

CROSS-PURPOSES

OR

THE ADULTERY CLUB

OR

ROLLING AT THE BALL

By

John O'Loughlin

Of Centretruths Digital Media



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CHAPTER ONE

With a look of pained scepticism on an otherwise quite straightforward face, Stephen Jacobs, friend and only guest that evening of fellow-writer James Kelly, said: "I can hardly agree with you that Plato was a realist. After all, he considered the Ideas to be of primary importance and the objects, insofar as they had any reality at all, to be merely secondary. Unlike his great pupil Aristotle, he didn't put the Ideas *in* the objects but kept them separate, thereby emphasizing their superior nature. So how can a man who considers the Ideas superior to the diverse components of the material world, which are deemed to be merely imperfect copies of the originals, possibly be a realist?" He leant back in Kelly's armchair with a less sceptical expression on his clean-shaven face and fumbled in the left pocket of his dark-green jacket for some cigarettes. Without giving Kelly a chance to respond, he proceeded to ram home his point with the aid of a cigarette, the idea of which, he ventured to suggest, would have been more real to Plato than the damn cigarette itself. "Fortunately, cigarettes hadn't been invented in the fourth-century B.C.," he went on, "so no-one would have been granted an opportunity to question the superiority of the Idea on their account."

"Yes, but the point is that, for Plato, the Idea was external to himself, it was something which had a kind of life of its own," countered Kelly with an air bordering on supercilious defiance. "The Idea wasn't something that he extrapolated from reality but, rather, something he believed he had discovered in the external world, where it had a prior existence to him."

"Really?" exclaimed Jacobs as he lit the cigarette in his hand with the aid of a glossy lighter and returned the no-less glossy packet of *Gauloise Longues* to its customary pocket. "That's almost too funny for words, old chap. I mean, what's an idea if not something related to one's mind, to the faculty of thought? Can you imagine the idea of a wheel floating about in space with more reality to it than the wheel of a car or a motorbike?" He deeply inhaled some tobacco from his cigarette, as though intending to throw up a dense smoke-screen between himself and the idea of a wheel hovering somewhere in the immediate vicinity. "But even if the Idea was external to himself," he continued, having exhaled the incipient smoke-screen in the general direction of Kelly's armchair, "even if that was the case, he'd still be an idealist for attributing more reality to the Idea than to

the material object derived from it; for attributing more reality to the idea of a wheel than to the wheel itself!"

"Perhaps he would," conceded Kelly, who was almost choking in the detestable smoke his guest had unconcernedly bombarded him with, "but he'd still be less of an Idealist than, say, William of Occam, the fifteenth-century philosopher who placed the Ideas firmly in the mind instead of in the external world, like Plato, or in the mind of God, like Plotinus. You might call him an idealistic realist, if you like."

"Or a realistic idealist," suggested Jacobs, before flicking some ash which had fallen on his lap onto the carpet and then proceeding to rub it in with the heel of his right shoe without the slightest show of embarrassment or remorse. "But he was quite mistaken to consider the Ideas external to himself, and, in my opinion, equally mistaken to consider them superior in reality to the objects around him. If Aristotle wasn't entirely right to put the Ideas into the objects themselves, he at least showed more common sense than his early mentor where the claims of Idealism were concerned. His was a more realistic touch."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," murmured Kelly, who looked as though he had just been defeated by Alexander the Great and was about to be executed for political treachery.

For a while, however, silence supervened between them, since neither man knew what to say next, nor had they any real desire to continue the conversation along the same paradoxically intellectual lines, each of them at cross-purposes with the other. Although they both professed to being philosophers in preference to anything else, they were obliged to admit to themselves that there were times when the subject of philosophy was virtually anathema to them, times when they would rather have discussed the weather or the results of the latest football matches, tired as they were of dragging their professional lives into their social relationship. It was as though they had to keep reminding themselves of the professional basis of their friendship from fear that it would automatically crumble for want of solid support, since it was philosophy which had brought them together in the first place.

Now that they had come to a pause in their philosophical discussion, however, they suddenly found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to stare the basis of this friendship in the face, which didn't seem as solid a thing as when they had first entered upon it, some four years ago. But it was the thirty-nine-year-old Stephen Jacobs who, with his talkative nature, re-opened the conversation on a note of sympathy for Plato for having had enough sense to think an actual rose superior to a painting of

one, even if he hadn't had enough sense to think an actual rose superior to the idea of one. "You might be able to sell a painting of a rose at ten-thousand times the price of an actual rose," he continued, "but even so, the actual rose cannot be improved upon - any more than you can improve upon the beauty of an actual woman with the aid of a canvas, a brush, and a set of oils. It's nature which has the better of art, irrespective of what certain artists might think. Consequently it seems to me that a realistic perspective relating to the value of art will always be found somewhere in between Plato and, say, Wilde, rather than at either extreme. Then one wouldn't have to consider a painting inferior to the Idea it endeavours to portray through the object or, conversely, superior to the object it endeavours to improve upon through the Idea." He flicked some ash from his half-consumed cigarette into the small ashtray which stood conveniently close to-hand and bowed his head, as though to aid himself think about something he desired to keep private.

"Yes, I quite agree with your realistic perspective," admitted Kelly smilingly. "If one could always strike a balance somewhere in-between idealism and realism, one would certainly save oneself a lot of unnecessary deceptions! It seems that we're only just beginning to shake off the idealism of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, etc., by accepting the external world as something which actually exists as it is in itself rather than wholly dependent upon the shape our minds choose to give it. We appear to have been labouring for too long under the deception that our minds are really quite different from the world around us. Obviously, there has to be a subject/object relationship, but not to the extent of making the object entirely dependent upon the nature of the subject. Even Plato wouldn't have approved of that, insofar as he found the object to be a pale copy of the Idea, which was external to the subject."

"Indeed, eighteenth-century idealism is quite a different proposition from Platonic Idealism," rejoined Jacobs, raising his head again. "One can hardly expect the minds of Locke, Hume, Berkeley, etc., to be content with re-stating everything Plato thought on the subject, even though there are some similarities here and there. For instance, instead of the Idea we have the *thing-in-itself*, which was of course unknowable but more real, for all that, than the material object associated with it. In both cases, there is something beyond appearances which makes the apparent a relatively inferior phenomenon. The only notable difference is that, in the case of eighteenth-century philosophy, we impose a limitation upon the object through being unable to grasp the *thing-in-itself*, whereas the limitation imposed upon the object in Plato's case is solely a consequence of the

object being inferior to the Idea, which, as you correctly said, he considered external to the subject. It transpires, however, that the concept of *thing-in-itself* is just as shaky, these days, as that of the Idea, for which we have no real sympathy." Stubbing-out his cigarette in the ashtray, Stephen got up from his armchair and walked over to James Kelly's bookcase, which stood against the longest wall in the room and held merely a few hundred books. He wanted to look up a passage in Hume relating to the unknowability of the *thing-in-itself* but was distracted from this objective by the sight of a book, resting on top of the small bookcase, which his friend had evidently been reading recently. "So you're into Arthur Koestler again," he observed, picking it up and scrutinizing the author's small photograph on the back cover. "*Janus - A Summing Up*, eh?"

"As a matter of fact I've been re-reading it," replied Kelly enthusiastically. For Koestler was pretty much his favourite philosopher these days, and the book in question unquestionably one of the master's finest. "As you may know, Koestler developed a theory of 'holons' - a name he assigns to phenomena which are simultaneously both wholes and parts, the phenomena in question being complete in themselves, and thus wholes, but also dependent upon larger wholes, and thus parts. A phenomenon, be it a material object, an organization of material objects, an event, a psychological process, or whatever, can be an autonomous whole one moment and a dependent part the next, depending on the context. There's no clear-cut division between wholes and parts, particles and wavicles, because there's nothing which is entirely one or the other. For example, we are autonomous wholes to the extent that we are individual human beings, but we're also dependent parts in a larger whole, which is human society. If we try to live merely as autonomous wholes, divorced from the society to which we belong, we'll soon find ourselves starving to death. And if we try to live merely as dependent parts, as tools of society, we'll probably find ourselves starving to death just as quickly, since we won't be in a position to feed ourselves - *not*, as in the first case, because we haven't earned the money, but simply because we'll have no desire or time to look after ourselves once we *have* earned it."

"Yes, that sounds reasonably plausible," sighed Jacobs while flicking through the book in his hands. "There's a parallel of sorts with Whitehead here, the diverse kinds of phenomena you mention having intimate connections with Whitehead's 'actual entities', which cover more than the merely material aspects of life. He thought the world an 'extensive continuum' of events having 'extensive connections', or overlappings. That doesn't appear too far removed from what you've just explained to me

regarding the 'holon', if I've understood you correctly."

"Unfortunately I must confess to a rather scant knowledge of Whitehead's philosophy," said Kelly, blushing slightly, "but I can tell you that Koestler's philosophy is closely related to the philosophies of Parmenides and, perhaps to an even greater extent, of Hegel."

"Oh, in what way?" asked Jacobs who, though no stranger to Koestler himself, had next-to-no-knowledge of either philosopher.

"Well, he contends that the combination of parts into a whole is greater than and different from the sum of the parts which form that whole, thereby concurring with both Parmenides and Hegel to the detriment of any behaviourist/reductionist credo," Kelly promptly replied. "And he goes on, like Hegel, to develop a tripartite system of logic as opposed to a purely dualistic one, which leads him to emphasize the 'extensive continuum', if you like, of humour, science, and art. He defines humour as the 'ha-ha!' reaction, science as the 'aha!' reaction, and art as the 'ah ...' reaction, returning to a dualistic framework to ascribe self-assertive tendencies to humour and, at the other end of the spectrum, self-transcending tendencies to art. Science is defined as signifying a subtle combination of the two tendencies, a kind of hybrid coming in-between the two thoroughbreds, as it were. Now anything which has a self-assertive tendency can be identified, in returning to the 'holonic' viewpoint, with the independent whole, whereas anything with a self-transcending tendency should be identified with the dependent part. So you can see that humour pertains to individualism, whereas the keynote to art is to be found, as earlier affirmed by Schopenhauer, in self-transcendence, in acknowledgement of something greater than oneself. But if one is to take this triad of humour, science, and art seriously, then it should be fairly obvious that, contrary to popular belief, science and art are not opposites but next-door neighbours, so to speak, in a tripartite spectrum beginning with humour, which is therefore the logical antithesis to art. It seems that we've also deceived ourselves for far too long on this matter, as on so many other matters, for that matter."

"So it would appear," mumbled Jacobs, whose face was partly hidden from Kelly by the book he was busily scanning, as though in search of some hidden revelation. "And so Koestler has effectively demonstrated that there's a place for both dualistic *and* tripartite reasoning in the world; that the one needn't necessarily exclude the other?"

"Precisely," confirmed Kelly with some considerable satisfaction. "It's simply a question of knowing when to employ one or the other modes of reasoning, not of castigating that which you foolishly assume to be mistaken. In this respect, Koestler has achieved a greater synthesis than

most of his philosophical forebears, who either emphasized triads at the expense of duads, or duads at the expense of triads. Although one could also argue that Koestler has put tripartite thinking on the philosophical map at the expense of dualism, which is no mean achievement, and one, I feel sure, that can only gain greater recognition and credibility as time goes by."

Stephen Jacobs sceptically nodded his head before saying: "Wasn't Huxley thinking along tripartite lines in *The Human Situation*?" He cast his gaze in the general direction of the Aldous Huxley section of Kelly's meagre bookcase, then went on: "I seem to recall your telling me something about that book a few months ago, though I still haven't got round to reading it yet, despite the fact that it was published some time ago. "Perhaps you'll let me borrow it sometime, James?"

"By all means, take it with you this evening. It's something you ought to have borrowed when I first mentioned it to you, though you seem to have a marked talent for procrastination where books of that sort are concerned."

"It's an old family weakness, I'm afraid," confessed Jacobs, smiling. "Still, I do get round to reading them eventually, even if I'm not as keen as you on some of the more recent philosophical publications. I suppose I'm more old-fashioned really, and tend, in consequence, to react against them."

"A statement which seems to imply that I'm also old-fashioned, only less so than yourself," deduced Kelly, smiling in turn.

"Well, there may well be a grain of truth in that implication," conceded Jacobs thoughtfully, "though I didn't exactly intend to convey such an impression. I suppose a course in Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy would add more precision to my utterances."

"Provided you could understand his linguistics!" joked Kelly.

There ensued another silence while Jacobs continued to flick through the pages of *Janus - A Summing Up*. However, when his eyes alighted upon the name of Konrad Lorenz, he halted in his flicking tracks and uttered an exclamatory 'Aha!' sound, which was evidently in confirmation of something he had been assuming for some time. "I imagine Koestler got some of the inspiration for his 'haha!' - 'aha!' - 'ah ...' spectrum from Konrad Lorenz," he at length remarked, noting the positive reference to the latter on the page before him.

"What makes you say that?" asked Kelly, feeling slightly puzzled.

"Well, I've recently been re-reading Lorenz's *Behind the Mirror*, a work which does, incidentally, have some bearing on what you were saying about Platonic idealism a little while ago," Jacobs replied. "It seems the compromise between idealism and realism you were advocating is the very

thing that appeals to Lorenz who, in opposition to the idealistic lopsidedness of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century philosophy, is given to the view that the material world isn't really all that different from the world as we see it, but corresponds to reality as it actually is. Instead of making the world dependent on our particular consciousness of it, as traditional idealism usually does, Lorenz contends that our consciousness corresponds to the world and was evolved in harmony with it, so that what we see isn't necessarily a distortion of reality but, rather, that reality reflected in our minds. The fact, however, that we're given to assimilating only a fraction of total reality doesn't, of course, invalidate his contention, since what we *do* assimilate as *Homo sapiens* is real enough in itself. It merely corresponds to a different reality than to, say, fish reality, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the assimilation of rain, snow, sunlight, wind, flowers, trees, etc."

"So I was right in thinking that we've finally got round to believing in the reality of the external world!" exclaimed Kelly mockingly. "Though I guess you could say it had to wait for an age of materialism, with its cameras and televisions, to give it due credit as a logical entity. I suppose Christianity was largely responsible for the hold-up by insisting on the superiority of the Otherworld to the detriment of this one. Yet some people would still argue that conceptual subjectivity is intrinsically superior to perceptual objectivity, and that the modern world has simply regressed from the civilized plane to the barbarous one. But isn't Lorenz's contention more a straightforward appeal to materialism than a compromise between realism and idealism?"

"I don't think so," Jacobs replied. "He's simply getting us away from the stupid or, depending on your viewpoint, highly civilized idea that the world would cease to exist if we weren't there to witness it."

"Like, presumably, what Berkeley said?" conjectured Kelly.

"Yes, though he was shrewd enough to point out that it would continue to exist as an idea in the mind of God," confirmed Jacobs. "However, the important thing to remember is that any objective comprehension of things presupposes a subject who comprehends; that there's a subtle interaction between subject and object which inevitably implies a compromise between them. Unlike the earlier-mentioned idealists, however, Lorenz doesn't accept the contention that our minds *distort* external reality. On the contrary, he endorses the correspondence they have to it. That's the difference, and *that*, believe it or not, is an important advance in the history of Western philosophy!"

"One would think it crawled along at a snail's pace," said Kelly, who

was by this time almost ashamed of being philosophical. "Either that or it has been pursued almost exclusively by intellectual cranks hitherto!"

"I could hardly agree with *that* remark, James, which I'm sure you don't seriously mean!" exclaimed Jacobs with a show of surprise. "Still, we do have our moments of amusement and exasperation at its expense, I'll grant you. But Konrad Lorenz is a scientist, not a philosopher, and a scientist, moreover, who doesn't think too highly of idealistic philosophers. We can at least be grateful to science for continuing to support our faith in external reality, even though it is becoming progressively weirder with the passing of time."

Having returned the Koestler tome to its resting place on top of the small bookcase, Stephen Jacobs glanced at his wristwatch and informed his friend that he would have to be leaving. He had an appointment with his agent the following morning and consequently wanted to get an early night. Since it was already 10.30pm, he couldn't expect to get to bed much before 11.00. But he had enjoyed Kelly's company, particularly as, due to ill-health, he hadn't seen him for over a month and had been especially looking forward to discussing philosophy again. His other friends were all such natural enemies of metaphysical and kindred speculation that it was a relief to have someone like James with whom to talk once in a while, someone above the common run who would add a little intellectual variety to an otherwise monotonous round of inconsequential chatter. Such, at any rate, was the general impression he endeavoured to convey to his fellow-writer before turning on his heels with the Huxley lectures tucked safely under his arm.

"Good luck with your appointment tomorrow," said Kelly, opening the door of his Highgate flat.

"Thanks old chap," Jacobs responded smilingly and, with a gentle wave of his free arm, he was off down the flight of stairs and out, via the communal entrance, into the wet night.

'Oh well,' thought Kelly as he returned to the study and began to survey its heterogeneous contents with an air of dejection, 'I suppose I won't be seeing *him* for some time. Which is probably just as well, considering he resents not being able to show off his philosophical knowledge to me as much as he'd ideally like to, in view of the fact that I'm usually better informed and even more up-to-date than him. I think he has the impression that he ought to know more about philosophy than me, bearing in mind that he's three years my senior and has been studying it for a couple of years longer. But how hard and how often has he *really* been studying it? And who has he been studying anyway? He thinks he's a

philosopher, but he's really a philosophical artist, a man who leans in the direction of philosophy from a sort of literary base. He doesn't have a Ph.D. and is consequently without a chair of philosophy anywhere. But how many genuine philosophers don't have that? Almost every great philosopher on record was a lecturer at one time or another - even Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Though the former resigned his chair and the latter taught philology even after he'd been awarded an honorary Ph.D. by his university. But at least he ended-up with a doctorate, which is more than either Stephen or I have acquired. Still, why should one be ashamed of being a man of letters instead of a bona fide philosopher with no literature to his name because he is sufficiently preoccupied with his university post and the writings which pertain to or supplement it? What's wrong with being a philosophical artist? That's what I'd like to ask Stephen Jacobs, though if I did it would almost certainly humiliate him, even make him take umbrage. For he thinks he's a philosopher. But philosophers don't write literature; they confine themselves to lecturing on and writing about philosophy - assuming, of course, that they hadn't been sacked from their university, like Bertrand Russell, or induced to resign their post, like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, for one reason or another. Admittedly, Stephen writes philosophy or, at any rate, something approximating to it. But he can't earn his living from that; he has to write literature as well. So, in a sense, he's probably ashamed of having to compromise himself against his deepest intellectual predilections.... If he was genuinely a philosophical artist, on the other hand, that sort of thing wouldn't particularly bother him. He'd be nicely poised between literature and philosophy, glad to take refuge in the one whenever the other became either too oppressive or too restrictive. But because he secretly yearns to be a philosopher, and has little taste for literature, he finds the idea of being a philosophical artist beneath him. Yet he's neither a genuine philosopher - much less an artist-philosopher/philosopher-artist - nor a genuine artist. He's a total misfit. A failed philosopher and a bogus artist! That's the way I see him anyway, and that's the way I believe he is, even though he'd be the last person to admit it. For if there's one thing he's a genuine master of, it's the art of self-deception! Of that, there can be no doubt!

By now James Kelly was beginning to feel slightly more pleased with himself than he had done all evening. He was taking revenge on Jacobs for all the humiliations the latter had wittingly or unwittingly inflicted upon him throughout the course of the evening by means of this barrage of analytical thought, which he aimed at his colleague's professional integrity with the express purpose of smashing it to bits, if only in his perverse

imagination, and thereby firmly establishing his unquestionable intellectual superiority over the man.... Not that Jacobs was a permanent thorn in his side. On the contrary, he could think of plenty of people who would have created a less favourable impression on him. But, all the same, he knew that their friendship wasn't particularly sincere, that it didn't run very deep. For one thing, their temperaments weren't entirely congruous, Jacobs being no less critical and moody than he was easy-going and optimistic, while, for another, they wrote quite different books and lived in quite separate worlds. Naturally, they did their best to pretend that these worlds weren't all that far apart whenever they were in each other's company. Nevertheless, there were times - as had occurred more than once this very evening - when the effort of maintaining mutual regard proved too much for them and an embarrassing silence interposed itself between their respective pretences. Needless to say, such occurrences were by no means unheard of in human relationships; there were always contradictory or even antipathetic elements endeavouring to undermine the basis of even the most solid friendship. Even so, there was a limit to how many of these elements one could be expected to tolerate before things became too burdensome and one was accordingly obliged to sever ties. Fortunately, however, things weren't quite that bad between them at present, though that wasn't to say they couldn't have been a lot better!

'As for me,' Kelly continued to reflect, as he sat down in the armchair recently occupied by his guest, 'I have the advantage of being at one with my vocation of philosophical artist, of being an intellectual hybrid simply because, on the one hand, I don't want to be exclusively an artist and, on the other hand, I've no desire to establish myself as an academic philosopher, a man with a Ph.D. and lecturing post at some university who is thereby enabled to write uncommercial treatises in his spare time. Admittedly, one could also be a philosopher *without* such qualifications if, by good fortune, one had been endowed with a sufficiently large private income to enable one to exclusively dedicate oneself to the writing of aphorisms, monologues, dialogues, etc. But the vast majority of philosophers aren't so fortunate, with the inevitable consequence that the money they make from teaching philosophy enables them to continue writing it. Yet I have no desire to teach philosophy and, even if I were wealthy, I doubt very much that I would want to confine myself exclusively to writing it either, since I value the creative potentials of literature too highly. And, conversely, I value thought too highly to be content with limiting it to a literary guise and diluting it in the interests of plot, characterization, description, etc. Besides, you can never get to the ...'

His digital watch suddenly bleeping 11.00pm broke the train of his thought and induced him to take cognizance of the time. He decided he would go to bed early himself, since he had no desire to subjectively exert his brain any longer. If the habit got out-of-hand, as it threatened to on occasion, he might not find either the time or the inclination to write at all. After all, there was quite a difference between being a thinker and being a writer! And, by a similar token, there was quite a difference between inviting a moody creep like Stephen Jacobs over for a Sunday-evening chat and being invited to dinner by a charming man like Douglas Searle, who wasn't a writer at all but a successful publisher with a penchant for the arts. Mr and Mrs Searle would certainly make life more interesting for him than ever Jacobs could! Besides, there would be some other guests there who, like himself, were bound to relish the Searles' hospitality to artists.

'June the nineteenth,' he muttered to himself a moment before the curtain of sleep drew across his waking consciousness and plunged him from thoughts about his dinner invitation with the Searles into the dreamful depths of his unconscious. It was now June 14th.

CHAPTER TWO

It was a warm dry afternoon as the bright-green Citroën drew to a halt not far from the village of Merstham, in Surrey, and the driver got out and pointed in the general direction of the hill which she and her two female companions, Carmel Daly and Sharon Taylor, were intending to climb. Within a few seconds the remaining occupants of the modest little car had joined her and were smiling at each other over a large hamper of provisions, which they agreed to carry between them. When the owner of the Citroën had locked both its doors and windows, the three of them set off in the general direction of their destination, where they intended to have a salad picnic.

"What a relief to be able to stretch one's legs again!" exclaimed Jennifer Crowe while glancing back at her companions, who were struggling along with the copiously packed hamper a few yards behind her. "It was only an hour's drive, but it seemed like an eternity."

At twenty-eight, she was not only the oldest of the group, but the only one who had been to this part of Surrey before. As they walked along, their eyes surveyed the surrounding countryside with all the avidity of people who have been cooped-up in the city for too long and could hardly believe that they were re-establishing contact with nature's vast panorama of bushes and trees, fields and hills, crops and flowers. Fortunately, there were only a few small harmless-looking clouds in the sky, as the sun shone down brilliantly onto everything around them. The land across which they were walking was deserted except for a few birds, and every now and then the flapping of ponderous wings could be heard as some large crow emerged from the trees to their left and flew across the open spaces beyond. There were still over two hundred yards to go to the top of the hill, which they fancied would make an ideal spot not only for their picnic but subsequent sunbathing as well. Yet already they had quickened their pace in an eagerness to reach it and were panting quite heavily, especially Carmel, the youngest and plumpest of the three, who wasn't used to such strenuous exercise.

"Not far now," Jennifer announced with a reassuring glance back at her companions, who seemed to be rather labouring under their burden. "Here, let me take a hand in carrying that!" she offered, moving towards the hamper. But her generosity was emphatically rejected by both Carmel and

Sharon, who professed not to be under any difficulty with it.

"When did you last come here?" asked Carmel by way of diverting attention from her obvious lack of stamina.

"About two years ago," replied Jennifer, with a thoughtful look on her face. "My boyfriend drove me here then, though the weather was nowhere near as fine as today. We thought it was going to rain, so we returned to the van - he had an old Ford thing at the time - and, well, you can guess what happened next!"

A spontaneous response of knowing laughter erupted from her two companions, who also nodded approvingly.

"But we'd have preferred to have enjoyed ourselves on the crest of this hill," Jennifer went on, "because it isn't every day that the return to nature can be so complete, if you see what I mean."

Again there were nods of approval from both Carmel and Sharon.

"He must have been quite upset by the sudden change of plan," Sharon ventured to speculate, as the crest of the hill loomed larger, just fifty or so yards above them.

"Well, you know what men are like," sighed Jennifer with a knowing look on her face. "They don't care where they get it really, provided that they do eventually get it somewhere. It was my idea to lure him here, my dream to be humped in full view of nature's gaze, to have such a beautiful and romantic setting. And so I was more disappointed than him when the sky became overcast and it looked as though we'd end-up doing it in the rain. It was his idea to return to the van, not mine."

The trio fell silent as, arriving at their destination, they looked about them for a suitable spot to decamp. There were a few trees and bushes in the immediate vicinity, which gave a degree of privacy to the area and would have provided some protection, depending where one sat, from inquisitive eyes, had there been any such eyes to spy on people who were intent upon harmlessly enjoying themselves. Fortunately, however, no-one else was around at present, and it was principally this aspect of things which brought a sigh of relief from Jennifer's ample lips.

"How nice to have the place entirely to ourselves!" exclaimed Carmel, as soon as they had decided on a suitable place to sit. "My God! when one thinks of the millions of people crawling over one another like ants in London, and then finds oneself blessed with this solitude on a warm summer's day in mid-June amidst the beauty of the Surrey countryside, it just doesn't seem possible."

"Yes, it's just as well we chose a weekday," remarked Jennifer while taking a large plastic groundsheet from the wicker hamper and spreading it

on the grass. "I doubt very much that it would be this quiet at the weekend. Let's keep our fingers crossed that we don't get any unwanted visitors."

"A remark, I presume, which excludes everyone but handsome young men," opined Sharon, taking some plastic cups and plates from the hamper and setting them down on the groundsheet.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said Jennifer, "though, under the circumstances of this rare treat to country life, I think we could even do without them, don't you?"

Her companions smiled approvingly at what sounded like a rhetorical question and duly busied themselves with the preparation of their salads. They had brought a decent-sized lettuce, an uncut loaf of brown bread, a cucumber, half-a-dozen tomatoes, a half-pound of cheese, a dozen or so small boiled potatoes, a beetroot, a few hard-boiled eggs, and some coleslaw. They shared out the responsibility for preparing their food in a thoroughly democratic manner, and were soon tucking-in to it. For liquid refreshment they had a large flask of orange juice, which all agreed to be the most suitable drink for the occasion.

"Look!" exclaimed Sharon, while they were in the process of casually taking-in the view from their vantage-point high above the fields. "There are a couple of blokes over there between the hedges, can you see them?" She pointed in a north-easterly direction.

"No more than fifteen-year-olds, by the look of it," said Jennifer, who was particularly good at distinguishing people from a distance. "I don't think they'd relish our company somehow."

"It looks as though they're heading towards that cluster of trees," observed Sharon, drawing their attention to a small copse to the north-west, some 150 yards away. "Seems to me they're not interested in us, anyway."

"Just as well," murmured Carmel before swallowing a mouthful of fresh lettuce. "They'd only spoil our picnic."

"Two young guys heading for the protection of those trees? It makes you smile rather, doesn't it?" Jennifer commented, offering Carmel an ironic wink.

"They might be going beyond them, seeing as there are so many trees and bushes over there," Carmel speculated.

"Oh well, what does it matter to us?" sighed Jennifer as she poured herself a beaker of orange juice. "Let's forget about them."

After the main course, the girls each ate an apple and a couple of digestive biscuits, and when all the used knives, forks, beakers, and plates had been packed away in the hamper again, they decided it was high time for some sunbathing, the real *raison d'être* of their excursion.

As usual, Jennifer led the way by taking off her denims and white cotton vest, followed, in quick succession, by Carmel and Sharon, whose striptease act involved the removal of a pale-blue mini skirt. Then when all three were stripped down to their bikinis, they applied suntan lotion to their bodies and stretched out on the towels which had been brought along for comfort's sake. It was now almost 2.00pm and the sun was beating down on them with all the intensity of a brilliant mid-summer's afternoon.

"Let's hope it continues to shine like this!" enthused Jennifer as the glare from above forced her to turn her head to one side and speak with her eyes closed. "We could certainly do with a little colour on our bodies."

"Especially after last winter," sighed Sharon, who was lying in-between the others with her back to the sun. "It's a wonder we aren't all blue now." The vehement buzzing of a large bee suddenly interrupted her for a few seconds, but the busy insect didn't pay any of them much attention and the sound of its buzzing soon faded back into the distance from whence it had so unexpectedly come. "Are there any intruders in sight?" she asked Carmel, who was applying some additional suntan lotion to her shins.

"What kind of intruders?"

"Human ones. Men in particular."

There was a short pause while Carmel briefly surveyed their surroundings. "None that I can see."

"Good," sighed Sharon, who immediately began to unclip her bikini top and pull her bikini bottoms down as far as she could without giving everything about herself away.

"Would you like some more lotion?" asked Carmel when she had taken care of her shins. And, without bothering to wait for a reply, she proceeded to vigorously rub some oil into the newly exposed parts of Sharon's back and buttocks. A faint smile crossed its recipient's lips as she felt Carmel's middle finger sliding backwards and forwards a few times in the trough between her parted mounds of quivering flesh.

"Thanks," she murmured, once the massage was completed. "Let me know when you need any assistance."

"*You'll* need medical assistance if you get stung or bitten on the backside!" warned Jennifer, who was laying on her back with the minimum of social respectability still covering her most private parts. "I've got an ant crawling over my left tit at this very moment."

"Oh, don't!" protested Sharon while showing her right-hand neighbour a look of repugnance. "You'll spoil my self-confidence."

"A hungry ant which finds its way into the valley between your

mounds of bum will spoil it even more," Jennifer remarked, to the audible amusement of Carmel, who was still dressed in a more orthodox fashion - top and bottoms of her green bikini clipped securely in place.

"She'll have to learn modesty the hard way," Carmel managed to joke.

Silence mercifully descended on them for a couple of minutes, before Sharon ventured to inquire of Jennifer whether, in returning to the subject of her boyfriend, she had ever had sex in the open.

"Quite a few times actually," she admitted. "Provided the weather's not too extreme, it can be a most refreshing experience! In fact, it was about this time last year that David and I last had it off in the open. We were on holiday for a few days near Burford, in Oxfordshire, where a friend of his happens to live, and, on one of those gorgeous days, we got together on the edge of a cornfield and followed the course of nature for an hour. An hour tends to suffice him, as a rule, though I've known him to spend three hours playing around with various bits and pieces of my anatomy."

"What, in the country?" gasped Sharon disbelievingly.

"No, unfortunately not! I think the open makes him feel insecure, afraid, perhaps, that some copper will suddenly turn up and say: "Ere, 'ere, 'ere, what's all this, then?" or something of the sort, before carting us away for indecent exposure. That would be terribly humiliating."

"You're not kidding!"

"Still, it hasn't happened yet, so, providing David keeps his head and doesn't become too careless where he chooses to take or have me, as the case may be, it shouldn't ever happen." Jennifer readjusted her sunbathing position and requested Sharon to rub some more lotion into her back. "Now it's my turn to let my bikini down a little," she joked, noticing that Sharon was tactfully rearranging her bikini in conformity with the administrative role just thrust upon her. "I hope I didn't drag you away from your position before you'd had enough of it," she added almost sarcastically.

"No, it was becoming a shade uncomfortable in any case, lying on my stomach for so long," Sharon confessed. "It's a pity we didn't bring something softer than towels to lie on, if you see what I mean." She vigorously massaged her friend's freckled back with both hands, noting the satisfaction this brought her.

"Any intruders in view?" asked Jennifer in imitation of Sharon.

"No human ones that I can see. What about you, Carmel - can you see anyone?"

"Only a scarecrow in that field over there. It seems too good to be

true, that we should still have this hill to ourselves." Having said which, Carmel turned over onto her stomach and requested a similar massage from Sharon.

"Sounds like she wants to do a striptease act, too," declared Jennifer as she heard Carmel unclipping her bikini top in turn. "We *are* being promiscuous today!"

"So it would appear," laughed Sharon before turning from the bare back of the one to the equally bare back of the other, which she then proceeded to massage in a similarly steady but comprehensive manner. "I've never seen so much of your respective bodies before," she commented, with a faint tone of sexual arousal in her voice.

"Then make the most of it while the opportunity still prevails," Jennifer joked. "For you won't see us like this very often, you know."

Carmel had tied up her long black hair to prevent it from being blown across her back by the stiff breeze which occasionally raked the hill, to the detriment of a uniform tan. Of the three women, she was the only one with straight hair, the only one who could tie it up with any degree of success. The others had wavy hair of a fairly coarse texture which, because of its considerable length, was more difficult to manage and therefore could not be disposed of in quite the same fashion. For her part, Jennifer had contented herself with resting her head on as much of her long black wavy hair as could be gathered up into a sort of pillow, while Sharon had divided her own hair, with the aid of strong elastic bands, into two thick strands, which were now tickling Carmel's back as she bent over it to administer the suntan lotion.

"Phew! Is it hot!" exclaimed Sharon as she felt the sun burning into her shoulders. "It's a shame we don't have weather like this more often."

"That's precisely why we can't afford to waste any time today," responded Carmel, momentarily opening her eyes to the spectacle of Jennifer's prostrate body. For a moment, Sharon's shadow hung over it and then disappeared, as the lady in question returned to her former position between Jennifer and herself.

Lying on her back with an arm across her brow, Sharon retreated from the outside world into the sanctuary of her fantasies, from which she had briefly emerged the moment before. Prior to asking Jennifer whether she had ever had sex in the open, Sharon had dreamt of having it there herself, of being sacrificed, as it were, on the altar of nature with complete abandonment to the imaginary hero of her heart! How and where she would meet this man she cared not. But it was certainly an ambition of hers to be taken into the country by such a man and humped among the

buttercups and daisies, the bushes and trees, the butterflies and bees. To be sure, she had a number of sexual ambitions to realize, including one of being fucked by two men at once - one underneath her and the other on top. She sensed, however, that she would never realize them all, that there would always be disappointments and frustrations in store for her. All the same, it seemed not improbable that she would subsequently lose interest in some of these ambitions and acquire an interest in ones that hadn't yet crossed her mind, ambitions that lay too far into the future or depended on a different context from the one she was currently living in, and were therefore beyond the range of her existing imaginative powers.

'I almost envy Jenny her relationship with David,' she mused, as she lay perfectly still between her fellow-sunbathers. 'How beautiful it would be, to be humped on this hill on such a fine day, with the birds and insects to witness one's delight. I dare say she gets what she wants whenever and wherever she fucking-well wants it - unlike me! And yet I'm better-looking than she is. I'm better-looking than both of them are actually, though I doubt whether they'd admit it, the lying bitches! But, at twenty-four, I deserve more luck with men than I've had this year!' She sighed in instinctive dismay.

"Finding the heat too much for you?" asked Jennifer, incorrectly interpreting it.

"No, I was just thinking actually," Sharon confessed, reluctantly turning her head in Jennifer's direction. She felt painfully ashamed of herself for having got wrapped-up in her thoughts at their expense.

"Sorry to disturb you," murmured Jennifer with a wry smile on her lips. "You shouldn't torture yourself with thoughts on such a fine day, you know!"

"No, I guess not." The silence once more mercifully interposed itself, before Sharon informed them that she would have to relieve herself behind one of the nearby bushes. It was over five hours since she had last taken a pee.

"You'd better avoid the bush I peed behind shortly after we got here," said Carmel, who was apt to treat such things as a joke. "Though it should be dry there by now." She watched Sharon's retreating figure disappear behind a large bush some 40-45 yards from where they were sunbathing.

"Psst!" hissed Jennifer, raising herself on one elbow. "Let's play a practical joke on her."

"What, like hiding her miniskirt behind a bush?" Carmel suggested.

Jennifer shook her head. "No, let's pretend we're having sex, so that she'll find it difficult to believe her eyes when she returns."

Carmel blushed at that prospect, though she was all for a bit of fun at Sharon's expense. "But what'll we do?" she innocently asked.

"You leave that to me!" snapped Jennifer and, before her companion could utter another word, she had moved closer to the other girl and thereupon applied her mouth to one of Carmel's nipples. Carmel uttered an involuntary whimper of shocked surprise in response to Jennifer's tongue, but managed to put an arm round her friend's waist all the same.

"Let's hope this looks convincing," Jennifer whispered, as Sharon emerged from behind the bushes away to their left.

"Good god! what *are* you doing?" she exclaimed, arriving back to her towel, only to find their bodies entwined in a semblance of passionate sex. "Don't tell me you're ..." But the rest of her remark was prevented from emerging into vocal clarity by the impulsive amusement which overcame Jennifer at the pathetic spectacle of Sharon's obvious bewilderment.

"Don't worry, love," she said, while disengaging herself from Carmel's body. "We're only joking."

"Some joke!" protested Sharon, whose face suddenly broke into a broad smile of comic relief. "But you had me fooled for a moment, I must say!" She waited for Jennifer to move back to her towel, before taking up her former position in between them. "I think I'll feel safer if I just sit rather than lie between you two lecherous lesbians," she added, looking disapprovingly from the one to the other.

"In that case, we'll go for your tits," joked Carmel, who stretched out a hand and grabbed Sharon's nearest breast with a force which almost dislodged her bikini top.

"Oh, no you won't!" she cried, while making to defend herself by wrenching the other girl's fingers away and covering her breasts with her hands.

"That's only because she wants to hold them herself," chuckled Jennifer over her shoulder.

"Yes, what a provocative picture she'd make for someone with a camera!" averred Carmel with a sardonic grin on her face. "She's behaving quite erotically."

Sharon dropped her guard, smiled guardedly, and lay down on her stomach. The joke went off as quickly as it had come on, and they were all rather bored with it and privately ashamed of themselves for behaving like adolescents.

'It's true what they say about women behaving stupidly when they're not in men's company,' Sharon mused, once the context of sunbathing had enveloped them all again. 'And men act just as stupidly when left alone

with one another. Some kind of relief from the usual sexual tensions, I shouldn't wonder! Still, you can't altogether blame them. There are times when you positively need the company of your own gender. Times when you're only too relieved to get away from the opposite sex.'

She shut her eyes and listened to the brazen sound of crickets in some nearby grass, which had the effect of making her conscious, once more, of the sun on her back and of the steady breathing of her friends, who had returned to their private lives again and were now soaking-up the sun's rays and perhaps - who knows? - fantasizing about men. And, just as consciously, she found herself wondering what Jenny's boyfriend would be like in bed, and whether Carmel's boyfriend, Martin, whom she had met only once, would have taken a fancy to her, had he met her first. Somehow she preferred not to think about her own relationships with men over the past few years because, with the possible exception of a brief fling with a young actor she felt genuinely fond of, they had all been somewhat disappointing.

Indeed, of the seven or eight men who'd had the audacity to barge into her life during that time, the last of them, whom she was obliged to break-up with after a mere three days, had been the most abominable. In fact, he hardly knew how to make love at all, so preoccupied had he been with avoiding premature ejaculation! But ever since she got rid of him on the pretext of having to work in a theatre up north, she hadn't managed to find herself a successor, not even an incompetent one. And that was over four months ago! Really, she was beginning to feel sorry for herself, being left on the shelf for so long, particularly as she was so good-looking and still relatively young. Apart from one dreadful year, when she was nineteen and had spent six months without sex in consequence of a serious illness, this last year had been the worst of her adult life! She feared that if things didn't improve soon she would have little option but to give-up acting and become a visiting masseuse, or maybe even something worse.

No, perhaps that was going a bit too far! All the same, she might have to make herself more amenable to people whom she wouldn't ordinarily have considered worthy of herself... Like, for instance, some of the older men at the theatre, whose advances she would ideally have preferred to snub. But as for Jennifer and Carmel, what could *they* do to help her? True, their practical joke had been a little lacking in taste. But, even so, it engendered connotations upon which she didn't care to dwell. There was something ironic about it, something which suggested the possibility of her succumbing to lesbian activities under pressure of prolonged celibacy.

For a moment, she had a vision of Jennifer's vagina above her nose

and of her tongue methodically working its way backwards and forwards between its goose-pimpled labia. She didn't know what Jenny's vagina exactly looked like, but the impression she now formed of it in her imagination was so vivid ... that she felt a sort of revulsion in her stomach and was obliged to turn her head in the opposite direction, so that the others wouldn't notice anything amiss. Although Sharon had never indulged in lesbian activities with anyone before, she felt somewhat insecure, stuck in-between the predominantly naked bodies beside her, both of which belonged to highly attractive women. It was as though she feared the power of the imagination would carry her away with herself, resulting in her crawling over one of these bodies and doing things to it which she would never have considered herself capable of at other times, times when she was well-sexed and therefore not vulnerable to the temptations of lesbianism in such a blatant manner. She looked at Carmel, the prettier of the two, but her face gave nothing away. It was a mask of sensuous impassivity, of complacent repose. No doubt, her boyfriend would be eagerly awaiting her return to London that evening! And he would take special note of her tan, congratulating her on it and then inquiring, as he removed her clothes, why she hadn't taken her bikini bottoms off as well, so that she could have gone uniformly brown all over? As it happened, both halves of her bikini were still in an orthodox position, perhaps in testimony to her lack of confidence in ants.

"What time is it?" asked Jennifer, breaking the long silence which had fallen between them.

Sharon glanced at her tiny wristwatch and informed her that it was already 4.30pm. "I guess we'll have to be making a move soon," she added.

"Yes, I expect so," Jennifer sighed. "It may not be as easy driving back to London as it was driving out of it this morning. Still, we don't have to work this evening, so there's no real hurry."

This allusion to the Hampstead theatre where they all worked as actresses caused Carmel to titter to herself, and, on being asked by Sharon what was so funny, she repeated a few of her lines from 'Daybreak Tears', their current theatrical venture, in which she had to confess to being madly in love with a man who, in private life, she wholeheartedly loathed. "But I shall never leave you, come what may. For I am too madly in love with you to allow anything like this to come between us ...' And I have my arms round his neck - imagine it! Round the neck of a man I'd sooner strangle."

"Well, at least it gives you an excellent opportunity to assess your progress as an actress," opined Jennifer stoically. "It's to your professional

credit that you manage to conceal all but the faintest traces of disgust whilst in his arms. One would think that you actually liked him."

"That's not good enough, since I'm really supposed to convey the impression that I'm madly in love with him!" Carmel retorted.

Jennifer smiled sympathetically. "Very few people would spot the difference, so you needn't worry yourself too much about that! The fact remains that you still manage to pull off the act pretty well.... Frankly, you ought to be grateful to the man for testing your professionalism to the limit of its objective endurance." She paused a moment to reflect on her own position, then continued: "But I have a role which, in many respects, is the reverse of yours. I have to shout at a man who, in private, I'm really quite fond of. You remember Act Two, Scene Three, when Gerald has drunk a little more wine than is good for him and subsequently makes a drunkard's attempt to seduce me in front of my husband?" She waited for Carmel's acknowledgement of this esoteric information which, when it finally came, took the form of a vaguely amused nod. "Well, let me tell you that I have considerable difficulty living up to the hatred required by the lines: 'Why, you raving lunatic, what do you think you're playing at, fumbling under my skirt! Keep those sweaty hands to yourself, you lecherous half-wit!'"

A titter of laughter escaped, with this remark, from Carmel's ample lips, for she remembered the look on Gerald's face when Jennifer had first fired those lines at him point-blank, so to speak, and the embarrassment which overcame him when his reactions were censored by the producer for being too subjective and thus insufficiently impersonal. Had he actually been drunk, the poor fellow, he might have found it less difficult to live up or, rather, down to the part. But his acute sensitivity regularly got the better of him in those early days of rehearsal and became something of a standing joke among the cast, who were of the express opinion that he needed toughening. Only Jennifer, to Carmel's recollection, refused to treat his discomfiture with levity. But then that was because she was mainly responsible for it in the first place!

"It would make the lines easier to play if *I* had actually been drinking before reciting them," the latter confessed while toying with her hair. "He's such a nice guy really. But on stage one's acting comes first, so I endeavour to overcome my personal misgivings and simply bellow them at him."

"And he endeavours not to take them too seriously," Carmel deduced. "Still, your acting does give one the impression that you actually loathe the guy."

"Thank goodness for that!" exclaimed Jennifer. "Anyway, my

conscience compels me to compensate him off-stage for all the abuses to him on it by being as sweet as possible. If it wasn't for the fact that he's already happily married, he'd probably have been in my bed some time ago."

"Instead of which, he's only recently been in it," chuckled Carmel, only to receive a wry smile from her colleague.

"Are his hands really sweaty?" asked Sharon as she turned her head back in Jennifer's direction.

"No, very dry actually. And he's neither a 'raving lunatic' nor a 'lecherous half-wit', as you well know."

"The vicissitudes of the acting profession," Sharon concluded. "Oh well, one could do worse. I'd rather be the actor or actress than the playwright any day."

"Try telling him that!" said Carmel.

The sun was less intense now as evening approached and, following Jennifer's suggestion that they all get dressed again, the three young actresses reached out for and began to inspect their respective items of clothing, Carmel being especially careful to be on guard for the possibility of ants hiding in her cords, which were black and therefore an ideal nesting place for them, whether or not they might subsequently take to biting her backside. Not surprisingly, she was the last dressed, having also, along with Jennifer, relieved herself behind a nearby bush.

When the women had gathered up their towels and packed them away in the large wicker hamper, they gave their surroundings a farewell glance and, with a tinge of regret on their suntanned faces, set off down the hill in the general direction of Jennifer's car. The task of carrying the hamper, now much the lighter for the absence of provisions, was accepted by Jennifer and Carmel, who decided to lag a few yards behind Sharon on the down-hill route. However, when they had got to within a hundred or so yards of the car they noticed two young males sitting on the fence by the side of the footpath. As the three women drew nearer, the youths began to grin at them and whisper to each other. Finally, as though the close proximity of the women were a cue for action, they unleashed a barrage of verbal abuse to the effect of: "Fucking Lesbians! Bloody Lesbians! Lesbian cunts!" and other such sharp phrases which had the effect of making the two hamper-carriers lower their eyes in rapid shame and blush violently. A few sticks hurtled after the women once they had passed their tormentors, one quite large stick hitting Jennifer squarely on the back.

"The little brats!" she yelled and, letting go of the hamper, she turned on her heels to confront them. But they were already off the fence and

scampering up the hill from whence the threesome had come.

"Are you alright, Jenny?" asked Carmel as her companion bent down to pick up the opposite side of the hamper again.

"Yes, I guess so," she sighed. "Though I suppose I shall have a bruise across my back for the next few days."

"They were evidently the two young men we saw crossing the field in the direction of that clump of trees a few hours ago," Carmel deduced. "They probably spent most of the afternoon spying on us with the aid of those binoculars the taller one had draped around his scraggly neck.

"The frigging little brats!" reiterated Jennifer while rubbing the lower part of her back with her free hand. But, as she reached her car, she couldn't help noticing what looked like a 'tough-luck!' smile on Sharon's rosy face.

CHAPTER THREE

It was Douglas Searle in person who opened the front door to admit James Kelly to his little gathering of choice guests. It wasn't yet 7.30pm, the time at which Kelly had been advised to arrive at Mr Searle's imposing residence, but most of the others were already there and, with the assistance of some alcoholic refreshment, eagerly preparing themselves for the meal to come.

"Delighted to see you again!" he declared, as Kelly stepped through the open doorway and met his host's outstretched hand half-way. "What a fine evening it is!"

After exchanging a few trivial remarks, James Kelly was escorted into the lounge and summarily introduced to each the other guests, all but one of whom he had met before. That was Susan Healy, a short twenty-six-year-old art teacher with blue eyes and fair hair who had recently become Keith Brady's latest girlfriend. Kelly knew from experience that Brady, the chubby painter over ten years her senior who now stood proudly, and therefore protectively, beside Susan, had a special talent for finding himself new women and losing them just as quickly. But perhaps this one, being familiar with art, was his bride-to-be? Knowing Brady, James fancied he would probably find himself being introduced to a different girlfriend the next time he was ushered into the lounge by Mr Searle.

"Still hard at work with your writings?" Brady asked him as soon as he had got over the shock of meeting a new face. But before he could even nod his head a hand had grabbed one of his arms and another voice, more seductive than Brady's, was congratulating him for his healthy appearance. It belonged, he soon realized, to Paloma Searle, Mr Searle's half-Spanish wife, who had been in animated conversation with one of her guests when he first entered the room. Her dark eyes sparkled with joy at the sight of his face, which had, in the meantime, become somewhat flushed. At thirty, she was a woman of considerable charm and eloquence whose 5' 8" of shapely flesh, dark hair, and gently aquiline nose were chief among the many qualities which especially appealed to Kelly's aesthetic sense at this moment. He hadn't seen her for over three months and felt quite flattered to receive a glass of wine from her hand and to be offered a seat beside her on a comfortably padded couch. The smell of her perfume tantalized his nostrils as he immersed himself in her lively eyes, listening, as closely as

the general hubbub in the room would permit, to the melodious flow of words which cascaded, like confetti, from between her moist lips. She could only find time to congratulate him on the publication of his latest novel, however, when duty beckoned her away to the kitchen, where the chicken salad apparently required a few final touches. She had already prepared most of it, but seemingly still had some more work to do. His eyes followed her across the room, like a hungry dog intent upon collaring a succulent bone, as she made for the door, noting, with especial pleasure, the seductively curvaceous shape of her calf-muscles, tastefully outlined beneath a pair of dark-green nylons to which her purple miniskirt formed quite a contrast.

"So you're back here, too!" boomed out Trevor Jenkinson's bass voice above the softer voices socially at large on the airwaves. "It seems they have a weak spot for writers."

The tall, greying man who had just taken Mrs Searle's place beside James Kelly happened to be a writer himself, albeit of a more conventional kind. His twenty-something years in the profession had resulted in the publication of some fifteen crime novels, none of which Kelly had read, though he vaguely knew the titles of a few of them. Had it not been for the man's affability and unpompous manner, Kelly would probably have felt intimidated by his professional seniority. But his easy-going personality, so much in tune with James Kelly's own, precluded any such intimidation with an ease which the younger man could only admire. Here, anyway, was a writer who had outgrown his professional egotism and virtually come around to regarding his reputation with indifference, if not downright repugnance. How different from Stephen Jacobs! There were times when his aura of self-importance so overwhelmed and disgusted one that one would have dared to tell him that his work was by no means as good as, largely on the basis of its superficial success, he imagined it to be. But that would simply have resulted in Jacobs regarding one as insulting and summarily taking his leave of one in order, presumably, to seek better understanding elsewhere! There was no toppling *him* from the pillar of professional self-esteem upon which *he* had elected to sit, compliments, in no small measure, of a public-school and Oxbridge background.

"Yes, I think his wife's rather fond of you," Jenkinson was saying in a more confidential tone-of-voice. "She likes to see younger men about the place."

Not wishing to comment on that, James Kelly finished off the wine in his glass before asking: "Are you reading anything particularly interesting at the moment?"

"I'm always reading interesting things!" replied Jenkinson in what seemed to the younger man like a slightly ironic tone-of-voice.

"But don't you ever read boring things by mistake?" asked Kelly incredulously.

"Never!" averred Jenkinson. "If I did, I wouldn't be a writer now, would I?" Which rhetorical statement was duly followed up by: "Fact is, even the worst things tend to interest me for one reason or another, even if only to the extent that I want to find out how bad or wrong they are."

"Really?" gulped the younger man innocently.

"Yes, well, I guess you could say that I grew out of my youthful aestheticism some time ago," Jenkinson confessed in a tone of scarcely concealed pride. "I used to plume myself on reading only the best, er, novels, I suppose you could say - you know, the ones which are most, ahem, classic." There was a short pause whilst he knocked back the rest of the wine in his glass, before continuing: "Well, I must have read just about everything there was to read in that category by the time I was thirty-five. But, since I couldn't give-up reading altogether, I decided to try a less aesthetic line and embrace the sort of, er, novels which more discriminating writers would prefer to avoid. Still, I'm not bored by them - at least not to the extent that I get bored by second-rate music, art, and drama, the last two of which I really can't abide at all on account of the fact that I've become too conceptual to tolerate anything so damned perceptual and fundamentally autocratic!"

Kelly thought he could empathize with that statement, baffling though it was, as he chose to say: "But you can't be reading second-rate novels all the time. Surely there must be some new first-rate ones?"

The older man paused to reflect a moment. "New classics, you mean? Yes, I suppose I do read something approximating to the classic every once in a while. It's hard to tell really."

Kelly was about to say something about the book he was currently reading, which wasn't a novel at all, when Mrs Searle suddenly appeared in the doorway and informed everyone that dinner was ready. The last guest had just arrived in the guise of Rachel Davis, a relatively good-looking journalist who had apparently been held-up in the traffic. She was now talking to Douglas Searle who, in response to his wife's prompting, immediately began to usher everyone in the general direction of the dining room.

"Oh well, I could use something to soak-up the bilge water a bit," confessed Jenkinson ironically, as they came within sight of the food. "I haven't eaten anything since lunch time."

There were eight of them in all, Mrs Searle appointing the six guests their places as they arrived at the elongated rectangular table. The Searles elected to sit at opposite ends of it, as presumably was their custom, with the guests facing one another three abreast along its length. At a squeeze it could have sat ten people, but, for purposes of convenience, eight was considerably more satisfactory.

As the proceedings got under way, Kelly found himself seated near Mrs Searle at the end of his row, so to speak, with Keith Brady to his right and Gordon Hammer, a forty-eight-year-old concert pianist with balding head and drooping moustache, directly opposite. At the other end of the table, the host was flanked by Susan Healy on his left and by Trevor Jenkinson on his right, while the remaining place, in between Jenkinson and Hammer, was taken by Rachel Davis. Surprisingly, they all found the chicken commendable, despite its toughness, as the preliminary forays on it momentarily got the better of their conversations and imposed a modest silence upon everyone.

"Very nice," admitted Brady by way of congratulating Mrs Searle on her culinary handiwork. "There's nothing better than a chicken salad on such a warm evening."

"Indeed not!" confirmed Susan in response to her boyfriend's lead.

"Please feel free to help yourselves to more wine when you're ready," Searle informed them all, generously drawing their attention to the eight large bottles of quality German wine which stood at regular intervals along the table. "There's no shortage of plonk here."

"Worse luck!" Jenkinson exclaimed in mock-ironic fashion.

"Very nice wine," said Brady, who had just taken his first sip and was belatedly making a show of savouring the bouquet.

"Hmm," agreed Susan over the brim of her untouched glass.

Gordon Hammer was staring across at Kelly with a ...