

LISSA EVANS

SMALL BOMB

'FUNNY,
POIGNANT, PERFECT'
Daisy Goodwin

AT

'GENEROUS,
TOUCHING, ROMANTIC'
Clare Chambers

DIMPERLEY



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Praise for *Small Bomb at Dimperley*

‘A funny and insightful microcosm during World War II’

Irish Independent

‘A future classic’

Woman & Home

‘Brilliantly written, gloriously funny . . . a
heart-warming read about learning to live again’

Sun

‘Perfectly pitched, funny tale, sprinkled with peppery
observations and speckled with a poignant bitter-sweetness’

Daily Mail

‘Is there an author quite so entertaining as Evans when
it comes to blending satire, nostalgia and pluck?’

Mail on Sunday

‘A heartwarming, witty historical novel about
changing – sometimes reluctantly – with the
times in the aftermath of World War Two’

Press Association

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‘Funny, poignant, perfect period detail . . . Heaven!’

Daisy Goodwin

‘Lissa Evans is a great comic writer and her portrait of an aristocratic family trying to cling to its privileges in the unforgiving aftermath of WW2 is all the funnier for being generous, touching and romantic rather than mean’

Clare Chambers

‘I loved this. Brilliantly funny, moving and joyous. Also, there’s a perfect moment – when one character moves from liking someone to love’

Catherine Johnson

‘Deeply enjoyable, lovable and poignant. Her characters are created with such affection and care it makes you wish you could step into the story and become one of them’

Miranda France

‘Brilliantly funny, with a sharply observed cast of eccentric but utterly believable characters, it’s a masterclass in understated British fiction’

Frances Quinn

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Also by Lissa Evans

NOVELS

Spencer's List

Odd One Out

Their Finest Hour and a Half
(motion picture released as *Their Finest*)

Crooked Heart

Old Baggage

V for Victory

NOVELS FOR CHILDREN

Small Change for Stuart

Big Change for Stuart

Wed Wabbit

Wished

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SMALL BOMB AT DIMPERLEY

LISSA EVANS



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Small Bomb at Dimperley

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1

From Prosser's *Companion to Buckinghamshire* (published 1908):

Dimperley Manor may be described as lacking in architectural harmony, though its mongrel elements are nonetheless pleasing to the eye. At its heart is an early-Tudor fortified house of roseate brick with stone battlement-copings and half-timbered projecting bays.

The building originally sported six turrets, but a third of it was pulled down in the 1700s, the moat partially filled in, the courtyards roofed over and a neo-Palladian Dower Wing, originally somewhat severe in aspect (until the addition of a lavish High Victorian Gothic facade), added to the west side and linked to the Tudor building by a tunnel. The latter is purportedly the setting for N. J. Larby's famously gruesome ghost story, 'What was Down There', written after the author had visited the Manor in 1890.

A later and perhaps more architecturally successful addition was the Indian-style two-storey East Wing, built in sandstone in the 1820s, topped with a large copper Mughal dome and extending on one side into a long, curved Orangery, ending in an octagonal library. A hedge of topiary elephants enhances the theme.

Dimperley Manor's extensive gardens contain numerous mid-century follies, including a gated Hermit's Hollow and a sixty-foot free-standing tower decorated with a trio of carved wyvern. The house stands in a fold of the Chilterns south-east of Aylesbury and is home to the Vere-Thissett family, who were granted the land in 1404 after rendering an unspecified service to the King. The family holds the hereditary office of 'High Woodsman' with the requirement that the senior male must attend each coronation in order to present a beech log (no shorter than three ells), nine bundles of brushwood and a bushel of hazel-nuts to the new monarch. It was only at the Coronation of Queen Victoria that this tradition was left out of the ceremony. Henry Vere-Thissett – High Woodsman at the time – was created a Baronet by way of compensation. His grand-son Sir Grevell Vere-Thissett was an amateur taxidermist of some distinction.

Pollux usually did his business at the foot of the Wyvern Tower, although he sometimes preferred to wait until he reached the Obelisk, a basalt spike erected by the first Baronet in memory of his favourite wife. In the old days (and before Castor had succumbed to distemper), the dogs would have been followed at a distance by the odd-man with a shovel, but since there was no longer an odd-man – nor a boot-boy, nor a stable-lad, nor even an under-gardener – it was nowadays necessary for Irene, Lady Vere-Thissett (accompanied on the morning walk, as always, by her middle son, Cedric), to carry with her a small velvet drawstring bag; it contained sawdust, which she would sprinkle on the offending pile, clearly marking it

for later disposal. It was the kind of inconvenience that, until recently, she had chosen to view as part of the war effort, but since the war was now over, it had become yet another painful reminder of irrevocable change.

On this particular August morning, the early warmth promising a day of great heat, the sky the colour of the Celeste ceiling in the Orangery, Pollux deviated from his usual route and left a second deposit on the Great Lawn, and it was some moments before Irene could spot its location amidst the shockingly long grass, blistered with dandelion clocks.

‘Epple says the petrol mower’s broken a blade,’ her daughter-in-law had reported last week, ‘and he can’t use a scythe because of his lumbago. And he says it would be easier to mow if the washing-line posts came up, but he’d need the crowbar for that and it’s currently being used to prop up the roof of the Shell Grotto.’ Why there need be talk of a servants’ Trade Union when they had Barbara to act as their champion seemed a mystery.

The washing-line posts in question were of concrete and had been sunk into the greensward when Dimperley Manor had been requisitioned as a maternity home in 1940; for nearly five years, a quadruple row of sepia-stained napkins and sheets had been visible from every South-facing window, including those of the Dower Wing, to which the family had been confined for the duration. Also visible had been the monthly disembarkation of a slowly moving herd of swollen young women from a motor-coach that had brought them from Aylesbury Station. Traffic in the opposite direction had been more erratic, since not all the

women had returned to the slums of London but had instead been found billets with their new offspring in the Buckinghamshire countryside. And even though it was now several months since the last (but one) had left, evidence of their stay was still ubiquitous – every polished surface scarred by cigarette burns and the pale rings of enamel tea-mugs, blotches of dubious origin disfiguring the carpets, grooves worn into oak floorboards by cheap canteen furniture, the scents of beeswax and wood-smoke displaced by the lingering smell of disinfectant, the Morning Room mosaic of Phoebus 'Mid the Laurels – once washed daily with milk to keep its shine – now dulled, its surface pocked with tiny holes where an idle fingernail had prised out random pieces. Collapsible cots filled the dove-cote, while in the ice house lay piles of mattresses, the striped ticking already sooty with damp-mould. Irene was not a fanciful woman, and yet, re-entering the hall after the last uninvited guest had departed, she had felt as if the house had been kidnapped, maltreated and then returned, trembling, to the family's care.

'Ceddy!' she called, as Pollux squatted yet again, this time at the base of the statue of Minerva. 'Did you give him one of your Liquorice Allsorts yesterday? After I had expressly told you not to?'

There was no answer, and she turned to see that her son had paused beside the moat.

'No, come away from there.' She could never bear to see him so close to those horrid green waters.

He pointed at something, and she retraced her steps to find him gazing at a naked, headless doll that was floating a

yard or two from the bank. 'Oh, that must belong to the Baxter child. No, leave it alone,' she added, as Caddy knelt down. 'Eppie can use a rake, and you shall come and watch. I said *no*,' she repeated, as he ran a palm back and forth across the surface of the water, as though assessing its finish. 'Come along.' He tutted loudly and gave a couple of heavy sighs but stood up again, although not before she'd noticed, for the first time, a few fine pale threads visible along the dark hair of his parting. It was unsurprising, perhaps; her husband had begun to go grey at much the same age, and Caddy was the image of him. 'Good boy,' she said, as they turned away from the moat.

Pollux, reliant on smell rather than sight these days, nosed along his usual route, past the entrance to the maze, the yew hedges once clipped every fortnight but now heavily whiskered, and towards the high walls of the kitchen garden. The mention of the Baxter child led Irene to glance automatically in the direction of the library at the end of the Orangery, where Alaric, her late husband's brother, would already be at work on his book (a history of the Vere-Thissetts), aided, no doubt, by the houri from Hackney, tippety-tapping on her typewriter. 'I'm sure Barbara could learn to assist you when Mrs Baxter goes back to London,' Irene had said, only last week, and Alaric had reared back, like an ageing hunter faced with a brick wall. 'No, no, no, that wouldn't be the same at all.'

'Wouldn't it? Barbara can type, I believe, after a fashion.'

'It's far more than simply typing, far more – there's the filing and the . . . the . . . the . . .'

There had been a pause; no further task beyond 'sitting opposite me in an unnecessarily tight blouse' seemed to have sprung to Alaric's mind. 'Besides,' he'd continued, eventually, 'Mrs Baxter's husband's still in Malta so there's absolutely no urgency about her return. No urgency. She's assured me of that.'

'Has she?'

'It may be months, and in any case, Barbara will have her girls back, won't she? She'll be fearfully busy. No, I need to forge onward. I've very nearly reached the nineteenth century.'

At the spinney on the far side of the kitchen garden, after Pollux had stopped for a fourth time and Irene had tipped out the last of the sawdust, she turned in the direction of the house. 'No, we no longer go there, do we?' she said to Ceddy, who was lingering beside the stile that led out of the trees and into Brook Field, which had once been part of the Dimperley estate. It had been a favourite route, the path skirting a hazel coppice and then winding gradually upward through sheep-cropped pastures to the brow of Farrow Hill, the view from which was celebrated in a local rhyme ('If up on Farrow Hill you be, two counties and eight spires you'll see'), although these days the first object to catch the eye was the hideous biscuit factory just outside Aylesbury, constructed of brick the colour of horse-liver and counting amongst its employees most of the village girls whose mothers and aunts had at one time been happy to fill the servants' hall at Dimperley.

Iniquitous death duties had forced the sale of Brook Field in 1935, and to walk across it now was to risk an

encounter with the new owner, a farmer named Jeffries who habitually spoke to Irene with a familiarity which suggested they'd first met when queueing at a wheelk stall and who had actually clapped her on the back last year when she'd been presenting the trophy for best heifer at the county fair.

It was all part of a gradual descent into careless informality that had begun well before the war – she could almost have drawn a graph charting the slow decrease in the depth of curtsies she'd received over the years, the most recent of which (accompanying the presentation of a posy at the VE Day Supper) had been a mere twitch of the knees, more suggestive of a small child urgently in need of a lavatory than a mark of respect. And now, of course, since the appalling, inexplicable events of July, when the populace had flung aside Mr Churchill and filled Parliament with baying reds, there was no knowing how far or how quickly the descent would continue, how soon before the tumbrils came clattering through the lodge gates, five centuries of noble service to the common weal swept aside by savagery and persecution.

'Good morning, Lady Vere-Thissett, good morning, Mr Cedric,' said Epple, limping from behind the Chinese Pavilion with a wheelbarrow containing a spade and a pile of earth-encrusted beetroot. 'Been meaning to ask you something, Lady Vere-Thissett, if I might,' he added, lowering the barrow and removing the pipe from his mouth.

Irene inclined her head.

'My nephew just come out of the navy and he's looking around for a bit of work and he says he could help me out a

few hours a week, temporary, and I wanted to ask if he could start on Monday, only he needs to know what he might get paid given that the grocer says he could start there too, only he likes an outdoor life, does Fred, he's not a gardener but he's handy, so that's what I wanted to ask you, Lady Vere-Thissett, or maybe . . .' His mouth carried on moving but no further sound emerged – had he finished, wondered Irene? – and then something wet and brown began slowly to emerge from between his lips, like a stocking from a mangle, and he lifted a hand and extracted a long shred of tobacco and looked at it with apparent pride before continuing, ' . . . or maybe I should speak to Lady Barbara about it?'

'Yes, I think that would be more appropriate,' said Irene. Caddy was tutting again, impatiently this time, and she called the dog and moved away at a smart pace before Epple could request anything else – her assistance in tarring the potting-shed roof, perhaps, or helping to lift the seed-potatoes – and she found herself remembering McHugh, the unsmiling Scottish steward who had run the estate in her husband's time. On the first of every month, he had been ushered into the Baronet's study, where he had silently placed his black-bound ledger on the desk, open to the relevant weeks. The Baronet had glanced through, making an occasional comment, and then McHugh had bowed and taken the ledger away for another month. Wages, rents, purchases, produce, maintenance, transport – all had been under his aegis; the business of the estate had been conducted with invisible efficiency, the engine purring onward; as owner, one had not been

expected to take an active part in its maintenance. Did the passengers of a Rolls-Royce need to know how to change the . . . whatever it was that apparently had to be changed on a regular basis? No, they did not.

McHugh had died, suddenly and inconveniently (one might almost say inconsiderately), actually during the Baronet's funeral, which meant that her eldest son, Felix, inheriting his father's title, had had to face a multitude of hideous financial decisions entirely unguided, although his natural abilities had, as ever, carried him through.

'Pollux, come here,' she called, as the Jack Russell veered off towards the Shell Grotto. 'Come here, *now*.' Reluctantly, Pollux veered back again.

Ahead of her, Caddy had already disappeared into the stable block, and Irene followed him through the arch, across the carriage-yard and into the cool interior, dimly lit at intervals by high, semi-circular windows, their glass uncleaned for at least half a decade and now barely transparent. There were sixteen stalls, fifteen of them either empty or packed with dismantled bedsteads awaiting collection. A thin film of straw dust coated the dark metal.

At the loose-box at the far end, Caddy was standing with Smokey, her neck resting on his shoulder, lips pushing at his closed fist.

'Horse,' he said, opening his fingers to reveal a damp ball of yesterday's braised cabbage.

'Are you in there?' Her daughter-in-law's voice, projecting from the entrance, was unnecessarily loud. 'Lady Vere-Thissett?'

'Yes, I'm here. What is it?'

‘We’ve had a . . .’ Her footsteps hurried towards them.
‘Oh, hello, Caddy.’

‘It’s a horse.’

‘We’ve had a telegram.’ Barbara’s voice was high and uncontrolled, the slip of paper she was holding very bright in the gloom.

‘You opened it?’

‘Well, it was addressed to me.’

‘But did it say—’

‘Oh, please don’t start this again. Please, not now. It *didn’t* say “Irene, Lady Vere-Thissett” or “Dowager Lady Vere-Thissett”, it said “Lady Vere-Thissett”, which means that, as Lady Vere-Thissett, I was perfectly entitled to open it, and in any case . . .’ Her voice disappeared momentarily; Irene could hear her trying to swallow, her throat clicking. Behind them, Smokey shifted, hooves scraping the flagstones.

‘It’s a horse,’ said Caddy.

‘. . . in any case, what it says—’ Barbara held out the telegram, the paper wavering in her grip ‘—it’s . . . well, it’s . . . oh God, I’ll have to tell the girls as soon as they arrive, I’ll *have* to . . . I’m afraid it’s . . . well, it’s what we’ve known all along, haven’t we? . . . It says that Felix is . . . that he . . .’

Irene took the paper and held it at arm’s length. The print was small, and since she never wore her spectacles outside the house she could read only odd words. But amongst them were ‘CONFIRMED’ and ‘DEATH’.

Beside her, Barbara gave a little gasp. ‘So I suppose that we’re *both* Dowager Lady Vere-Thissett now, aren’t we?’ and then, incredibly, she giggled – a watery bleat that made Irene, and not for the first time, want to slap her.

Irene turned, with an effort, to her second son; he was resting one cheek on Smokey's flank, his lovely profile so much like that of Felix. This should, of course, have been the moment when Caddy was looped by the silken cord of inheritance that would bind him to his grandfather, the fourth Baronet, his father, the fifth, his older brother, the sixth . . .

'Horse,' said Caddy, who had stopped using most other words after an attack of brain fever when he was ten and who could, therefore, never be the seventh Baronet.

'I shall have to place a telephone call,' said Irene and, leaving Felix's widow behind, she walked briskly to the house. There was work ahead; the silken cord would need to be fashioned into a lasso.

2

Just before Dusty Miller hit Valentine with a sledgehammer, they'd all been talking about their demob plans. The exact date of discharge was based on age and on how long one had been in the services, so Offord, who was over thirty and who'd joined right at the start, was off home in a couple of weeks, whereas Valentine, at twenty-three, was still months away.

He had kept his own wishes small but fervent ('*Hot* water to shave with, no more tin cups, and I'd like to spend at least six hours a day slouching and keeping my hands in my pockets'); Offord had launched into a bitter diatribe about his ex-sweetheart, who'd married a Canadian called Jean-Yves ('It's a bloody girl's name, for a start, in fact it's *two* bloody girls' names'); Crockett had stunned them by saying that he was thinking of signing up for another five years; and then Miller had taken the floor and, though he was usually the sharpest talker of the lot, with a gift for officer impressions that had kept him firmly in the ranks, Valentine had gradually stopped listening because Miller had clearly been making his plans for some time and the account had begun with him stepping off the train at Northampton and continued minute by minute from there on ('Two pints of mild at The Engineer, might make it three depending if

Ruby's at the bar, then I'll call for my cousin Frank and we'll have a whisky at The Admiral Rodney, maybe a double, and then another pint of mild at The Bald Stag . . .').

Beyond the spinney beside which they were supposed to be re-erecting a fence, a tractor was intermittently visible as it chugged up and down a field of red clay. A cloud of lapwings was banking and wheeling behind the plough; Valentine had heard them mewing when he'd woken up that morning, the plaintive sound audible between the occasional gaps in the snoring. That was another one for the list of wishes, he thought: a bed in a room on his own.

Miller was still talking, and his audience had relaxed into various idle postures, Offord cleaning under his fingernails with a matchstick and Crockett tipping his head back as though resting on an invisible pillow; as Corporal, Valentine was nominally in charge of the work party, but since they'd been given the entire morning to complete the task, it was difficult to muster any sense of urgency.

The fence had been knocked over the previous day by a group of Hereford bullocks who'd wandered into the woods and then ambled across the trampled wire and up the field towards the camp. When they'd peered between the flaps of the mess tent, nostrils dilating wetly at the smell of burned potatoes, Private Liston (always a card) had let out a girlish scream and someone had shouted, 'Nazis!', and the subsequent round-up had been the most entertaining thing that had happened in Camp 14J for weeks, with Sergeant Fisk organizing twin flanks into a pincer move, his eyes narrowed like those of John Wayne in *Santa Fe Stampede*.

They'd been shown that film by a mobile unit the month

before, and it had been preceded by a series of informational shorts about their imminent return to civvy street. *'Of course, all soldiers complain about army grub, but one complaint you can never make is that there isn't enough. So when you get back home, try and remember that the piece of cheese on the table may have to serve the family for a week, and that an egg is a treat, not to be expected daily.'* There'd been footage of bombed streets: *'Danger and suffering haven't been reserved for those serving overseas'*; and tired-looking women in headscarves: *'She's been at her factory job since six a.m., and then had to queue for the family rations on the way home. So if she isn't looking her best when you arrive on the doorstep, I'm sure you'll understand.'* The atmosphere afterwards had been rather glum.

'I suppose we'd better get on with it,' said Valentine, positioning one of the posts.

'No hurry, is there?' asked Miller, who'd just reached the snug at The Travellers' Rest. 'If we finish this, they'll only think up something else. They should send us all home tomorrow if they don't have nothing for us to do.'

'Or back to Germany,' said Offord. 'My cousin's stationed in Hanover and he says there's more beer than you can drink. It's piss, he says, but there's no end of it, and the girls are smashing.' He curled one hand around an imaginary pint glass and reached for a female buttock with the other.

'Sarge is coming,' said Offord. They all turned to see Fisk, still fifty yards away but walking purposefully in their direction, and suddenly they were all at work again, Valentine holding the post, Miller the hammer, the others scampering over to the next section of fence.

‘... so after that I’ll go to my mum’s,’ said Miller, taking advantage of the sudden silence, ‘and when I get to her house, I’ll do my special knock so she knows it’s me, it goes dup dup dup, *whack* – I use the flat of me hand for the last one. Dupdupdup’ – he swung the sledgehammer – ‘*WHACK.*’

‘Thissett!’

Valentine straightened up. ‘Yes, Sergeant?’

‘The CO wants you.’

‘Me?’

‘No, someone else. I’ve come all this way for my health.’

‘But Sarge, he doesn’t know me from Adam.’ Lieutenant Colonel Ripon was the pale, unpopular, non-speaking type of CO, whose gaze glided over the khaki ranks like someone checking the wax finish on a Bentley.

‘Is Toff in trouble?’ asked Crockett.

Fisk ignored him, continuing to eye Valentine with an odd, unfamiliar expression that seemed partway between disbelief and derision.

‘The CO asked for you by name,’ he said. ‘AND YOU OTHERS GET ON WITH YOUR WORK,’ he continued, effortlessly raising his voice. ‘He asked for you by your *full* name, Valentine *Vere*-Thissett. *And* your full title,’ he added, pointedly, just as Miller swung the sledgehammer again, and Valentine, who’d been moving forward, swayed back as if slapped, his hand shifting its grip on the post.

They ended up needing two stretchers, after Miller, who’d been through Dunkirk, Monte Cassino and Normandy, fainted dead away when he realized that the tip of Valentine’s index finger had lodged inside the neck of his shirt.

3

From *Woodsmen to the King: The Vere-Thissetts of Buckinghamshire*, by Alaric Vere-Thissett:

No record remains of the circumstances by which William Thissett of Dimperley received his honorary title, but perhaps the reader may forgive a little phantasy, as we turn the eye of imagination toward a verdant copse 'twixt the parishes of Whatton and Addenham, on a May evening in 1404.

Through the sylvan twilight, plangent with birdsong, passes a line of finely caparisoned horses, one of which seats his noble highness, King Henry IV, as tall as his father, John of Gaunt, but narrow of shoulder, his disfiguring skin condition barely visible in the leafy shadows. Behind the riders, in a covered litter carried between two milk-white steeds, lies the Queen, dark-eyed Joanna of Navarre, who is with child. But hark! The first horseman of the procession calls back, alarmed; the way is blocked by a fallen tree; the litter cannot pass, and night is swiftly a-falling. It is still half a league to their destination, the Manor of Nottley Saye, and who knows what footpads and cut-throats may be lurking in the gathering darkness?

It is the King whose keen ear first discerns a steady step approaching through the brushwood and it is he who rises in

the stirrups and espies a sturdy fellow with an axe, and summons him hither, to deal with the fallen tree.

The fellow makes no great hurry, and is admonished by one of the King's men. 'Dost thou not recognize thy King?'

'Every man is a king in his own wood,' says the fellow, and then sets about the fallen log with a will, soon clearing the path.

'Shall I reward yon sturdy yeoman?' asks one of the King's companions, loosing his purse, but the King shakes his head.

'What is thy name?' he asks the yeoman.

'William Thyssett, sire.'

'And this is thy wood?'

'Yes, sire. The land all around is Royal land, but this wood, though no more than two chains across, is mine own.'

At that, the King smiles. 'From henceforth, William Thyssett, it shall be two leagues across, and you shall be my Royal Woodsman.'

The string of horses departs, the milk-white stallions disappear into the mists of the past, my little tale is done. Mere fancy, perhaps, and yet something of the sort must have happened, for, beside his royal duties, William Thyssett appears quite suddenly in the records as a land-owner of note, and the construction of what was to become Dimperley Manor began in 1405. It is true, also, that the unfailing vigour of the Vere-Thissett line, which has continued unbroken from father to son since William's time (the interesting story of how 'Thyssett' became 'Vere-Thissett', I shall save for a later chapter), seems, to this distant scion, far more likely to have sprung from healthy peasant stock than from the feeble stem of aristocracy; from the same origin, surely, came our motto: 'Probitate et

labore' ('By honesty and toil'). Planted deeply in the rich soil of Buckinghamshire, we continue to flourish . . .

After ten days, Valentine's hand still hurt like hell. Waiting at Marylebone for the delayed 11.23 to Aylesbury, he found himself walking up and down the platform, trying to outpace the pain; the missing ends of the three injured fingers felt as if each were being gripped by a pair of red-hot iron tongs, an image which he realized was straight from the Judgement painting in Addenham Church. As a child, he had spent at least an hour every Sunday morning staring at the most interesting section, which featured sinners being dragged into the abyss by a moustachioed devil who looked exactly like the man who came to Dimperley Manor four times a year to re-hang the pendulums.

It was far more painful than the shrapnel injury he'd received in Sicily, which had left him with a large scar on his right thigh in the shape of a letter V. 'What you need to do,' Miller had advised, 'is find some doll called Verna and then drop your trousers and say, "Baby, I've been looking for you my whole life!"'

The thigh wound had resulted in surgery and three weeks of pampering on board a convalescent ship, whereas on this occasion the MO had stared gloomily at the damaged hand for a few seconds before shaking his head.

'Well, that's a heck of a mess, Corporal.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Not very much we can do about it. Are you right-handed?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘Pity. And what’s your job in civilian life?’

Valentine was spared an answer by the simultaneous application of an iodine swab to the affected fingers, and by the time he’d recovered his voice, the doctor had been called away and an orderly was wrapping his hand with layer upon layer of gauze and cotton wool.

The CO had come to see him in sick bay, and Valentine had felt an absolute fool, trying to salute with a bandage the size of a coconut on his hand. ‘No, no, please don’t stand up,’ the CO had said, and the other three men in the room, members of L platoon felled by an under-cooked chicken, had watched boggle-eyed as Ripon had drawn up a chair and sat beside the bed.

‘I’ve spoken on the telephone to your’ – the CO had paused, as if the word ‘mother’ might be somehow indelicate – ‘to Lady Vere-Thissett about the accident. She was very sympathetic.’

This was laughably unlikely, but Valentine had managed a nod.

‘They’re looking after you in here?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Jolly good, jolly good.’ The CO continued nodding for a while, his eyes fixed on Valentine, and it was disconcerting to be pinned by the same flat blue gaze that had so often swept past him. ‘I was awfully sorry to hear about your brother. I was lucky enough to meet him once, you know – we were at the same shooting party in Romania and he offered me a ride home.’

‘In the Vega Gull, sir?’

‘That’s the fellow. A touch bumpy; we had to land three

or four times for him to make repairs, once bang in the middle of a village square – nearly hit a horse and cart. Caused quite a sensation with the locals!’ The last few words were splintered by a chuckle. ‘So he was in Singapore?’

‘Yes, sir. With the RAF. He’s been missing, believed killed, since ’42.’

‘Oh, I see. So perhaps not quite the shock that it might have been.’

‘No, sir.’ Though, speaking for himself, he felt as if Miller’s sledgehammer had walloped his head as well as his hand because, all along, he’d been absolutely certain that Felix was still alive and in a prison camp and would come roaring home again at the end of the war, another scrape survived. And now that he was definitely dead, the ramifications were so appalling that Valentine kept trying to shove the thought aside, and it kept returning unbidden, like a loyal but filthy dog.

The CO was leaning towards him in order to speak more quietly; Valentine caught a whiff of good coffee. ‘Obviously, er . . . Corporal, you understand that I had no idea that you were in the regiment. No-one informed me as to who you were, otherwise I might have been able to . . . to . . .’

‘That’s all right, sir,’ said Valentine. ‘No-one knew, so they couldn’t have.’

Ripon appeared to chew on this statement for a moment or two. ‘So you’ve been with the Gloucesters since . . .’

‘Nineteen forty, sir.’

‘You joined straight from school?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Which school?’

‘You probably won’t have heard of it, sir. Umberton.’

‘No. No, it doesn’t . . . er . . . Does it have an OTC?’

‘No, sir.’

‘I see.’ Ripon nodded a few more times and Valentine felt a slight twinge of pleasure at the man’s obvious bafflement; he looked like a bird-spotter faced with an unidentifiable Atlantic blow-in. There were, of course, other public-school boys in the ranks: over the years, Valentine had come across numerous soldiers nicknamed ‘Toff’, like himself, or ‘Duke’ or ‘Swank’ or ‘Lardy’ (short for ‘La-di-dah’), but most were sooner or later moved onward and upward via an officer training course, or – if emphatically lacking in brains or physical prowess – shifted sideways into staff jobs, where their accent might oil the jerky wheels of inter-service communication.

Ripon took a final stab. ‘Your family’s from Buckinghamshire, isn’t it? You didn’t think of joining the Yeomanry?’

‘No, sir,’ said Valentine.

There was a further pause, and then the CO rose to his feet. ‘Well, jolly good luck, Vere-Thissett. I’m sure you’ll be more than capable of assuming your brother’s . . . er . . .’

Mantle? wondered Valentine. *Debts? Wife?*

‘. . . role,’ said Ripon, making it sound as if Valentine were lined up to play the murderer in the Aylesbury Players production of *Death in the Saddle*.

After he’d left, there was an awkward silence in the room. ‘Friends in high places,’ muttered one of the others.

‘I honestly wouldn’t call him a friend,’ said Valentine.

‘You say that, but I can’t remember the last time a Lieutenant Colonel told me my brother gave him a lift home from Romania. Mind you, he’d have had to climb in the back of the cart with the milk bottles.’

The next day, Valentine had received an envelope containing his early discharge papers, and the week after he’d been driven to the dispersal centre in Winchester, where he’d been issued with a sheaf of coupons, a railway pass, an identity card, a ration book, a trilby, a raincoat and a stiff brown serge suit sporting a wide purple stripe which made him look as if the sling he was still wearing was the result of a razor fight between rival spivs. Pacing along the station platform under the blacked-out glass roof, holding a cardboard box containing his effects, he might as well have been wearing a luminous sandwich board that read ‘DEMOBBED’.

He wondered what Miller would have said about the suit; he’d had a note from him in sick bay, helpfully written in the large capitals that Valentine found easiest to read: *THEY’VE GOT ME ON REPORT SO CAN’T COME TO SEE YOU. SORRY ABOUT YOUR FINGERS, IT’S LUCKY YOU DON’T HAVE TO ASSEMBLE ANY MORE BREN GUNS, OLD COCK, OR SHOULD THAT BE SIR OLD COCK? KEPT THAT QUIET, DIDN’T YOU, YOU SLY BASTARD?!?! IF YOU’RE EVER IN NORTHAMPTON ASK FOR ME IN THE JOLLY SMOKERS OR THE ENGINEER. OR THE EAGLE. OR THE FREEMASON’S ARMS OR . . . YOU GET THE PICTURE. MUD IN YOUR EYE, DUSTY.*

‘Once they’ve healed, you’ll have to find a few new ways of doing things,’ the MO had said when he examined

Valentine's injuries before signing him off. 'You'll find writing tricky. You might try the rubber thimbles that cashiers use for counting paper money – they'll protect the stumps and give you a better grip. Do you shoot?'

'Sometimes. Rabbits, mainly.'

'Might be a while before you bag a bunny again.'

The Bren gun reference in the note had been chastening; until last week he could have assembled one in his sleep and had once actually equalled the battalion speed record. He wondered which other hard-won army skills would now be beyond him: spud bashing, obviously; shuffling and dealing cards; dominoes; blancoing . . . And then, for the first time, he thought of the notebook he always carried with him, the pages filled with hurried sketches, and he flexed his fingers involuntarily. The twang of pain made him stumble, and a naval Lieutenant, standing on the platform with a folded *Times*, glanced up, and then peered at him more closely.

'Thickie! Thickie Thissett! It is you, isn't it?'

The chap was his own age and had a circular mole on his right cheek and a chin so square that it looked like the bottom half of a cigar-box.

'Byng Minor,' said Valentine, his voice dead. He glanced along the track, hoping to see the train.

'Byng Solo now, I'm afraid. Byng Major bought it at Arnhem.'

'Sorry. I lost my older brother too.'

'Didn't know you had one.'

'He was at Marlborough. And then the RAF.'

'Bloody glamour boys,' said Byng Minor, automatically.