity, if you'll permit me, sir,' he would continue, gathering steam as he addresses all the sirs within range, and the ladies too, for they still have an eye for him, and he for them. 'On the morning my bearer reported to me that the memsahib was about

to do me the honour of presenting me with a child – this very child here, sir – a perfectly *normal* Indian sun was rising over the regimental infirmary.’

A stage pause, of the sort Mundy too will one day learn to make, as the Major’s glass also mystically rises and his head dips to greet it.

‘*However*, sir,’ he would resume. ‘*However*. By the time this same young man deigned to appear on parade’ – swinging accusingly round to Mundy now, but the fierce blue gaze as dotting as ever – ‘without your topee, sir, fourteen days confined to barracks, as we used to say! – that sun up there wasn’t Indian any more. It belonged to the self-governing Dominion of Pakistan. Didn’t it, boy? Didn’t it?’

At which the boy will most likely blush, and stammer out something like, ‘Well, so you *tell* me, Father,’ which would be enough to earn him a kindly laugh, and for the Major just possibly another drink on someone else’s tab, and an opportunity to point the moral of his tale.

‘Madame History a very fickle lady, sir’ – in the telegrams later inherited by his son – ‘you can march for her day and night. Sweat your guts out for her. Shit, shine, shave, shampoo for her. Doesn’t make a blind bit o’ difference. The day she doesn’t want you – *out*. Dismiss. Scrapheap. Enough said.’ A fresh glass is by now making its ascent. ‘Your good health, sir. Generous man. To the Queen-Emperor. God bless her. Coupled with the name of the Punjabi fighting man. Finest soldier ever lived, bar none. Provided he is led, sir. There’s the rub.’

And a ginger beer for the young sahib if he’s lucky, while the Major in a fit of emotion whisks a khaki handkerchief from the sleeve of his frayed military sports jacket and, having first hammered his fussy little moustache with it, dabs his cheeks before returning it to base.

The Major had cause for his tears. The day of Pakistan's birth, as the Golden Swan's customers know all too well, robbed him not only of his career, but also of his wife who, having taken one exhausted look at her overdue and overlong son had, like the Empire, expired.

'That woman, sir –' It is the evening watering hour, and the Major is waxing sentimental. 'Only one word to describe her: *quality*. First time I saw her, she was in her riding clothes, out for a dawn canter with a couple of bearers. Done five Hot Weathers in the plains and looked as though she'd come straight from eating strawberries and cream at Cheltenham Ladies' College. Knew her fauna and flora better than her bearers did. And she'd be with us here to this day, God bless her, if that arsehole of a regimental doctor had been halfway sober. To her memory, sir. The late Mrs Mundy. Forward march.' His tearful eye settles on his son, whose presence he appears momentarily to have forgotten. 'Young Edward,' he explains. 'Opens the bowling for his school. How old are you, boy?'

And the boy, waiting to take his father home, admits to sixteen.

The Major, however, as he will assure you, did not buckle under the tragedy of his double loss. He stayed on, sir. He endured. Widowed, a baby son to look after, Raj collapsing round his ears, you might think he'd do what the other buggers did: lower the Union Jack, sound the Last Post and sail home to obscurity. Not the Major, sir. No, thank you. He would rather slop out his Punjabis' shithouses than kiss the arse of some limp-wristed war-profiteer in Civvy Street, thank you.

'I summoned my *derzi*. I said to my *derzi*, "*Derzi*, on the day the Dominion of Pakistan declares itself to be the Republic of Pakistan, and not one day later, you will unstitch the major's crowns on my khaki drills, and you will replace them

with the crescent moon of Pakistan – *juldi*.” And I pledged my services – for as long as they were appreciated – to the finest body of fighting men in the world bar none, *provided*’ – his index finger stabs the air in dramatic warning – ‘provided, sir, that they are *led*. There’s the rub.’

And there also, mercifully, the bell will ring for last orders, and the boy will slip a trained hand beneath his father’s arm and march him home to Number Two, The Vale to finish up last night’s curry.

But Mundy’s provenance is not as easily defined as these bar-room reminiscences suggest. The Major, so lavish with the larger brushstrokes, is reticent when it comes to detail, with the result that Mundy’s memories of his infancy are a succession of camps, barracks, depôts and hill stations that accelerates as the Major’s fortunes dwindle. One day the proud son of Empire rules supreme over a whitewashed cantonment complete with red-ochred club, polo, swimming pool, children’s games and Christmas plays, including an historic production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in which he stars as Dopey. The next, he is running barefoot down the mud streets of a half-empty settlement miles from any town, with bullock carts instead of motor cars, a corrugated-iron cinema for a club, and Christmas pudding served in a regimental institute green with mould.

Few possessions survive so many moves. The Major’s tiger skins, his military chests and treasured ivory carvings are all posted missing. Even his late wife’s memory has been stolen, her diaries, letters and a box of precious family jewellery: that thieving bastard of a stationmaster at Lahore, the Major will have him flogged, and every one of his rascally *chaprassis* with him! He makes the vow one night in his cups after Mundy has

driven him over the edge with his persistent damn-fool questioning. 'Her *grave*, boy? I'll tell you where her bloody grave is! Gone! Smashed to bits by rampaging tribesmen! Not a stone left standing! All we've got of her is *here*!' And he drives his tiny fist against his breast, and pours himself another *chota peg*. 'That woman had class you wouldn't believe, boy. I can see her every time I look at you. Anglo-Irish nobility. Vast estates, razed to the ground in the Troubles. First the Irish, now the bloody Dervishes. Entire clan dead or scattered to the winds.'

They come to rest in the garrison hill town of Murree. While the Major vegetates in a mud-brick barrack hut smoking Craven A for his throat's sake and growling over pay imprests, sick-lists and leave rosters, the boy Mundy is consigned to the care of a very fat Madrassi ayah who came north with Independence, and has no name but Ayah, and recites rhymes with him in English and Punjabi, and surreptitiously teaches him Holy Sayings from the Koran, and tells him of a god called Allah who loves justice and all the peoples of the world and their prophets, even Christians and Hindus, but most of all, she says, he loves children. It is only most unwillingly, after much pressing on Mundy's part, that she admits to possessing no husband, children, parents, sisters or brothers left alive. 'They are all dead now, Edward. They are with Allah, every one. It is all you need to know. Go to sleep.'

Murdered in the great massacres that came of the Partition, she admits under interrogation. Murdered by Hindus. Murdered at railway stations, in mosques and market places.

'How did you stay alive, Ayah?'

'It was the will of God. You are my blessing. Go to sleep now.'

Come evening, to a chorus of goats, jackals, bugles and the insistent twanging of Punjabi drums, the Major will also

contemplate mortality, under a neem tree at the river's edge, puffing at cheroots that he calls Burmas and cuts into lengths with a tin penknife. Intermittently he refreshes himself from a pewter hip flask while his overgrown son splashes with his native peers and, acting out the never-ending tales of adult slaughter all around them, plays Hindus versus Muslims and takes turns at being dead. Forty years on, Mundy has only to close his eyes to feel the magic cooling of the air that comes with sundown, and smell the scents that leap out of the sudden dusk, or watch the dawn rise over foothills glistening green from the monsoon, or hear the cat-calls of his playmates give way to the muezzin and the nocturnal bellows of his father berating that damned boy of mine who killed his mother – *Well, didn't you, boy, didn't you? Come here juldi when I order you, boy!* But the boy declines, *juldi* or otherwise, preferring to let Ayah clutch him to her flank until the drink has done its work.

Now and then, the boy must endure a birthday, and from the moment it appears on his horizon he succumbs to a variety of illnesses: stomach cramps, feverish headaches, Delhi belly, the onset of malaria, or fears that he has been bitten by a poisonous bat. But the day still comes round, the kitchen wallahs prepare a fearsome curry and make a great cake with *Many Happy Returns to Edward* on it, but no other children are invited, the shutters are closed, the dining table is laid for three, candles are lit and the servants stand silently round the wall while the Major in full mess kit and decorations plays the same Irish ballads on the gramophone again and again, and Mundy wonders how much of his curry he can get away with not eating. Solemnly he blows out his candles, cuts three slices of his birthday cake and lays one on his mother's plate. If the Major is half sober, father and son will do silent combat with a red-and-white ivory chess set brought out for feast-days. The

games have no conclusion. They are put aside for tomorrow, and tomorrow never comes.

But there are the other, rarest nights – they never needed to be many – when the Major with a more than usually frightful scowl will stalk to a desk in a corner of the room, unlock it with a key from his chain, and ceremoniously extract from it an elderly red-bound volume called *Selected Readings from the Works of Rudyard Kipling*. Pulling a pair of reading spectacles from their battered metal case and setting his whisky glass in a hole in the arm of his rattan chair, he will bark toneless phrases about Mowgli the jungle boy, and another boy called Kim who became a spy in the service of his Queen and Emperor, though what happened to him when he had become one, and whether he won or was caught, were matters not divulged by the extract. For hours on end the Major will sip and read and sip as solemnly as if he is conducting a one-handed service of Communion, until at length he falls asleep, and Ayah emerges silently from the shadows where she has been crouching all this while and, taking Mundy by the hand, leads him to bed. The Kipling anthology, the Major tells him, is the sole survivor of a vast eclectic library that was once his mother's.

'That woman had more books in her than I've had hot dinners,' he marvels in his soldier's way. Nevertheless, with time it becomes something of a puzzle to Mundy, and a frustration, that such an illustrious reader as his mother should have left him such a ragbag of half-told tales. He prefers Ayah's bedtime stories of the heroic doings of the Prophet Mohammed.

For the remainder of his education the boy attends the dying remnants of a Colonial school for the orphans and children of impecunious British officers, performs in pantomimes and pays weekly visits to a smooth-faced Anglican missionary who instructs him in Divinity and piano, and likes best to guide

boys' fingers with his own. But these random spurts of Christianity are only tiresome interruptions in the sunlit passage of each pagan day. His best hours are spent playing ferocious cricket with Ahmed, Omar and Ali on the dust-patch behind the mosque, or gazing in glassy rock pools that flash mother-of-pearl, while he whispers child-love to Rani, a nine-year-old barefoot beauty of the village whom he intends to marry for ever just as soon as arrangements can be made; or bawls patriotic hymns in Punjabi as the shiny new flag of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is hoisted over the regimental cricket pitch.

And Mundy would have passed the rest of his youth in this undemanding manner, and the rest of his life also, had not a night come when the servants and even Ayah are fled and the bungalow's shutters are once more bolted fast, while father and son in silent haste load their last few life possessions into leather suitcases with brass corners. By first light they are bumping out of camp in the back of an ancient military police truck with two grim Punjabi soldiers riding shotgun. Hunched at Mundy's side the unfrocked major of Pakistani infantry wears a civilian trilby hat and his old school tie, a regimental tie being no longer pukka for an outcast found guilty of raising his hand to a brother officer. What he did with his hand when he'd raised it was not defined, but if Mundy's experience was anything to go by, he didn't just slip it back in his pocket unfired. At the garrison gates, the dewan who until now welcomed Mundy with a beaming salute is granite-faced, and Ayah stands as white as all the ghosts she fears in her grief, anger and disgust. Ahmed, Omar and Ali howl and wave and scamper after the truck, but Rani is not among them. Dressed in her Brownie tunic, her black hair freshly plaited down her back, she bends double at the roadside, bare feet pressed together as she chokes over her folded arms.

The boat leaves Karachi in darkness and stays dark all the way to England because the Major has become ashamed of his face after seeing it printed in the vernacular press. To hide it from view he takes his whisky in his cabin, and food only when the boy presses it on him. The boy becomes his father's minder, keeping watch for him, making sorties, vetting the ship's daily newspaper in advance for toxic matter, sneaking him on deck for furtive walks before daylight, and in the evenings while the ship changes for dinner. Lying on his back on the other bunk, secondary-smoking his father's Burmas, counting the brass screw-heads in the teak ribs that arch across the bulkhead and listening now to his father's ramblings, now to the chug of the ship's engines, or puzzling his unfulfilled way through Rudyard Kipling, he dreams of Rani, and swimming home to what his father still calls India.

And the Major in his anguish has much to say on the subject of his adored, abandoned India, some of it to the young Mundy's ear surprising. With nothing more to be gained by pretending otherwise, the Major declares himself mortally disgusted by his country's connivance in the disastrous Partition. He heaps curses on the rogues and idiots in Westminster. Everything is their fault, right down to what they did to Ayah's family. It is as if the Major must unload his own guilt onto their shoulders. The blood baths and forced migrations, the collapse of law, order and a central administration are a consequence not of native intransigence but of British Colonial disrespect, manipulation, greed, corruption, cowardice. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, against whom the Major until now will hear no evil, becomes in the fume-soaked atmosphere of their tiny cabin the Jackass. 'If the Jackass had moved slower on Partition and faster to stop the massacres, he'd have saved a million lives. Two million.' Attlee and Sir Stafford Cripps fare no

better. They called themselves socialists, but they were class snobs like the rest of 'em.

'As for that Winston Churchill, if *he'd* been allowed to have his way, he'd have been worse than all the other buggers put together. Know why, boy? Know *why?*'

'No, sir.'

'He thought the Indians were a pack of fuzzy-wuzzies, that's why. Flog 'em, hang 'em and teach 'em the Bible. Don't you ever let me hear you say a good word for that man, d'you understand me, boy?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Give me a whisky.'

The Major's burst of heresy may have its intellectual limitations, but its effect on the impressionable Mundy at this crucial moment in his life is of lightning. In a single flash he sees Ayah standing with her hands clasped in horror, with all her murdered family lying at her feet. He remembers every filtered, unclear rumour of mass murder followed by mass revenge. So it was the British then – it wasn't just the Hindus – who were the villains! He relives the jibes that as an English Christian boy he was obliged to suffer at the hands of Ahmed, Omar and Ali. Too late, he thanks them for their moderation. He sees Rani and marvels that she sufficiently overcame her disgust to love him. Ejected from the country he loves, caught in the twilight of puberty, dragged night and day towards a guilty country he has not seen but must now call home, Mundy undergoes his first exposure to the radical reappraisal of Colonial history.

The England that awaits the young Mundy is a rain-swept cemetery for the living dead powered by a forty-watt bulb. A grey-stone mediaeval boarding school reeks of disinfectant and is ruled by boy quislings and adult despots. Number Two, The