

The Tenth
Acolyte Reader



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Niko

by I. L. Ingles

A

There was a gentle knock at the classroom door. "Come in," shouted Pascal from inside the stock cupboard.

"I've brought my History, Mr Lamb." The voice was that of John Waterhouse, an attractive and friendly boy.

Pascal emerged from the cupboard. "Good heavens! All twelve years of it?"

"Thirteen, you mean," retorted John. "It's my birthday next Friday."

"Well," smiled Pascal, "at least we have one thing in common. I shan't, however, be blossoming into a terrible teenager, acne and all, as our friend Cromwell might have said." He took the exercise book, his fingers resting for a second on the hand holding it.

"How old are you, sir? Would you like me to walk with you to the bus stop again?"

Pascal was amused. "I suppose, if pupils can never keep their ages secret, it's not really fair for us to. I shall be exactly thirty years older than you; and the answer is yes, I would love you to escort me. Good job you're not a guide dog, you'd be almost a hundred. Imagine it, the blind led by the geriatric."

"I know. It's because dogs mature quicker than us."

Pascal smiled again. "No confessions, please, and no false modesty. I'm sure you're very mature indeed. Now, do you remember any of the braille I taught you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You can finish off this paper for me."

John giggled. "Do you want a row of kisses on the bottom, sir?"

Pascal was enjoying this conversation, typical of John. "Do not corrupt your elders, young man. Anyway, it's not a love letter. Nobody loves a middle-aged schoolteacher. It's only a list of marks. A simple

underlining will suffice. You can pass me Talking Tim and put the braille machine away."

John pulled open the drawer of the desk and pressed the button on the clock. 'It is three thirty-three,' said a dalek voice. John handed Pascal the folded white cane which was in the drawer. "Shall I lock up here, sir?" he inquired a moment later from inside the stock cupboard, where the braille lived.

"Thanks, John. Now let us go hence and see if the March winds have blown the sun away."

"They haven't, sir. It's quite bright."

"Good. Solar heating and teenagers also have something in common. They're both extremely temperamental." He put out his right hand, and John took it with practiced familiarity.

B

John was a competent escort, and Pascal relaxed. "How are you going to celebrate your maturity – roasted adult on toast?"

"Going to Alton Towers with G.T.E. – I mean George," replied John. "He's paying."

George was the fat boy of the class; but, unlike many fat people, he was no jolly joker but a rather unpleasant and malicious character. Pascal had once carelessly described him as 'George The Egregious', and the name had stuck. "I shouldn't have let that slip out," murmured Pascal, blushing.

"I shouldn't worry, sir," said John. "He hated it at first, but he's got used to it. Probably likes it, but I'm not telling you what he calls you back."

Pascal smiled. "There, didn't I say you were mature?"

"Am I?" replied John abstractedly. "We're going to go on 'The Screw'. Turns you inside out."

"Charming," said Pascal. "If I didn't know you were as innocent as a new-born babe...! Are Mum and Dad going with you?"

John let out an audible sigh, and Pascal swore inwardly, furious with himself. Was his brain going? "Sorry, John. You did tell me about your Dad. I should have remembered."

"It's Mum now as well," growled John. "She's left me – dumped me on Gran and gone off for ever. Here's your 74, sir." He helped Pascal on. "See you, sir."

C

Pascal tapped his way along the crazy paving up to the front door. Once inside the lounge/diner, he hung the cane up full-length from one of the hooks beside the jamb and, without a word, marched into his room, and locked the door.

Hughie came out into the lounge. "Hello, you are my Pascal Lamb, and I claim the fifty-kiss prize. Oh." He walked over to Pascal's door and turned the handle. "Hell. Are you all right? Why've you shut me out?"

The reply was unambiguous. "Go away. Leave me alone."

Hughie's shoulders sagged. "For God's sake, Pascal, what've I done wrong now?"

The kettle whistled in the kitchen. Hughie switched it off and returned to the locked door. "Let me in, blast you."

"I said I want to be on my own," yelled Pascal, and buried his head in a towel to stifle his sobs.

"Yes," Hughie snapped back, "That's been obvious for weeks. What do you think I am, your bloody servant? Cook your meals, check your clothes, go over the bits of homework you bring back... wish you'd bring a real bit of homework back. I'd go over *him* all right. It'd give me someone else to shout at." He listened at the keyhole, swore, ran out of the lounge, round the house, and climbed in through Pascal's window. "What the bloody hell's going on?" He grabbed hold of Pascal and shook him violently, then gave him a fond kiss.

"Don't you understand English?" snapped Pascal.

"We didn't speak it in Llanafan," Hughie retorted, "but I do understand about the breaking-up of relationships if people won't talk." He kissed Pascal again. "Come on, Pas, we can't let ten years curl up and die like a piece of burnt bacon, nothing left but frizzle and cold fat. Put your head on Uncle Hughie's shoulder and have a good cry. Then I'll get you a drink. You're suffering from acquired afternoon-tea deficiency, but the minister of home affairs can cure it in a few seconds." He laughed dramatically.

Pascal tried to smile. "Sorry. Couldn't help it. It was because of John."

"John?"

"Yes, Waterhouse. You've seen his name when we've been marking books. He's going to Alton Towers for his birthday. I must be losing my senses. I asked him if he was taking his mother and father with him."

"Don't see anything controversial in that. Of course, people of both

sexes do go in by the same turnstile, but in these enlightened days..."

"Don't try to make me laugh, Hughie. John told me ages ago that his father's in prison for rape with violence. I should've remembered... and now his mother's run off. I wanted to wrap myself round him and hug and kiss him for ever. I couldn't prevent the tears trickling down my cheeks all the way home, and I was praying that people would think it was something to do with these useless eyes of mine. They do run a bit. Poor John."

"Poor Pascal, you mean," interjected Hughie, "and poor me. What's happening to you? You haven't slept with me for nineteen nights. I can hardly talk to you, let alone touch you. How do you think *I* feel? I love you. Do you follow me?" He was almost shouting again. "In basic English, you are the singular direct object of this dependent verb."

Pascal had had enough. "Please, Hughie, not now."

"Please, Hughie, not now!" Hughie mimicked. "I'm not asking you to come to bed with me this instant – 4.56 on a Friday afternoon. It's communicating I'm talking about, not copulating."

Pascal flinched. "So am I."

There was an awkward pause, then Hughie said morosely "All right. Let's have that cup of tea. You can freshen yourself up while I get it ready." He kissed Pascal lovingly on the forehead. "Just now you said you couldn't help crying and feeling the way you do. Okay, but I can't help feeling the way I do. I know you don't love me, not like I love you, but we've had a perfectly workable understanding, and it's lasted ten pretty good years. Don't destroy it. It'd be us you'd destroy, my darling, not just a relationship... a couple of middle-aged, under-employed gays. Me, a waiter in a dubious club and restaurant; you a part-time teacher of R.E. and History. We're like hundreds of others who don't mix with the drag and drug lot and can't compete with the bright and busy brigade, but can make out pretty well with a nuclear niche of two and no kids." He kissed Pascal again. "Get those tears under control, and I'll try and do the same with my temper."

Pascal washed, squirted himself with deodorant, changed into comfortable clothes, and tried to be normal.

D

Mrs Gwendoline Jones smiled, looked at the calendar, and drew a ring round the eleventh of April. Then she trotted out of her picture-book Welsh cottage and headed for the post office in Llanafan. "Maybe a bath

curtain, his is so tatty, and 'The Sound of Music', him being blind, and Hughie likes it."

E

John Waterhouse walked out of St Peter's Post Office, sat down on a canal step, smiled, and inked in a 4 in front of the 3 on the birthday card. Back home, he sat on his bed, grinned at the picture of the naked boy, full-frontal, grinning back at him, and read aloud, Gran being safely out of hearing: –

*My dear lamb? How very cute
To show us all your birthday suit.
Now to your party we have come,
So introduce us to your -'*

He opened the card – 'Bum!'

F

Hughie and Pascal sat on the settee, listening to the slow movement of Mozart's twenty-first piano concerto. When it had finished, Pascal leaned over and switched the cassette off, and Hughie leaned over him to kiss the back of his neck. "Zo," said Pascal in a mock-German accent "you haf vays of making me talk?"

"Ja, and the sooner the better for both of us." He kissed the neck again.

"Just don't interrupt for a while," enjoined Pascal. "Give me a chance. There's nothing new. Nothing's changed. Just the frustration factor reaching its limit, like steel, Hughie, steel. Don't suppose anyone would ever call me tough or heroic, especially you... why should you?... but really I'm armored in proof, invisibly armored. Perhaps I've outgrown it because I've been wearing it since I was fifteen and hardly ever been able to put it aside in all these twenty-eight years."

"Fifteen? You mean when...?"

"When I got you in the grass cuttings. Now shut up."

The phone rang. Hughie answered it. "Yes, okay, if you really need me. Quarter to. See you." He slammed the receiver down. "Patrides wants me to start work half an hour earlier. Keep talking. It may be extremely important to both of us. When you got me in the grass

cuttings..."

Pascal nodded glumly. "I had to prove to myself whether I was really a boy-lover. It could have been a disaster: you might have been a macho heterosexual."

Hughie laughed. "It would have been a disaster all right, if the groundsman had decided to switch on the cutter and tidy up the outfield just then. Old man's beard or schoolboy's balls, it's all the same to the Mighty Mower in the Sky." There was a long pause. "Sorry."

"After that," persevered Pascal, "I took chances and discovered it was younger people I liked."

"Thought you said there was nothing new," interrupted Hughie. "Are you trying to tell me you've been having sex with kids and not just with me?"

"For God's sake, Hughie, can't you keep quiet for just ten minutes? I've managed for ten years. For ten years I've had no other partner but you. In bed it's been with you or with nobody, no one else sharing the cooking and shopping, no one else reading to me, no one else but you on holiday with me, no one else to care for or be cared for by, just like you've wanted; but before that there were eighteen other years, Hughie, eighteen years, when the only sexual pleasure I had was either with myself or in my dreams, except two afternoons with a boy at a caravan camp, and six times with a boy from my last school who got tired of me when someone his own age turned up. They didn't actually give me away, probably scared, but they spread stories about me, till the Head suggested I should apply for my present job. There was a vacancy and he got me in." Pascal let out a long sigh. "Eight little innings in eighteen years, Hughie. Not exactly a full-time program, is it, any more than my teaching is? Then ten years with you." Hughie put an arm round him and hugged him tight, and Pascal burst into tears again.

Hughie was immediately full of remorse. "Sorry about my temper, Pas. You should have told me all this ages ago; and, if it's the sex part of it, well, we haven't done badly in those ten years."

"Bumping into you again was a miracle," said Pascal between sniffs.

"Could be," smiled Hughie. "R.E. teachers have divine guidance. They see light at the end of the tunnel when nobody else can."

"Too easy, Hughie," Pascal sighed. "What has God ever done about my blindness, or did he send it as a judgment on me after I seduced you under the grass cuttings?"

"Pish. It was mutual. We helped each other grow up."

Pascal sighed. "It was wonderful. Being gay or loving boys *is*

wonderful. It's being that way, blind and British that fouls it up, like a cable with three wires that won't fit into one plug. To love boys is to be given a little hint of heaven. To be blind and love boys is hell. The world talks with its eyes. How can a blind man talk with his? How can he even know that that pretty boy is sitting there astride that bike at the edge of the pavement? How can he know that a young potential is lounging against the wall four meters away or flaunting himself up there on the diving board?

"When you are blind you see with your hands. Try that on your average boy in the street! Even if it's true that one person in ten is gay or bisexual, nine aren't – and how does someone like me even get near a boy except by luck?" This time Hughie did not interrupt.

"Suppose," continued Pascal, "you just happen to sit beside him or him by you. He may be one of the nine; but, even if he is 'that way', he may not be interested or willing. He too is a cross-section of the psyches; and, even if ten per cent *are* actually drawn to males, it doesn't follow that a blind boy-lover is going to meet one of them. A man like me is in a minute minority of a minority – and all around are the seeing eyes. They hover round the innocent victim, the tender boy, the defenseless son of the petrified tribe. Look, there's his mother keeping him in view from the other side of the room. There's his teacher watching over him on the beach. Look again, there's his brother spying on him from the car. There is the usherette, pinning him down with her torch. There is his schoolfriend staring across the playing field... and there's his nice little sister who tells tales. A passing policeman gazes through the trees. A priest crosses the cemetery and raises inquiring eyebrows. The baths attendant turns a dutiful head. In the store the detective eyes the innocent defenseless boy shopping with his friend. Everyone has him in focus... the high-perched lorry driver, the efficient social worker, the local reporter, the pin-stripe-wearer, the publicans and all the other sinners... all have their eyes on him. How a boy ever vanishes without trace is one of the world's mysteries. All the eyes are on him, and their owners are not gay.

"So what about the gays? What about the common spotless gay, safe in his nest, who doesn't want young boys? Does he defend people like me? Does he care for this sub-group of a sub-group of a sub-group? Do *you* care, Hughie?"

Pascal paused again, and again Hughie did not interrupt, so Pascal sucked in a weary breath and continued "That's why I've sheathed myself in armor all these years – because no one cares, and no one dares – because, if I tried to be myself, I'd be picked up, not by some nice thirteen- or fourteen-year-old, but by some nasty guardian of the prejudices of the community, which cannot

cope with exceptions, which fears me; a community of hypocrites, whose members stand together because they'd fall alone, and great would be the fall of them: the slanderers, the backbiters, the materialists and money-grabbers, the sensualists, the profiteers, the pimps, the wife-beaters, the creatures who make violent films, the fundamentalists, the fascists, the time-wasters, the reckless drivers, the politicians economical with the truth, the narrow-minded activists, the bosses who underpay their employees, all the average normal people who inhabit this land."

Again Pascal drew in a deep breath. "Say after me 'What are normal people made of? Care and prayer and love to spare, that's what normal people are made of – but what are pedophiles made of? Lust and lies and children's cries, that's what pedophiles are made of.' Ugh. For every filthy rapist, every boy-snatcher, there are hundreds like me who want nothing worse than a caring friendship with a boy who is willing; but what am I? – someone to be locked up because I'm dangerous to our sons. I don't knock them down with cars, I don't strigate them with sarcasm, frighten them with rages, preach hatred to them or buy weapons to destroy them. I just love them. Well, I am locked up in my armor of grief and pain and self-control, in a panoply of incompleteness. Am I not a human being too? If you do not feed me, don't I starve? If you curse me, do I not wither? If you lock me up, do I not pine? If you take my children away, does my heart not break – and, when you fill the boys with fear of me, do they not lose the love I have to give? They don't always get it from their 'normal' parents or guardians, that's for sure.

"What kind of a world is this that pretends that joy and strength, pleasure and love, come only in one clearly-labeled packet of one officially-approved mixture? That is an evil. I am not."

Hughie stroked Pascal's hair. "I never said you were, and when did you hear me go on against boy-loving?"

"When were you ever challenged?" shouted Pascal. "What do you say now?"

"No need to yell at me."

Pascal shook the hand away. "What do you say?"

Hughie lost his temper. "That I love you, damn you."

"But what about me and my kind?"

"If you must know," grated Hughie, "to me it doesn't seem natural."

"Oh my God! Meet Mr 99 Per Cent. Not natural! That's what they say about *you* Hughie, and pretend not to know about Tchaikovsky and Shakespeare, David and Jonathan, and all the thousands of others."

"I know," said Hughie, "but it's different and, if it becomes a media

issue, the rest of us may lose what we struggled so hard to get."

"Struggled?" exploded Pascal. "You didn't struggle to get me. We bumped into each other by chance after eighteen years – or was it another quirk of divine will?" He stood up. "I'll tell you what you may lose soon, Hughie Jones – me! The armor's cracked, Hughie. It's been cutting me to pieces, weighing me down. I can't cope any more. I've been trying to hide myself under a skin of steel, so that nobody could see how weak and needy I am. To wear armor you have to be strong, and I've no strength left. I just have to be myself. I want to be what I am, I want a boy to love, even if he can't love me, one who at least will enjoy my company or pretend to."

Hughie was still cross. "If you have all this to cope with, why the hell did you become a schoolteacher? That was asking for trouble." His voice softened. "What puzzles me is how you keep sane with all those kids around you, and all that ache inside you."

"Oh, the numbers don't worry me much. It's like being in the sea. The sea is vast but you only swim in your little body-space of it at any given moment. You let the children surge around you, breakers to the right of you, breakers to the left of you; let them tumble about in waves ahead and behind, but mostly you only have to deal with those close at hand. It's the ache inside that's the real problem. I can't bear the thought of them being doomed to suffering, even the children that hurt me." Pascal's voice cracked. "Hughie, do try to understand me and not just love me. I'm more than a pair of buttocks and a pubic convenience."

Hughie glanced at his watch. "I've got to go."

Pascal ignored the hint. "School has kept me sane. There I can swim in the never-ending sea of boys, even if my bit of it is thick with minefields. I'm sure, if I hadn't been a teacher, I would have been in prison by now, or dead. Perhaps it would be better if I was."

"Stop that," snapped Hughie, "and just remember that, if it wasn't for you, I'd be saying the same sort of thing."

Pascal sat down with a weary sigh. "You'd better go. I'll sleep with you tonight if you want." Hughie embraced him lovingly, and hurried out of the house. "Remind me to wind up old Phoenix later," he shouted through the letterbox. They had silenced the cuckoo clock out of respect for Mozart.

G

It was half-past seven. Niko was enjoying himself. He was dressed

in his ostrich uniform, which always brought in extra-large tips. "The Inglenook' was crowded with cheerful customers. He wondered if it was full because it was the fourth of April, and they knew he always ostriched on the first Friday in the month, handing out sweetmeats at specially reduced prices.

Niko was sure people couldn't help liking the ostrich get-up. It emphasized his privates and his bottom in a way that made even *him* excited when he looked in a mirror, but it was absolutely safe because it clipped tightly all round him, and all they could do was pat him or give him a little pinch. His imitation Alexander-the-Great-style chiton, cut as short as you could get away with for 'Members Only' nights, was not safe at all. Many fast-moving fingers had crept inside it and felt his bottom before he could wheel round out of contact. Once a hand had slid up under the front of this tunic and kidnapped his foreskin, and he had had to bite savagely through the ear of the man whose hand it was and yell for Hughie to come to the rescue and bounce the man out.

Tonight it seemed to Niko that, shooting down from under the big, round, black ostrich-body bulge at his middle, his long legs in their skin-colored tights looked particularly elegant and artistic. Above the bulge of the bird's body his torso was corseted in a clinging diaphanous vest, also skin-colored, which showed off his slim waist and broadening chest to perfection. He never tired of this work, not even physically. His uncle Patrides made sure he was rationed to ninety minutes' waiting on any one night, well under the legal maximum for a fourteen-year-old.

For slack times there was the Sabu rig-out. While the cook combined leering at him with keeping *cave* against the arrival of unannounced inspectors, Niko steeped himself in a quick-drying, temporary dye in the kitchen sink, a vast thing nearly two meters long. The dye colored his body a beautiful glistening, fragrant brown. Meanwhile, Patrides would remove some of the tables in the restaurant and widen the gaps between the others.

At a given signal, Niko, wearing nothing but a brilliant red loin cloth and matching turban, would make a spectacular entrance on a tricycle. Patrides had ornamented the handlebars with the trunk and flapping ears of a paper-mache elephant. An old pajama-cord attached to the saddle did duty as a tail. Niko would ride up and down between the diners, flinging them peanuts and jelly-babies.

Tonight, however, it was Niko's favorite, his ostrich night. Hughie watched him thoughtfully from the opposite side of the restaurant and flashed him a friendly, approving smile when their eyes happened to meet.

H

In his shabby back-to-back bedroom, John Waterhouse ringed round the 11th on his Oxfam almanac. For the rest of the week both he and Gwendoline Jones continued to mark off their calendars day by day.

Exceeding his word, Pascal slept with Hughie for the next three nights, not without pleasure. Then the malaise overwhelmed him again and he returned to his own bedsit-cum-office-cum-bathroom.

I

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Lambkin, happy birthday to you!" Hughie finished his aria on a high falsetto, whipped off Pascal's sheet, and chuckled "How sweet the Lambkin sleeps upon this bunk! Here's a 43-year-old cup of tea for my beloved. My beloved is..." Hughie tickled him, making him squirm and squeak... "come to life. Breakfast in fifteen minutes. Your favorite. Your cuppa's on the floor."

Pascal smiled and Hughie went back to the kitchen. Pascal gulped down the tea, made a hurried toilet, and joined Hughie in the lounge.

"Best egg and bacon I've had for at least one week. Thanks, Hughie."

Hughie smiled. "Can't be original with a man who knows what he likes. Now, as to your present –"

"Oh, you don't need to bother. We're past that sort of thing."

"All my concubines say that," smiled Hughie, "and it's rubbish. No. When presents cease, so do futures. Here's an envelope."

As Hughie spoke, something fluttered down onto the doormat. "Card from my mother for you but not her customary check. She doesn't love you any more, Lambkin. Well, as I was about to say, in this envelope you will find twenty pounds. Final payment for your present. I couldn't arrange for it to be delivered any earlier. Had to be ordered. Someone'll bring it round tonight. I shall probably be working, so you'd better have the money. It's cash on delivery."

"Thanks, but twenty pounds is far too much."

"Rubbish again. How dare you question my judgment!"

"Sorry. Shame we have to work on my birthday," murmured Pascal, angry with himself for sounding ungrateful.

"Needs must," Hughie replied calmly, "and what's twenty pounds between friends? After last Friday I felt I just had to do something

special. Don't fret if it's late; it'll come. I'll bring back something sparkling with me. You ought to be celebrating."

J

John Waterhouse picked up the letters. "Bitch!"

From the dining-room his grandmother called "Your cereal's on the table, lovey, and something else."

John walked through to join them. "Here are your letters, Grandpa," he said off-handedly. The two grandparents glanced at each other with raised eyebrows. "Open your parcel, darling," said Grandma in her crackling voice, like walking through dead leaves.

John opened the packet. "Thanks. Can I wear them to school?"

Grandma smiled. "Of course, lovey. Now eat up." She rose hastily from the table and hurried out before the boy could see her tears.

Half an hour later, John watched Pascal go into the empty classroom. He followed him in, to be greeted by a less than tuneful "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear gift of God, happy birthday to you."

John looked at Pascal in surprise, not for the first time. "How did you know it was me?"

Pascal smiled. "Trade secret. Actually I was hoping we might meet like this."

John, unable to control himself any longer, blurted out "Mum never even sent a card."

"That's tough," murmured Pascal sympathetically. "Well, thirteen isn't a bad age to get yourself measured for a suit of armor. Life is a bit of an Agincourt for most of us, but you can compensate for it with a little touch of Pascal in the stock cupboard. I have a birthday something for you. Come inside."

Pascal opened the cupboard door. "Have a good look outside first. Anyone about?"

John looked through the windows. "No, sir."

"Good. Follow me in, then."

Again John was surprised. Was he really about to be given a present? Old Lambie had always been rather different from other members of staff.

"Right," said Pascal. "Show me your new trainers."

Amazed, John lifted up one leg. "How did you know?"

"Ha," Pascal chuckled. "Who always wears boots, but not today?" He felt the foot. "Very stylish." Then he ran his hands up John's leg and

body and, reaching the boy's head, said quietly "Now. This is my magic for vanquishing the unfairness of life." He leaned forward and kissed the boy on the left cheek. "That's from your dad." Then he kissed him on the right cheek. "And that's from your mum." Finally he kissed him on the lips. "And that's from me; but, whatever you do, never breathe a word about it or the spell is broken. Then the magician gets the sack or is cast into a dungeon. Understand?"

In some agitation John retorted, "I'm not stupid, sir. Please don't ever kiss me again. People would think I was a poofter."

Pascal affected to be shocked. "What a horrible word. What do you think it means?"

John sidled towards the door. "Boys who kiss each other, and all that."

"Well, John, words like 'poofter' are unkind. I understand that as many as one man or boy in ten may be gay – a slightly better word – and that's a lot of people. Your best friend could be, without you knowing. Don't worry, I shan't do it again. It was special, Mr Mature Young Man of the Week."

"Thank you, sir. It was kind of you to think of it, anyway."

The bell rang. "Battle commences," said Pascal, smiling bravely. "Help me get things ready. The *egregii* are coming." As he sat down at his desk his hands chanced upon a piece of card. "Ha!"

John darted over and stood by the desk. "It's for your birthday, sir, it's got braille on."

"Thanks for remembering. Well, John, you've made my day. I couldn't imagine a more welcome surprise – and with kisses," said Pascal, with another smile.

John became agitated again. "Sir, everybody puts those."

The rest of the class began charging in.

K

Hughie glanced at his watch. They were sitting at the table, Hughie dictating and Pascal taking down notes on a brailler. "One more sentence Pas, then I'll have to be off."

Pascal grunted. It was a familiar situation.

"Right," said Hughie, moving towards the door. "See you some time. If your present hasn't arrived by nine, ring me at 'The Inglenook'. I shouldn't be too late. Patrides knows it's your birthday." They kissed.

Pascal settled back down to work. At eight o'clock he put on a tape

of 'Carmina Burana'. Half way through, there was a knock at the door. "Who is it?" he shouted. He never opened the door without checking first.

"Present for Mr Lamb," shouted a voice he vaguely recognized from taking phone messages.

"Okay." Pascal opened the door. "Come in. How much to pay?"

"Five now and fifteen in the morning when I collect," said Patrides. "Eight sharp."

Pascal was taken aback. "Oh, you mean it's only for hire?"

"That's right, sir. These things don't come permanently, not this one anyway. Only allowed out to people we can trust. Here you are, sir."

Pascal found his hands placed suddenly on top of something silky, like the hair of a beautifully groomed spaniel. "It's a dummy! No. Too soft. It's a doll. The silly fool! It's one of those sex dolls you have to blow into."

"You could call it that, sir," murmured Patrides. "Treat it gently, Mr Lamb. No rough stuff. It's the only one like it I've got. Happy birthday."

The door shut, and Pascal heard the crunch of tires driving away over the gravel. "I've a good mind to put this in Hughie's bed," he snorted, Angering the present again.

"No you ostriching won't!" said the dummy. "He's too bad-tempered nowadays."

Pascal jumped. "It can talk. It's a talking robot for blind people."

"It's nothing of the sort," said Niko. "It's a boy. Congratulations."

Pascal stood motionless, flabbergasted.

"And it doesn't like being called 'It'. Even robots have names."

"What's yours, then," Pascal mumbled, "And who are you?"

"Niko."

"Ha," said Pascal, "Greek?"

"Mum is. Patrides is my godfather but I call him 'uncle'. That's how your Hughie knows about me – I work at the 'Inglenook' sometimes. I have to hand round goodies and look delicious." Niko said nothing about how excited the request from Hughie had made him.

Pascal frowned. "Hughie's never mentioned you."

Niko giggled. "I'm so beautiful it leaves him speechless. Why've you got such a funny name?"

"Could say the same about yours. I was born on Good Friday, and my parents liked making corny jokes."

Another giggle. "So does your Hughie. He said I've turned up in the 'Niko' time. Thinks I'll do you good. Just what the vet ordered."

"Vet?"

"Pascal *Lamb!* Get it? My kagoul's wet; the rain's peeing down out there. Boring. My legs are damp too. Shall I hang it beside your white stick?"

"Go ahead. You're obviously used to making yourself at home."

Niko was playing with the cane. "I hope your prick's not as long as this stick. I would really get bored then."

Pascal forced himself to ask the question to which he already knew the answer. "My prick? You mean you're a... prostitute?" Could this bright, cheerful creature really be a rent-boy?

Niko let the cane clatter back against the wall. "Naughty, Mr Lamb. 'A chain or whip my bum would strip, but names'll never hurt me.' Uncle wouldn't like you calling me a prostitute. I sleep with him most nights. Other 'special' people have to be positively-vetted."

"Vetted?" Pascal repeated with a smile. "Not what you would call 'doctored', I hope."

"Positively *niet*" giggled Niko. "I wouldn't have any customers then. No extra pocket money. We have to know you're not violent and can't give me AIDS or anything." He was warming to Pascal, whose humor slotted in with his own – and who was pretty good-looking when he smiled, which was often. "Uncle says you can do what you like with me all night, so long as there's no sado stuff." Then, soberly, "But I shan't mind a few bites if you get worked up. Anywhere except my face and neck. There's no P.E. till Tuesday."

"P.E.?"

"When we have showers – but my bite marks always go in a couple of days. I'm a good healer. Do you want to start straightaway? We've got more than ten hours."

In the bedroom Niko, without commenting, deposited a packet of condoms on Pascal's desk, and said, in a mock-professional manner, "Being your vet, I've brought my syringe with me. If you want injections..." Fingers suddenly grasped Pascal's right hand, pulling gently at it until it was pressing against the bulge between the boy's thighs. "If I gave you a quick injection now, I could manage at least two refills in ten hours, more, probably. Like Uncle says, I'm not permanent; but, if you put an S in front, I'm very! Want to undress me? The sooner you start, honey, honey, the more you get for your money, money."

Niko was clearly experienced and full of rather cocky confidence. It made Pascal feel slightly more confident himself. He lifted his hands to caress the boy's glossy hair, prior to feeling him all over, and then

undressing him. But something had happened to the hair. "What's this?" Pascal queried.

"My ostrich head," tittered Niko, thinking that Pascal's hands had a pleasant smell. "I came straight from the restaurant." Niko was pleased with the split-second efficiency with which he had slipped the head on, but not with the kitchen smell he had brought along with it. "The ostrich kit shows me off lower down. They have very long legs and bunched bodies. If you feel my backside..."

Pascal found that he was not quite as self-confident as he had hoped. He was still adjusting to the astonishing advent of Hughie's *deus ex machina* and replied lamely, "It's all rather sudden."

Niko was alarmed. "Don't you want me? Your Hughie said you were frantic."

Slowly Pascal ran his hands over Niko's ostrich rump and the bulge between the thighs, then down the long, slightly rain-dampened legs. Niko shivered. The man was so gentle. It was very erotic.

Pascal's hands slid back up the tights. "Do your parents know about all this?"

Niko shivered again as the fingers moved into his crotch. "Dad's dead. Mum works every night 'cept Wednesdays, so I sleep at Uncle's, because she thinks it's safer. She doesn't know anything. When Uncle and I agree to rent me out to 'special' customers, I get forty per cent. That's fair, because he takes most of the risks. He'd go to prison."

Pascal had never encountered a boy like this. He knew rent-boys existed but his stereotype imaginings had never conjured up a conversation such as Niko and he were having. The boy clearly enjoyed his work, unless those shivers had been signs of fear. Surely not.

"If you unzip my back, you can pull off the ostrich head and neck together. It's like a vest. It's transparent, to show off my body."

Pascal took the hint. The boy's back and chest were warm and just the slightest bit moist. Stage fright? Good actors always admitted to that.

"Now," said Niko, "put your hands between my legs. No, right in. Now find the seam and pull. There's a sort of strap made of Velcro." The body of the ostrich separated into two hanging halves, joined only round the waist. "Neat, isn't it? Now you can pull off the tights and the claws. They're transparent too. I wish you could see how beautiful my legs look." Why did such a nice man have to be blind?

Pascal grew more confident. "I hope the middle part isn't transparent as well."

"No," giggled Niko, "Always leave something to the imagination."

That's what our English teacher says. Now just tug the rest down like a skirt. It's only elastic."

Pascal discovered a pair of tiny bikini-like briefs. "That's to tantalize you. Come and get me! Get me and come with me! Can we have a bath? I stink of the club."

Pascal heard water running. He moved toward the bath and was immediately pinched on his bottom. The boy was as stealthy as a panther. "Usually both people take their clothes off, sir. Shall I help you?" Before the words were out, Niko had flicked down Pascal's zip and was fiddling with the button on the waistband. Pascal made a vague grab at him and, by sheer chance, caught him round the shoulders, but already the trousers were sliding floorwards.

"Can you control yourself, sir? Then we could give each other a bath. It's fun. What's the matter, sir?"

Pascal had started to cry, very quietly. "Sorry, Niko. I can't help it. May I kiss you?"

Niko was astonished. He had never had a customer who was so respectful to him. "You are funny," he said, trying not to sound rude. "Course you can. That's what I'm here for. Hang on." He darted away and turned off the taps. Then, springing back in a single bound, he stood front to front with Pascal, who was surprised to find himself being stripped as he planted kiss after kiss on the boy's damp face and somewhat mushy lips.

It was a strange sensation, standing suddenly naked chest to naked chest and naked thigh to naked thigh. Pascal ran a hand down Niko's spine to pat him on the rump, and found a thin cord round the narrow waist. Niko giggled. "You know your Hughie paid for me to be your male-order birthday present? Well, you haven't quite finished unwrapping me. Some people use their teeth on parcels." He stood still, giggling occasionally, as Pascal knelt and pulled down the bikini with his teeth. "Carry me, sir."

While they washed each other in hot soapy water, Niko asked "Why do you two have separate bath and bedrooms? Aren't you lovers?"

Pascal sighed. "He's a lover, and I'm very fond of him, and we help each other, but I need time by myself and space to be myself. I shall never be in love with Hughie. I want a... someone who doesn't make so many demands, someone young and free and easy. You know, someone relaxed who doesn't want to protect me all the time and can do without me some nights."

Niko dried Pascal in delighted silence, then exclaimed "That's strange. I

feel exactly the same. Uncle's very nice but he wants to control me all the time. Do you think I'm beautiful?" Much depended on the reply to this question.

"How can I tell?"

"No," persisted Niko, "I mean, when you feel me all over and feel my shapes, am I beautiful to your fingers and you?"

"Stop it," said Pascal, "you'll have me crying again. You're the most beautiful thing that's ever happened to me. Hughie and I have a decent enough arrangement; but, if Master Wonderful came along, Hughie would have to adjust. He knows. Lots of people have to make the best of things."

"You're telling me!"

Pascal was startled. "You mean you don't actually like sleeping with people?"

"It's okay. I love the sex and I'm good at it. I just wish I could tell Mum I'm gay, but she'd do her nut." Another giggle. "You and I'll be doing other kinds of nuts, won't we, soon?" Then he was serious once more. "And I wish she didn't have to work like she does; only, if she didn't, I might not be able to have much sex with Uncle, or even get out like this. And the cash is useful. She thinks it's money from Uncle for borrowing me to help in 'The Inglenook'. Only it's my lovely legs and beautiful backside he's borrowing. Do you think it's all right for an R.E. teacher to have sex with teenagers?"

Pascal was shaken. "God, that was like a sniper bullet." He was silent for some time, then nodded. "Yes. I *do* think it's all right. God made us like this and it's lovely. It's other people who confuse everything, with their rigid laws and artificial age-barriers."

Niko clapped his hands. "Can I sit on your lap, and try out your computer, only a while, and then you can have me." He had been terrified that he had spoiled things – it had been careless to let slip that he recognized Pascal from school. It was amazing that a blind man could take on classes of teenagers and cope. You needed something more than good looks for that.

L

Hughie sat in the 74 bus and nursed the champagne. This was a particularly special occasion. Pascal could enjoy a glass straightaway, if he wasn't otherwise engaged.

John sat at his bedroom desk and updated his diary. He wrote: "I wish old Lambie was my dad, though he was a bit sloppy today."

M

"Listen to your computer talking." 'File 1: Niko. File 2: Lamb. Merging files now.' There was a bleep. 'Edit text.' Niko wriggled excitedly, but took care not to push against Pascal's erection. His own he had under perfect control. "Listen... This computer has no joy-stick. You are a file. I am a file. Go and lie on the bed on your front. I will use my joy stick, and we shall merge." With another giggle, he slipped off Pascal's lap. "New directory! It's called 'Chase'. Catch me first. Grab my prick and I'm your slave for ever."

"You cocky young devil," exclaimed Pascal. A great release of tension and a surge of happiness had overwhelmed him. He hurled himself in the direction of the will o' the wisp voice.

"Cocky? You're dead right," crowed Niko, now standing on the toilet seat. "I wish you could see how cocky I actually am." There was a catch in his throat as he made the joke. They circled round the room, Niko always just out of reach, teasing his victim with moos and coos from places vacated just as Pascal's groping fingers were half a centimeter away. He knew it wasn't really fair, but he couldn't help doing it, and the teacher looked very sexy, jumping about after him. There could never be another customer as nice as this man, and he had lovely big testicles.

Then suddenly a handle turned, and Hughie was standing in the doorway. Pascal was kneeling on the floor and pushing back the drawer under the bed, his posterior up in the air. Niko stood looking down at him from the bed. Pascal had heard him pretending to pull the drawer out.

"Bottoms up, it seems," chuckled Hughie, shielding his eyes with the champagne as if scandalized.

Niko, standing poised to spring over Pascal's head, froze for an instant, then slithered down onto the floor, turned his backside to Hughie, knelt beside Pascal, and shouted in the piping voice of a distressed maiden "You must choose between us!"

Unnoticed, Hughie pocketed some of the condoms and intoned "You're under arrest for indecent composure. Sentence: cake and champagne in your best birthday suits, followed immediately by one night's community service."

N

Hughie poured some champagne into a condom and handed it to

Niko. Niko shook his head. "Eugh, no thanks – anyway, I'm driving," he tittered. He steered away a hand creeping over his lap, and covered his privates with a serviette.

"Well," slurred Hughie, who had drunk most of the champagne because the birthday boys were anxious not to endanger their performance, "I've kept you from your duties long enough, so I'll bugger off while you two bugger on. First, however, a final round of conjaculations. My last word is this: people say 'Penny wise, pound foolish' but I say... go, spend your pennies and then pound away merrily. Vamoose!"

O

"I brought them for safer sex," said Niko.

"No need," Pascal grunted.

"Sorry," persisted Niko, "compulsory." He looked anxiously at Pascal. One customer had walked out raging when a condom was produced.

"Oh, all right, but what problem is there if you've always used them? I'm no danger."

"It's like they say at school," said Niko. "The rule's for everybody's good." He tried to change the subject. "I hope there's some of that champagne left in the morning. It's a shame we couldn't risk drinking much."

"I've arranged it with Hughie," said Pascal with a smile. "Well, we've spent our pennies. Are you ready to pound?"

Niko set about engineering his favorite pleasure. He decided on the winsome-boy technique. Fluttering his fingertips delicately up and down the backs of Pascal's thighs, he murmured, "I think it'd be a good idea if you lie down on your front this first time." He lifted up the fingertips and ran them even more delicately in little circles round and round Pascal's bottom. "I do everything else better," he added engagingly, "if people let me lie on top of them first, when it's an all-night session." He had known men who thought the only use for his prick was to stick it back in their mouths every time he filled up again.

"You win, as always," Pascal chuckled, and complied.

Niko, a few minutes of heaven now safely guaranteed, hopped joyfully into position and settled down to the night's work with a strange sense of anticipation different from any he normally experienced. He prayed that the man would be as good at satisfying him in bed as he was at

answering awkward questions from teenagers. Grasping Pascal around the nipples, he began pumping as unhurriedly as he could manage. He was an expert at self-control, but this evening the desire for sex had been difficult to hold back. Besides, there was this new... and, although you always had to size up and excite your customers, he had spent too long over the preliminaries, and the champagne thing had added another twenty minutes.

Hughie listened outside the bedroom door to an unrestrained, yelping Niko enjoying his orgasm, and muttered savagely "I can't do more than I have done to show somebody I love him, but what's a bloody schoolboy of fourteen got that I haven't?"

P

Hughie had just finished the washing-up and was going through the ritual resuscitation of old Phoenix, when there was an imperious knock on the front door. He hurried over, and shouted "Who's there?", unnecessarily loudly, so as to warn the illicit couple in the rank sweat of their ensemenced bed.

"Me," shouted back an impatient Gwendoline Jones. "Hurry up. It's pouring."

"God!" Hughie opened the door and let his mother in.

"I wanted to surprise you," spluttered Gwendoline, "but not like this. I've brought a present for the blind man you look after. Tape and bath curtains. Thought I'd bring it myself and see my darling little boy as well." She kissed him effusively.

"You *are* soaking," said Hughie, trying discreetly to shake her off.

"Only the coat. I'll hang it up." As she did, she noticed Niko's kagoul. "Rather short for you, isn't it?" she said suspiciously. "No little girls, I hope, in my big boy's flat. I'm staying the night."

"Of course not," said Hughie, nettled. "It's... something Pascal confiscated."

"I see," nodded Gwendoline, "and what's this?" She held up the ostrich kit, which Niko had brought out to dry.

Hughie was ready. "It's props for a drama he's involved in with one of the kids. Something Greek. *The Birds*, perhaps."

"Oh yes," Gwendoline muttered, "he teaches religion. I remember." Her eyes lighted upon the champagne bottle. "Ah, just what I need." Ignoring the glasses, she picked it up and saw the condoms Hughie had left lying beside it. After a long silence she inquired sarcastically "And these?"

Hughie had to think quickly. "Er... condoms... confiscated as well," he blustered, hoping the two in the bedroom could hear his raised voice. "You know how it is in schools these days, mother."

"Rubbish!" snorted Gwendoline. "They don't confiscate them; they're handed out. You can't hide things from your mother. You've had girls in here."

"Never."

From behind the bedroom door rose the sounds of Pascal bellowing in the first ecstasies of his release from ten years' sexual deprivation.

Gwendoline sat bolt upright, the bottle tilted towards her lips. "Hughie," she demanded, "what's that?"

"I think he's going through Act One."

Inside, unaware of the situation, a breathless Pascal slid down from Niko's back and hugged him tight. Their first bout of rutting had been so intense and noisy that Niko had not heard Mrs Jones' arrival either. He wrapped his thighs and arms around Pascal in a fierce lascivious body-lock then, for the second time that evening, froze abruptly in mid-romp.

Hughie was yelling. "Pascal, Mother's here. Brought you a present. Wants to see if it's suitable. Can you get up and stop the recording for a few minutes? Incidentally, she says the ostrich is smart, but I think it's in the way just now. Can you make yourself respectable and shift it?"

Niko grabbed the remaining condoms, leaped into the empty bath, and closed the curtains.

Pascal threw on a dressing-gown and shuffled into the lounge, leaving the door ajar so Niko could listen.

"Hullo, dearie, happy birthday. Sorry to get you up, but I so wanted to surprise you." She spoke in the loud voice of those who think blind people are also deaf and stupid. Pascal heard a stifled snigger from the bedroom. "I've brought you a lovely new bath curtain. Can I just pop through and see if it suits?"

In panic Niko looked round the room. "The big drawer under the bed!" Full. Only one thing left. He hoisted up the window, squeezed through and, still clutching his condoms, crouched low between the house and the neighboring hedge, the rain beating down icily onto his naked, unprotected, body.

Pascal, paralyzed with despair, heard Mrs Jones moving around the bedroom. Hughie followed her in, just in time to see her drape the discarded bikini over the new bath curtain and frown disapprovingly. Pascal heard the very audible "tut tut".

Pascal heard Gwendoline, on her way out, mutter something about the

rain blowing all over the bed, pull the window down, and lock it.

Niko, still crouching, crept round to the back of the garden. It had been almost exhilarating, dropping out through the window. The rain, now only drizzling, made him extremely conscious of his naked curves and hollows. After several minutes, however, he was shivering, and the panic came back. He found himself clutching, infant-like, at his genitals, then urinating helplessly onto the grass. If he were discovered out here, he would be destroying Pascal and condemning himself to constant supervision.

In the lounge, the other three began speaking at once. "It's – the curtain's – very pretty – kind – late...", unaware that Niko, shuddering with cold and fear, and praying that nobody would catch sight of him, was crawling through the soaking grass towards his only remaining hope, and praying that rescue would come. Perhaps, because of the rain and cold, none of the neighbors would be looking out; but, if anyone was, how could they fail to spot a totally-nude boy prowling around in somebody's garden!

Reaching the back door of the kitchen, Niko slowly turned the handle. The door was locked. The rain suddenly increased again. He sat down under the kitchen window and, for the first time in ages, burst into tears. Suppose Hughie went straight to bed? You couldn't shout to be let in. That woman might hear. The minutes passed, unbearably long, frigid minutes. Dare he go round to the side again and risk knocking on Pascal's window? *She* might be sleeping in Pascal's room.

Meanwhile, in the lounge, everybody went on making small talk. Pascal thanked Mrs Jones again for his present, and Hughie said "I'll run you a bath in my room, Mother, and make you a drink. You get back to bed, Pas. I'll sleep on the settee. We can all have a nice cozy chat in the morning. Go ahead, Mother. I'll put the kettle on." He went into the kitchen.

Niko, crouched despondently under the window, suddenly saw light streaming out around him. Infinitely slowly he raised his head up above the sill. At last! Hughie. Alone.

Frantically Niko tapped on the streaming pane, and an astonished Hughie, turning mechanically, saw a beseeching face pressed against the glass. "God!" In a second Hughie had the door open. "Run, you bloody ostrich! She's out of the lounge."

Niko scooted through into Pascal's bedroom just in time not to be seen by Gwendoline, who was re-entering the lounge with Hughie's hot-

water bottle.

Safely in the bedroom, Niko, all his exuberance surging back, locked the door, yanked the dressing-gown off Pascal, towed himself furiously with it, and burbled "Now I feel *really* sexy."

In the kitchen Gwendoline held up the hot-water bottle, and asked her highly amused son, "Can I use this? I need something hot and cuddly to go to bed with."

Q

Watery light filtered through the curtains. Niko sprawled across Pascal's chest and pressed the talking clock. '7.20'. He snuggled up to Pascal again. "You know when I was riding on top of you that first time?"

"Yes?" Blissfully Pascal exchanged some more kisses and caresses. Niko was a delightfully amorous creature.

"And you know I hummed 'We are sailing, we are sailing?'"

"Yes," murmured Pascal, "until you got too excited and started singing 'Hooray, and up she rises.'" He had had to stop Niko singing the next time, because of Mrs Jones. Niko had found the ban very difficult to comply with.

"Well, that was because sailing is my hobby." He thumped Pascal enthusiastically on the chest. "You can come with me one day if you like." He thumped him again. "It's getting late. I'm naked, and that woman's there. What're we going to do?" He hated the thought of going. This man was wonderful in bed, gentle and considerate, different from any man Niko had ever slept with.

Pascal sighed, and rubbed his thighs against Niko's warm flanks. Why couldn't this lingering moment be stretched out into a whole morning? "I'll get your gear, but don't put it on. Hughie's arranged everything. Your uncle will bring a carpet and you'll be spirited out in it. An ancient Egyptian idea. Do you want a bath?"

"Niet," yawned Niko. "Ancient Egyptians never had baths. What I'd really love is some more of that champagne and cake – and sex. Do you like your ingle?"

Pascal toyed with the thin clusters of hair between the warm, birthday-present, buttocks. "Ingle?"

"Someone like me – a very young and special and beautiful bedboy. That's why we call it 'The Inglenook', but I think only me and Uncle know. Actually I couldn't manage any more sex; I'm bugged!"

"Humph," Pascal grunted, "I bet you always say that."

Niko transformed himself into a fierce, hugging, randy gorilla. "This isn't like always."

R

John intercepted Pascal in the playground. "Did you have a nice birthday, sir?"

"Perfect. A friend visited me unexpectedly and stayed for hours. How about you?"

"Mum's card came." John tried to sound nonchalant.

"Yeh," sneered George, "but it didn't have no address on it." Pascal hadn't realized George was there. "Heard the news, sir? A teacher's going to be guillotined for doing you-know-what with one of the kids."

Pascal suddenly felt very sick.

S

"Haven't got the nerve, Hughie. There'll be a queue right round the playing field."

Hughie chuckled. 'Too close to the scene of the crime. 'Seduction in comprehensive pavilion. Teacher confesses.' Would you have confessed?"

"Heaven knows. Before I found out it was in the pavilion, I was terrified it was me they were talking about."

"You're too defensive. Why should they think it was you?"

"I kissed John, and there's Niko."

"How does Niko come into it?"

"In school he's called Nicholas Pinkney, but his voice gave him away. I remembered covering his class once. He kept on asking sudden awkward questions in this slightly foreign accent."

Hughie laughed. "You covered *him* pretty effectively, judging by the noises you were both making, but a whole class – my dear, what orgies!"

Pascal tensed. "After your marvelous display of love and practicality in producing Niko for me, why must you now reduce the whole thing to the level of 4th-form crudery?"

"Sorry. No need to be touchy."

"I'm not. I told you, I suppressed my real self for ten years. It's the real me you're talking to now."

"Okay, but I've got feelings too. So long as you stay, I can put up

with almost anything, but I do need you to show some degree of affection. I did my best for you. So the little rogue never let on he goes to your school?"

"No. Probably thought it would be a good thing for both of us if I remained in blissful ignorance. Typical of sighted people. Not you, of course. Sorry I snapped."

"In more ways than one. Well, if you're so determined to be yourself, don't keep on downgrading what the world may think of you. You're damned good-looking – that boy's eyes never left you – and you're the most caring person I've ever met. Just going through a bad patch, that's all. Anyway, it would be good for both of *us* if you were promoted. You might be able to buy Niko once a month, and I could afford a few more C.D.'s. You got him for a nominal rent this time, a favor."

"Oh my God!" shouted Pascal. "'Be kind to your non-sighted friends.' 'The blind man is my waiter's lover.' One beautiful weekend after ten bleak mid-winters and it turns out to be a charity performance."

"You want too much, Pas bach," grunted Hughie.

"Sorry," Pascal muttered contritely. "Do you know, he asked me if, as an R.E. teacher, I thought sex with boys was quite Christian. I told him that for me a shapely stripling of thirteen or fourteen was God's masterpiece, and to be loved by one would be the nearest a man could get to Heaven. He must have taken me for God's most naive creation. Okay, you forced down your jealousy and got a bedboy on the cheap for me, so I'll force down my sense of inferiority and apply for Head of R.E. on your behalf. Good night." He barged back angrily into his room.

Hughie, endeavoring to keep himself from shouting after his over-reactive friend, picked up one of the exercise books they had been marking, and read 'When his head was going to be decaffeinated, Raleigh said it didn't matter what state your head was in so long as nothing was wrong with your heart.' He threw the book down. "Charming. Out of the mouths of teenagers..."

Pascal's door opened again. "And don't mention the job for the next two weeks, or I'll withdraw!" The door slammed shut.

T

The place was crowded. A very strong and familiar odor washed up against Pascal's nostrils. Murdoch and his smoke-filled boom. "Hullo there, Lamb. I hear you've applied for Don Juan's lost job?"

Pascal was surprised. "Yes." Murdoch hadn't spoken to him for

weeks.

"Good luck to ye. Let the blind lead the blind, that's what I say."

Surprise mounted to astonishment. "Thanks." Murdoch had never been more than necessarily civil before.

The bell rang and the Staff Room emptied... and so the days went slowly by.

The days were going by slowly for Patrides too. Hughie was duly sympathetic. "Seems strange without him," he commiserated one evening.

"Teenagers!" Patrides exploded. "Twelve days running now. Lost bloody interest, he says. So have I – in my bank account. Works hard at school and wants to go walkabout at weekends. Does he think he's a bloody queen? The customers are missing his backside. They liked giving it a pinch. Do you think my backside has the same youthful attraction!"

Hughie tried not to grin. Patrides was fat. Indeed it was odd that Niko should ever have liked sleeping with him. Availability and being sex-mad, presumably.

That night, as Pascal, fulfilling a promise, slid into bed with him, Hughie observed, "Last day for the applications tomorrow. Seems ages since you put yours in."

"It is," grunted Pascal. "Very lonely ages, as if something's changed in the world. Did I tell you that Murdoch, who never offers me a word, wished me well for the job?"

"Change for the better," suggested Hughie.

"Sorry," Pascal sighed. "Didn't mean that. That just came into my mind. What I was really thinking was that John, who used to turn up faithfully every morning and hang around all day, doesn't any more. Coincidence probably, but it's been going on since Niko came here—"

"Odd you should mention Niko," interrupted Hughie. "He hasn't set foot in the Club since that weekend. Seems all wrong without him."

"Very wrong," said Pascal.

Hughie switched off the light and embraced the invisible form beside him. "I don't know what your God is up to, pushing his chessmen all over on the board, but I'm glad He's moved you to Jones's castle for the time being. I hope you're thinking of mating me."

U

John tried desperately to hold George back. Argument had failed to

alter the Egregious' intention. "Break it up," barked the teacher on lunch duty. "John, basketball. Can you spare a few minutes now for a team meeting?" George smirked, and sauntered off towards the classrooms.

After the meeting John rushed into Pascal's stock cupboard. George had been thorough. The place was a ruin. "Bastard!" muttered John, and began clearing up. It was hard work. He had to move quickly and, although he was familiar with the stock and the way old Lambie kept things, it was difficult to remember exactly where they all belonged, and some were messed up. Suddenly, after ten minutes at it, he was horrified to hear adult voices in the classroom. If he was seen, they would be bound to put the blame on him.

"Shall I get you a chair, Mr Clapton?" John's heart did a little jump. Lambie was talking to the Head.

"I've got one, thanks," the Headteacher replied dourly. "I thought it might be easier to talk here. No peace in my office at lunchtime. Well, you know me, never beat about the bush. This application of yours for the R.E. post. I want you to withdraw it."

"Withdraw it!"

John heard amazement in the form teacher's voice. The Head went on, "I take it you're happy here or you wouldn't have applied. I would like things to continue that way. I think I can see my path clear to increasing your hours to the equivalent of a full week."

There was a silence which John thought was going to last for ever. Then Pascal replied. "If you find it necessary to ask me to withdraw, does that mean I am one of the front runners, then?" He knew it had been a mistake to apply. They would never believe a blind man could cope. He hadn't believed he could himself; but, since Hughie had urged him to take the plunge, it had suddenly seemed perfectly feasible.

"I have to say that your qualifications are excellent and no one questions your teaching ability. I wouldn't insult you by patronizing you."

"Is it my discipline, then?" Pascal knew that there were sighted teachers far less in command than he was.

"No. There have been no complaints on that score." Pascal began to lose his temper. "Qualifications, ability, discipline, all AI; yet my Headteacher asks me not to apply for a post anybody wanting to advance his career would find interesting. Why should I give up a chance of a promotion other people have encouraged me to pursue?"

"You could say that on reflection the amount of paper work and the separation from the... children... have caused you to rethink. Perfectly honorable."

Pascal could now hardly restrain himself. "I think you misunderstand, Mr Clapton. I wish to know what is behind all this. I can only conclude that it is the old, old story. A blind person is all right so long as he does not threaten the advancement of his sighted colleagues."

"Mr Lamb, you have the respect of all of us as a colleague, but I should perhaps remind you that you owe all that to me. One should not forget other people's cooperation."

John could hear Pascal's voice becoming grater and grater. "I'm sorry if I appear unthankful. Tell me, why should I pretend the paper work would be too much for me? I have a reader. I already know what it is to work harder than others in order to stay in the same place. More work won't kill me."

The Head was also beginning to sound impatient. "A nod is as good as a wink, they say, Mr Lamb, but I didn't want to spell it out."

There was an even longer silence. Old Lambie must really be losing his temper. Then John heard him say, like a hero in a film, "I think you'd better speak plainly, Mr Clapton. I must be naive and stupid."

"Nonsense. The mind closes to what it doesn't want to hear. Hardly naive. Just now I mentioned separation from the children. Perhaps if I'd said from the *boys*..."

John crept a half-meter closer to the cupboard door. Lambie had made a sort of choking noise. The Headteacher was continuing. "Officially I'm the only person who knows about your homosexuality. However, it's not exactly a secret that you share a flat with an unmarried man, and there have been comments about the way you openly and quite frequently allow the boys to hold your hand and how some of them hang around you. I pass it off as minor favoritism and an aid to your efficiency. I am sure it is more agreeable to be led than to have to use a boring white cane. You also have novelty value, I tell people."

John began to sweat. Suppose he coughed or sneezed...

Pascal said only "Go on."

"Myself," purred the Headteacher, "I can handle the idea of a gay teacher—"

"Though you wouldn't want your son to marry one," Pascal interrupted sarcastically.

"Touché. However, this vacancy arises because a man has had to resign for sexual misconduct."

Pascal interrupted again. "Mr Clapton, I couldn't even find my way to the pavilion. We don't teach history or R.E. there. It was a heterosexual who broke the law, not a gay person. Are you asking all the heterosexual candidates to stand down in case they might give way to

temptation?"

"The Governors," the Headteacher began...

"And," snapped Pascal, "the friends and Mrs Ridd the councilor, and the Director of Education, O.B.E. – and Uncle Tom Cobbleigh, especially Uncle Tom Cobbleigh, and all..."

"I have," the Headteacher retorted glacially, "been informed already by the Governors that no candidate about whom I know anything sexually controversial is to be considered. These things are best left undisturbed. I would have to mention your situation formally. I dare not take the risk."

Pascal stood up. "So much for Equal Opportunities! All opportunities are equal but some opportunities... you win, of course. We will scratch each other's back, quite unsexually, I hasten to add, and we will be saved. The boys, who know of my application, though not from me, will say I chickened out, but that can be excused, can't it, in a blind man who needs leading by the hand? I also need the money, and money has a loud voice."

John wanted to cry. The Head stood up too. "None of us is perfect, Mr Lamb."

"Biblical," said Pascal coldly. "Luke 18?"

Mr Clapton was at the door. "Thank you for your cooperation. Be assured that, in the event of any nasty insinuations, you will always have my full support."

The door closed, and John called out from the stock cupboard. "Sir...?"

"John!"

"Somebody messed up your cupboard, sir. I was trying to make it tidy. You ought to lock up properly."

"Who was it?"

"Er – he ran off before I got here, sir. I couldn't catch whoever it was."

"I see."

"I know I won't get AIDS, sir. It was only kissing. You have to—"

"Yes, you do," snapped Pascal. "So don't worry. Sorry. Didn't mean to bite your head off."

"That's why I don't come any more... the kissing."

Pascal sighed. "I understand. The kissing had to stop."

The bell rang. Pascal drooped. John looked into the unseeing eyes. "I won't sneak on you, sir. I never split on people."

"So I noticed," Pascal acknowledged, forcing a smile, "but it won't be easy to keep quiet, John."

John thought for a moment, then exclaimed jubilantly, "I'll write it in my diary. Nothing in there ever gets out. Official Secrets Act."

"In that case," said Pascal, "add this tonight. 'Old Lambie said he thinks I'm a very nice and very mature boy.' Now make yourself invisible, or we might be suspected."

John touched him bravely on the right hand. "I'm sorry you didn't get the job, but it would have been hard for you."

"Et tu, Johanne?" replied the teacher mysteriously.

"Pardon, sir?"

"Go. You'll have me crying in a minute. That would be sentimental, forbidden. Sentimentality, John, is the only thing that makes life worth living, but we aren't supposed to say so. Go."

When the boy had left, Pascal locked the door of the cupboard, and wept. After school he sat beside the canal towpath in the dark, and hoped nobody would come along and notice him crying.

That night John wrote "Old Lambie is gay, but I didn't tell him it was *me* that Dad was filthy with. Mr Lamb wouldn't do things like that."

V

When Pascal returned home at half past nine, Hughie threw both arms round him. "Where've you been, Pas? What's up? I've lost a night's work because of this."

"Ah, but I've gained a day," retorted Pascal bitterly. "A nearly full week, and I didn't commit suicide. Not bad for a naive, stupid, pathetic, blind, gay, also-ran. Get me a glass of something strong."

Hughie fetched some whiskey. "A thousand thanks," smiled Pascal sardonically. "You see how grateful I am? One must learn to be grateful. Am I not being given all those extra hours' work – despite quarreling with my lover and rebelling, after a mere ten years of deprivation? It's all in the mind, of course. Nothing wrong with my body, Niko knows."

Hughie held him tight. "What did you mean, 'suicide'? What's going on?"

"Well," Pascal replied, "I may have qualifications and great ability, I may have discipline and be very popular, I may have the full support of my Headteacher and be grateful to him at all times; but, if I do not have heterosexuality, I am nothing worth. I am an untouchable. Shall I hope to be changed? Now I feel for the ass perversely, but then I shall grope conventionally for a vagina. I know which talcum my buttocks are powdered with." He related all the events that had driven him almost to

suicide.

Hughie was silent for some time, then said thoughtfully, "Well, you didn't, thank God, and it could be worse. Don't ever think of suicide again. All right, so you lost a promotion and all the hassle that goes with it, but you've got extra hours. What's wrong with that? That's good. You didn't know three weeks ago that it was going to happen. We never know what good things are going to turn up, or when." He hesitated, and gave a little laugh, directed at himself. "I'm no psychologist, but I'm damned glad you've come back again."

Pascal smiled sadly. "You were right, Hughie. I want too much. There is nothing to expect but the maturing of grief and the grief of maturing. Now I shall retire, not from real life but to the reality of fantasy. Good night."

Hughie called after the disappearing cynic. "Come to bed with me."

"Oh my God," groaned Pascal, "Isn't there anybody who understands?" He shut his bedroom door and locked it.

"Hullo," said Niko. "Are you glad?"

Pascal stretched out both hands as if in a dream and whispered "The worst of times and the best of times." He was too astonished to even sound surprised. "Of course I'm glad, could never gladder be. Does Hughie know you're here?" Niko's shoulders were bare. "You're naked."

"No he doesn't, and no I'm not, not quite. Listen to my joke: I'm a nearly-nude bargain store, only you don't need any money. You are the lucky winner of a free and personalized gift. It's in my basement, on the front counter. Want to have a look at it?" He pushed down on Pascal's hands.

Pascal chuckled. "A fig leaf?" Even as he spoke, he could hear in his mind Hughie saying how one never knew what good things were going to turn up, or when.

"And," thought Pascal self-reprovingly, "I nearly committed suicide." He slid his hands down to the bargain basement, and burst out into a cleansing, tension-dispersing guffaw. "Nicholas Pinkney you're nothing but a silly young fool, and I love you!"

Niko was exultant. It was wonderful that Pascal should be able to laugh so much, even though he was blind. The exultation came out in yet another giggle. The exploring hands had discovered a very large bra with the backstrap elastic stretched out to its limit, taut and thin, like elongated chewing gum, around his bottom. One of the bra's cups was flat against his right thigh, the other very full and straining where the fig

leaf should have been.

"Better than that bikini," declared Niko. "Mum won't miss it. Got your dentures in? Even if I'm only a silly young fool, I still want to be the loving boy who's the nearest you get to heaven."

Pascal stooped, pulled at the elastic with his teeth, and let it flick back. "I've missed you."

"Ouch," whined Niko, "that hurt." He pretended to be angry. "Why should I love you always with everything I've got, when you're cruel, like now?"

Pascal stood up, flicked the strap with his thumbs, then squeezed each buttock in turn. "Always is a very long time; but, as long as it lasts you shall have my everything too."

Niko's anger became real. "You don't believe me. Nothing could ever come between us. It's love at first sight. Sorry, I forgot you can't see, you know what I mean." He was almost in tears – and it wasn't really at first sight. He had admired Pascal from afar at school and even been envious of John Waterhouse.

"Now then," murmured Pascal, patting the smooth, insulted buttocks comfortingly. "There's only one thing between us and heaven at this moment. Let's get rid of it and make a joyful assault on the pearly gates." Dropping onto his knees, he bit into the bra and began worrying at it, puppy fashion.

Niko was instantly his old self. "Watch out, heaven, here we come, no elastic on my bum!" he declaimed, wriggling his buttocks free as Pascal's teeth tugged the bra down from the front. "Now joke number 2," he boomed in deep judicial tones, when the bra fluttered to the floor, "Look – the youth, the whole youth, and nothing on the youth! No chasing this time, Sir. Let's get straight into bed."

"Spend a penny first?" smiled Pascal. "Then, as a matter of interest, how did you get in here? And please call me 'Pas'. This is hardly school!"

"Easy," mumbled Niko, relieved that there was be no formality. He had been taken aback when Pascal called him by his official name. "Anyone could get in through this window. You should lock it properly." Pascal blushed. John had said something like that.

"Am I your Niko, Pas? I don't need the toilet. I've been. I'm in." He turned back the bedclothes and leaped between the sheets. Soon, Pascal wriggled in beside him, and they lay together, holding their breath with excitement, chest to chest in each other's arms.

Niko lifted up one leg and slid it voluptuously several times across

Pascal's hips. "Let's go sailing," he murmured dreamily. "My nuts are killing me. Don't let's bother with any foreplay. All my sails are flapping." He clamped the leg around Pascal's waist and began pushing steadily against him – and at that moment there was a thunderous knock on the front door. He lay motionless, listening, foiled, conscious of Pascal's penis subsiding abruptly. After another knock they heard a surprised shout of "Who's there?" from Hughie.

"Community police officer, sir."

"Oh, what's the trouble?"

"None, I hope, sir. We've had reports recently about suspicious characters hanging around, and there've been one or two break-ins."

"No problems here," interrupted Hughie. His voice was now very loud and, Pascal noted, full of irony.

"I wonder if you would permit me to look at your locks, sir? Are you alone?"

Niko clambered over Pascal, slid down to the floor, and pulled out the drawer under the bed. "It's empty – for emergencies," he whispered. "Cleared it before you came. Mind you don't pinch any important parts of me in it when you shut me in."

"I have a flat-mate," said Hughie. "Shall I get him up?"

"If it's not too much trouble, sir. We're just checking doors and windows."

"Pas," Hughie shouted, "the police are here. Are you decent?"

"Just a sec," Pascal yelled back. "I'll get my dressing-gown."

W

Hughie watched the policeman cast a cursory glance round Pascal's room, point at the computer, then say to Pascal "Check the window, sir?" Pascal nodded. "You ought to keep it locked, sir," said the officer when the window flew up unhindered, "especially with such valuable stuff around. Just the sort of thing they like to pinch."

"He means the computer," said Hughie.

The policeman looked at Pascal. "Oh, sorry, sir. Anyway, I've fixed it now. May I see round the rest of the house?"

Afterwards Hughie came into Pascal's room. "Felt a proper fool. I'd left the kitchen door unlocked." He gave Pascal a peck on the cheek. "Don't feel like coming to my bed, do you?"

"No, he's going to mingle with his ingle," came a muffled shout from under the bed.

X

When they'd all had something to eat, and Pascal was alone with Niko again, he locked his door and window ostentatiously, ran his hands over Niko's thighs, and said "The only thing that's going to be pinched in this house is you."

"And you," retorted Niko, springing happily into bed. "Hurry up. My balls are still killing me."

Pascal climbed in and lay beside the impatient teenager. "Just hang on for a minute, Niko, and answer me one question."

Niko sighed with irritation, as Pascal continued doggedly "Do you really think you can cope with all this, Niko? At school, or like on my birthday and tonight... always somebody snooping or turning up awkwardly. I know it's not usually twice in as many visits, but we'll always be having to hide things and keep our mouths shut. Do you really think you want to have to cope with all that?"

There was such a long pause that it seemed the boy must be angry or have gone to sleep. At last, however, just when the tension was becoming unbearable, a hand slid along between Pascal's thighs, pinching them en route, and played with his foreskin until the penis lifted up hard and usable again.

Then Niko spoke. "Cope? Want to? Yes. Always... as long as it lasts," he said dreamily; for, although he was very much in love, and for the very first time, Nicholas 'Niko' Pinkney was not *quite* a silly young fool.