

Casuistry and Other Mischiefs

by Ian McLaughlin

1. Casuistry

My nephew Robin was thirteen and attended Saint Xavier's Jesuit College. I fostered for that sweet scion of our family an ardent love which unfortunately seemed doomed to remain platonic: Robin didn't call on me very often. When he did it was under the pressure of severe liquidity problems. I was loathe to see him turn up that day dressed in his school uniform – I am an old boy myself – which meant that he was planning another attack on my finances.

I did everything possible to steer the conversation away from monetary worries and stuffed him with tea and cake, insisting that these were the last morsels I had left; one hour passed and he hadn't broached the subject yet. I began to breathe again, until, "Uncle Ian, I have a problem."

"Robin, I'm definitely not the Bank of England."

"No, no," he said, "it's not what you think. It's a matter of conscience."

"Dear me, Robin! I'm surprised to hear you have such a thing as a conscience."

"It's a serious matter, Uncle Ian. It's a matter of chastity."

"Wouldn't you rather take such delicate affairs up with your confessor, Robin?"

"I did already. He said it was a matter of casuistry."

"Well, that sets the matter at rest, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. Casuistry weighs conflicting obligations to lay down the application of ethical rules to special cases."

"Almighty God, Robin, you are quite a theologian! You're not considering joining the Society of Jesus, are you?"

"Not at all, I want to be a cricket player. You know that."

"I fail to see what theology has to do with cricket."

"It doesn't. But after the game we take a shower. The sight of all those naked bodies brings me into such a state of sexual arousal that I cannot but sin against the flesh. The moral question is shall I quit playing cricket or shall I let a series of purely objective events carry me to an almost unremitting state of mortal sin?"

"You don't expect me to give you an answer, do you, Robin? You know that I don't believe flesh can be sinned against."

“Neither do I. But I thought casuistry was an interesting conversation piece.”

“I say, Robin, you didn't come all the way from Spunk Hill...”

“Spink Hill,” Robin corrected, “not Spunk Hill.”

“...to give me a sample of your intellectual acrobatics?”

“As a matter of fact I didn't, no.”

“Don't you try to make me believe the Pope has enacted indults again and that you want money to buy your sins off. My banker is Church of England.”

“I really don't see what there is to laugh at. Are you afraid to tackle a sex problem? When I take a shower I...”

“My dear nephew Robin, what you do under the shower is none of my business, believe me. Besides, you already told me. Didn't the Jesuits teach you that merely thinking about it was sinful?”

“I'm sinning right now: this conversation is putting me in a state of almost unbearable sexual tension.”

“Good Lord, Robin! Can't you talk of these things in plain language. And keep your hands off your fly! What about changing the subject?”

“Excuse me. I completely forgot you were a bachelor.”

“What the hell has *that* to do with it?”

“You've just *got* to have your own emotional problems that are intimately connected with the deficiency of an adequate and regular sexual outlet.”

“Beware, Robin. You are pushing at the limits of civility.”

“Dear me, you are touchy! There is something wrong with your sex life, isn't there?”

“Robin, you are not equal to solving a grown man's problems.”

“One never knows.”

“What are you hinting at?” I got up from my chair in order to look more adult.

“Nothing in particular. But you might just be a paedophile.”

“Beg your pardon? I hope you at least have the excuse of not knowing the meaning of the words you are using.”

“A paedophile is a person who is sexually attracted to youngsters. When I'm under the shower with my team-mates I feel irresistibly attracted to the younger boys. I'm definitely a paedophile, damn it all! If *you* were one we could understand and help each other.”

I burst into a fit of nervous laughter. “I'm terribly sorry, Robin. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I wasn't laughing at you.”

Robin kept silent for a long while. “So you won't help me?” he sighed.

“Can ten quid be of any help, Robin?”

He jumped up from his armchair, furious. “That's a very mean thing to say. Can't you even try to give me a little understanding, you heartless bastard!” He was shaking all over. It looked as though he was going to hit me in the face. I threw my arms around him and kissed him on the mouth. Robin gave a visible start and jumped back.

“Well, I never!” he said. “I’m awfully sorry. I really hadn’t the slightest inkling.”

“You see, Robin,” I said, “I *did* understand you all the time. And now what about solving your problem? Want another kiss or ten quid?”

He quickly turned it over in his mind. “Can I have both?” he smiled.

2. The Zipper

I fell instantly in love with Tommy when I first saw him standing inside the Clapham Common Underground Station men’s room frantically pulling on the zipper of his gray flannel pants.

“It’s stuck,” he observed.

“Well,” I said, “with shorts you don’t really need to open your fly to do that.”

“But I did it already, and now I can’t get the damned thing closed. Look – my shirt is jammed, and it sticks out. I can’t possibly walk about like this!”

“All right,” I said. “If you want I’ll drive you home.”

“My name is Tom,” he said.

We came out of the lavatory together. Sweat beaded my brow: what could look more like child molesting than this? But no one seemed to take any notice of us.

I was driving a very low sports car at the time. At every stop light Tommy began fumbling with his zipper. The whole world could see what was going on in there.

“Please, Tommy,” I said, “keep your fingers off your fly. You know what people are going to suspect.”

“Gosh, I didn’t think of that!”

“Of what?” I asked.

“That you might be one of those men my mummy warned me about. She says never take a ride from a stranger.”

“Well, you did – and there’s no reason to make the situation worse.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

“I surely will if you don’t keep your hands off your zipper and put your satchel on your knees.”

He kept quiet all the way to the next red light. Then, “Say, what do child molesters *really* do?”

The light turned green. “I can’t possibly go into that now, Tommy. I have to keep my hands on the wheel and my eyes on the road.”

“Let’s go to a Wimpy and tell me there.”

“That,” I said, “is exactly what a child molester would do.”

“Please.”

He ordered an enormous ice-cream special, with lots of fruit and syrup.

“Now, tell me,” he said greedily.

“What makes you so curious?”

“Andy said a child molester once gave him a ride in his sports car and then took him to his flat. He won't say what they did there. But he wasn't killed. Why wasn't he killed?”

“Andy who?” I asked.

“Andy Newman. Why, do you know him?” As a matter of fact, I did.

“People with sports cars who take boys to their flats don't usually kill them, Tommy. They just want to get super friendly, that's all.”

“Really? Just like us?”

So I took Tommy to my flat. With scissors and a lot of patience I went to work liberating his zipper.

“Aren't you feeling well?” Tommy asked. “You are shaking all over.”

“No, I'm just nervous,” I said.

“Are you scared or something?”

“Please, Tommy, shut up until it's finished.”

My piles of comic books had immediately caught his eye. Now he asked, “Can I look at one while you work on the zipper?”

He used my head as a desk. Finally I got his fly working once again and dropped him off close to where he lived. By then I badly needed a drink. Or even two. How stupid could a man be? What if Tommy told his parents? The lad could easily find his way back to my flat. And what if he told Andy? Wouldn't Andy recognize his 'child molester'? But that would be absurd: I'd known Andy for over a year and the “molesting” never went any further than an affectionate hug.

The next day Andy and Tommy rang at my door. “Tommy told me about what happened,” said Andy.

Once again the sweat started to form on my brow. Here it comes. “I knew it was you right off. Tommy remembered your address. Was he ever lucky not to fall into the hands of that child molester!”

“Wh... which child molester, Andy?”

“The gym teacher in the top form. Once he took me up to his flat to teach me a few self-defense tricks and then his wife said, 'Geoffrey, stop molesting that child. Dinner is ready.' So I never went back there, 'cause my mother warned me to stay away from child molesters. It's a pity. He drives a red Morgan – but I like your old Triumph, too,” he hastily added.

He climbed into my lap and hugged. Tommy was reading comics. They are both eight and in the same form.

3. The Crystal Goblet

It was my nephew Robin on the phone, calling from Saint Xavier's.

"Tell me, Uncle, when does a boy have his first ejaculation?"

"Robin, are you sure nobody is eavesdropping on this conversation?"

"Quite sure. Only Christopher is standing beside me, but he can barely hear what *you* say."

"Who's Christopher?"

"My friend. He's the one that wants to know."

"Robin, how old is Christopher?"

"Eleven, and it's four and three-quarters of an inch..."

"I didn't ask *that!* Keep such things between you and him."

"We do already!"

"Robin, stop! Or I'll hang up."

"Listen, Uncle Ian, can I bring Christopher along to London this weekend so we can talk these things out at your place?"

"You know I don't have a guest room."

"We could sleep in your bed and you could sleep on the couch."

"No, Robin, no. My flat is decidedly *not* a cheap brothel."

"What's a brothel?"

"It's a place where you have ejaculations."

"But Christopher doesn't have any!"

"Tell him to keep trying, but not in my bed."

"Please. Be a good sport."

"I'm not a sport. I'm your uncle."

"Please, Uncle."

"Oh, all right. I suppose you bought train tickets already?"

Friday night, after dinner, I served some strong coffee. Robin and Christopher had no intention of sleeping much anyway.

"So you are Robin's friend," I said. Christopher blushed and nodded.

"You are not in the same form, are you?"

"No," said Christopher, "we're in the same cricket team."

"Of course," I said. "I'm being stupid. Do you often play together?"

Robin chuckled. "We don't have to answer *that*, do we?"

"As a matter of fact, no. It was what you call a rhetorical question."

"I'd call it a stupid question, like all of yours."

Christopher gave Robin a shove. "Don't be so rude!"

"That's a good boy," I told Christopher. "Robin, I think I'll put *you* on the couch tonight and let Christopher share my bed."

"You'd be surprised how rude *he* is once he has his pants down," my nephew sneered.

“Robin, please!” Christopher implored. Was he really as embarrassed as he seemed? Or were they *both* trying to embarrass me, in which case they were succeeding admirably.

“Besides,” said Robin, “it’s my duty to warn you that Christopher is a bed-wetter.”

“That’s a damned lie!” Christopher shouted. The rage was genuine. “I have wet dreams, and *that’s* the truth!”

“Oh, sure, Chris,” said Robin, “you’ve been having wet dreams for eleven years now!”

They almost came to blows. I feared for my expensive china.

“Listen boys, are you friends or what?” I said. “If you keep on like this I’ll have to throw both of you out. Think of the neighbors. We can settle this without shouting.”

I reached for the phone: “Hello, Philip – No, fine, and you – Can you come over right now? – No, no, I told you I was fine; it’s for one of my nephew’s friends – I am aware that it sounds complicated, Philip – All right then, Philip, thank you.”

“Who’s Philip?” Robin asked.

“A doctor,” I said.

“A doctor!” gasped Christopher. “What for? I’m not going to wank in front of no doctor, if that’s what you called him in for.”

“Because you can’t!” hooted Robin, ducking.

They were both foaming with anger when Philip arrived.

“Good Lord,” Philip exclaimed, “you didn’t tell me the boys were infected with rabies! Did you bite them? Hello, Robin. How’s Spunk Hill?”

“Aw, that old joke again! You an old boy, too, like Uncle Ian?”

“Philip and I played on the same cricket team, once,” I hastened to say.

More coffee was served, with brandy for Philip and me and stories from the good old days at Saint Xavier’s for the boys to listen to with baited breath. Actually Philip and I *had* been in the same form and had shared a lot of colorful adventure with one another. Philip also shared my sympathy with children, but with him it took a different course: he had become a pediatric physician – and his interest in their bodies was purely professional.

“I don’t see anything wrong with Christopher,” said Philip.

“There is nothing wrong with me,” Christopher grumbled.

“There is too,” said Robin, “you suffer from megalomania.”

“From *what*?” shouted Christopher.

“From cock-sureness,” grinned Robin, keeping well out of the range of Christopher’s fists. “Don’t be upset. We’ll cure you, won’t we, Doctor?”

Quickly I began clearing away my precious china cups to safety. Philip turned to me: “Don’t you think you’d do better with a psychiatrist than a pediatrician? It’s all getting beyond me. Are these boys mental? I hope it doesn’t run in *both* their families.”

I put Philip *au courant* of the facts as clearly as the brawl allowed me. Philip

burst out with a roar of laughter, which was greeted by instant silence.

“Well I never,” Philip stammered in dumb astonishment. “You fellows *mean* it?”

“I’m afraid they do,” I said.

“All right, then,” said Philip, with his most professional voice. “Will you gentlemen leave me alone with the patient?”

Robin and I withdrew to the hall. The examination took some time. Robin gave his wrist-watch a glance. He was about to make some contemptuous remark but then weighed the luxury of my bed against the lack of comfort and company on the couch and swallowed it.

So I played it fair and let him herd with Christopher.

In the dead of night I was awakened by strange noises coming from the kitchen. There I discovered Christopher and my nephew, stark naked, eerily silhouetted in the light shining from the open door of the refrigerator. Robin was holding one of my Venetian crystal goblets in his hands and Christopher something that looked for all the world as if it were four and three-quarters of an inch long.

“What the Dickens are you doing here?” I asked. “You should be in bed. That’s how people get pneumonia, standing naked in front of open fridges. But, dear me, Christopher, are you perspiring?”

“*Please*,” said Robin, irritated, “be a good uncle and leave us alone. We have much on our hands.”

“All right, all right,” I soothed. “I suppose you’re old enough to decide. Still, I’d advise you, Christopher, to put a sweater on. Good night, boys. Try to get *some* sleep – and don’t slam the door of the fridge.”

They did, of course, a half hour later, waking me. I waited till I heard Christopher – who really should do something about his tonsils – snore and tip-toed to the kitchen. As I expected, the rubine red crystal goblet stood in the refrigerator cradling about a teaspoonful of colorless fluid. A note lay on top: *Fresh sperm – don’t touch!* Signed “Christopher” with a flourish which, considering the Clarity of the liquid, seemed a bit too triumphal to me.

It was a good guess that Philip would stop by at breakfast to collect the sample for microscopic analysis.

Christopher didn’t accompany him but nervously waited for the verdict by the phone. We played Monopoly; I had three houses on the Strand and all the railway stations when the phone rang.

Christopher jumped up, face ghastly white.

“Christopher Moore speaking,” he said in a very faint voice. He listened anxiously, then yelled, “Yahoo! It *is* sperm! I *told* you!” He was almost weeping for joy and relief.

Robin behaved like a little gentleman; he offered his apologies. For my part I bought Christopher a fountain pen with the memorable date engraved upon it, and never told Robin that what Philip had taken away in the crystal goblet was not all Christopher’s.

4. Trattoria

Although I usually follow the commendable practice of taking my meals at a different restaurant every evening, I changed my habit in Naples. By a piece of extraordinary good fortune I discovered a small trattoria where I was served by a lovely long-legged ragazzo who wore provokingly short pants. The food was barely fit to eat: I feasted mainly with my eyes.

Since my Italian is rather poor I had to point out my choice on the menu. Not that it mattered much what was chosen – it all tasted about the same – but this meant that Pepi had to stand close to me to read, and he soon developed the delightful habit of brushing his thigh against my arm. Each day I devoted more and more time to choosing, and sometimes pretended to change my mind so I could call Pepi back again. At the end of the week I gently pushed my elbow against a promising bulge between the long legs. I thought something stirred there, but it might have been my imagination.

Nevertheless I scribbled a hurried note: *Pepi, ti voglio bene* – everyone who has been to the opera once knows that much Italian – which I gave him with his tip just before leaving.

The next evening when I saw him coming with the menu-card my heart was beating so loudly it was a wonder Pepi couldn't hear it. The boy leaned against my arm as usual...but that was all. I was terribly disappointed, and wearily spooned up my minestrone.

Then Pepi came to take away the soup plate and underneath I found a neatly folded note (I translate): *How much do you love me ? Affectionately yours, Pepi.*

I had brought my pocket dictionary and now prepared another note: *I'll buy you a silver wristlet as thick as your cosa. By the way, how thick is your cosa?* My dictionary didn't have the street word I would like to have used so I used the Italian for 'thing' instead.

The answer was under the pasta plate: *Come measure it with your big mouth. Fully yours, Pepi.*

In his pocket I slipped the following: *I'm leaving Naples tomorrow.*

Under the dinner plate: *Attention. The reply comes by registered mail – in my slip. The postman rings only once. Pepi.*

He served the a la Romagna with deliberate slowness while my fingers feverishly searched his registered male pouch – but his *cosa* kept jumping up between them and interfering in their search. He had served me three times over before I at last withdrew the note: *Tonight at your hotel. Love, Pepi.*

Long experience has taught me that boys who talk big on the street often sing another tune when they find themselves alone with you in a strange room. Pepi proved to be an exception. He was as imaginative in bed as he was with his notes.

Around eleven, when I was almost counted out, I asked him how long he

was allowed to stay.

“Tutta la notte,” he said with a big, broad smile. Early the next morning I was awakened by a knock on the door. Pepi was still deeply asleep. I quickly threw a blanket over him and opened the door a crack. It was the hotel manager in person, holding a tray.

“Buon giorno,” he said. “I brought your breakfast and Pepi's.”

“But...there's no Pepi here,” I blubbered.

“Si, si,” the manager laughed. “I let him in myself yesterday evening. You forgot to tell him your room number, sir. Always give your room number. It's very embarrassing for a boy to have to ask.”

He carried the tray in. By now Pepi was sitting upright in bed, bare-chested, yawning.

“Ciao, Pepi,” the manager began. What followed I didn't understand but for one word, *cattivo*, which means something like 'naughty'. Then the manager left.

I jumped on the bed for some amicable wrestling. Pepi slapped the mattress in a gesture of surrender.

“All right,” I said. “Tu cominciare breakfast while io primo prendere shower.”

When I came back into the bedroom Pepi had vanished.

He had left a note saying, *I really do love you. I wish you a good journey. Please come back soon. Pepi.*

I rushed to the trattoria. It was still closed. My plane left two hours later. I think I cried a little in the plane but it may have been my imagination.

5. Poetic License

Aubrey, my twelve-year-old neighbor, washes my car regularly. I pay him two pounds, which is expensive, but then Aubrey is such a priceless boy.

Aubrey is an intellectual: he likes to type out instant poems on my battered Olivetti, sitting in my lap which he prefers to sitting on telephone directories – and as a matter of fact so do I. It stimulates me, in my work.

Aubrey is not really his given name, which is just plain William. I baptized him Aubrey, as in Beardsley, for his extreme leanness, his pallid complexion and his red hair.

I had always wondered what color sprouted from red-heads' lower abdomens.

One very hot summer day when Aubrey had shaken off his sneakers, his socks and his T-shirt I judged that the situation had advanced to the point where I could put to him the question of the color of his more intimate locks.

“I have only a few,” said Aubrey modestly.

So I applied the usual persuasive tactics: “Be a good boy and show me. Don’t be shy. This is between *men*, isn’t it ?”

“You can look at the hairs but I won’t show you my flipper,” Aubrey warned.

He didn’t say “the hair”, he said “the hairs”. Had he counted them? Probably. He unzipped, then changed his mind: “I’ll give you one!”

Thumb and forefinger plunged into the depths of his jeans, searched and searched and finally produced a tiny reddish curl.

I accepted the precious gift but ventured, “How many have you left now? Come on, let me count them. I’ll keep it a secret, just between you and me.”

“No, no,” Aubrey protested. “I won’t let you peep at my flipper.”

Did he know this was my Achilles heel, so to speak? Of course, I wanted to see it, touch it, fondle it – maybe even devour it (my mouth watered at the thought) – and I suspected he jolly well knew it. He was playing for time, and time played in his favor: I had to change my tactics.

“Five pounds, just to look,” was my next proposal.

He cold-bloodedly pocketed the money and dropped his pants. I reached out for his lower-middle-trifle but Aubrey stepped back and quickly hoisted up his jeans again.

“Not now,” he said. That sounded promising enough.

To make a long story short, he soon developed the pleasant habit of having his flipper coddled while sitting in my lap composing instant verse on my typewriter. It evidently stimulated his imagination: one of the first poems he thus wrote was appropriately called *Tilt*.

After a month or so I began to have my car washed by another boy (who was also cheaper) so Aubrey could devote himself entirely to poetry. Day after day I uncapped his fountain pen and he tossed off one or two poems on my Olivetti.

After each session the poems were copied in a magnificent little blue notebook I had bought in Paris at Laurent Tisne’s *Papier +* shop, 9 rue du Pont Louis-Philippe in the fourth *arrondissement*. (Monsieur Tisne is going to be ever so happy when he reads this. The shop is painted blue; you can’t miss it.)

And so things went until that infamous Saturday my nephew Robin unexpectedly rang at the door. Aubrey jumped from my knees and hurriedly readjusted his clothes.

“Are you expecting somebody?” he asked angrily. The situation had all the elements of a successful *comédie de boulevard* except for Robin’s tendency to make caustic remarks threatening the innocent charm of our poetic intimacy.

“Hello, Uncle Ian,” Robin greeted, flinging himself in my favorite armchair. Then, looking at Aubrey, “What’s that?” As if the boy was giving off a bad smell.

I ignored the question. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had the honor, Robin. Forgot my phone number?”

“Not quite. I hoped to please you with a surprise visit but it looks very much like I came at a most inconvenient time.”

“Is that your nephew Robin you told me about?” Aubrey inquired.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I moaned. “I’m awfully afraid we won’t be able to finish our poem before Monday, Aubrey.”

“Lord Jesus,” Robin grinned, “are you writing nursery rhymes nowadays?”

“Robin! The Lord Jesus has nothing to do with it and mind your own business.” But it was already too late to head him off from snatching the sheet of paper out of my typewriter. He began disdainfully to declaim the poem; I grabbed it and tore it to pieces. Aubrey left, slamming the door as hard as his weak arms permitted.

“Now look what you have done!” I railed in indignation. “It was *his* poem! Don’t you ever *think*? Robin, you are an utter nuisance. You’ve crushed a fine relationship under your big, inconsiderate, stinking feet!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Is that *all* there is to be said?”

“It was a lousy poem anyway.”

“It may have been a lousy poem but it was written by a fine boy, which is one thing I can’t say of you, you lousy little idiot!” And right then and there I burst into an uncontrollable fit of weeping. “So now you’ve made a grown man cry in anger and disenchantment. Are you pleased with yourself?”

“I’m *awfully* sorry.”

“You may be sorry but that’s not going to bring Aubrey back.”

“I’ll bring him back.”

“You? With your fine diplomatic talent?”

“I thought you’d be glad to be rid of that carrot-headed annoyance. How could I guess you cared for him?”

“You did assume that I cared for *your* presence.”

“I was wrong there, I know. I had better remove myself.”

He made ready to go.

“Don’t be silly, Robin. Let’s not make this into warmed-over Shakespeare – or any other kind of drama, for that matter.”

Robin stayed. We sat there, silent, gloomily brooding, until the door-bell rang.

It was Aubrey. “I want all my poems back,” he said firmly, “even the last one you tore up.”

“All right, Aubrey. I understand. Please come in for a moment. The note-book is in my car; I’ll just nip down and fetch it.”

I lingered in my car for a while browsing through the little blue note-book, Aubrey’s Collected Works, the debris of a very short-lived literary career. I’d have preferred to have kept that precious relic, with the red curl pasted on the fly-leaf, for myself, but Aubrey, of course, had the first right to it. Slowly I climbed the stairs, clasping the book to my aching heart. The door was locked from the inside. Nothing apparently stirred; nobody answered my knocking and ringing. I went to the local pub and dialed my own number, without any more success. Finally I sat on my door-mat like a sad, locked-out child, but now I

heard the familiar clattering of my dear old Olivetti: that devilish Robin! He evidently had my tender poet sitting in his lap! I rang, knocked and kicked the door, until finally they let me in.

“Well,” I snapped, “that was about time. Got writer's cramp at last?”

“It was hard on you, wasn't it, Uncle?”

“That's very poor punning. But you surely are a master in baiting innocent children.”

“Oh, yes I am!” Robin beamed. “Shall we take a bath together, Aubrey?”

Robin defiantly stuck out his tongue at me and rushed off to the bathroom, dragging Aubrey along. The rest was screams and splashing of water. The result of their literary co-operation was still protruding from the typewriter:

querty,
uiop,
uiop,
qwerty.

qwerty,
qwerty,
uiop.

qwickerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr rrr

I added the final full stop.

6. The Bike-Shed

It happened one day that I parked my car near the bike-shed of the school I had attended some twenty years earlier and the sight of it brought on a flood of bitter-sweet memories – times when the shed was the theater of fierce competitions having nothing to do with bicycle racing at all. I had participated with enthusiasm – and sometimes won. Ever-hungry boarders, we worked our fingers to the bone, so the speak, for the chocolate bar at stake. Sometimes I had kept “cave”; the crow boy got a bar without having to compete for it. I wondered if I could slink in and steal a glimpse of my past.

The place smelled exactly the same, which somehow reassured me that boys would be boys. Was that a whispering I heard in the far corner? I softly tip-toed in that direction.

One boy was facing the wall; another was eagerly bending forward to look.

And then I knocked over a bicycle. The boy with his back to me quickly tucked something up. They both stood rooted to the spot, blushing to the tips of

their ears.

"I'm awfully sorry, fellows," I said. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

They remained speechless.

"Look, boys," I repeated, "I really am sorry. If you want you can come up to my flat."

"What for?" said the one who had been standing with his back to me.

I was about to answer "five" but decided that they were too old for that sort of childish humor. Instead I said, "Well, I think it's a much safer place to do it."

"What?" he said.

This time I couldn't resist: "Watt is dead and Pardon took his place."

The boys hesitated.

"Do you think we can play hookey?" the smaller of the two boys asked. Then, to me, "Will you bring us back before dinner?"

"Of course," I said. "Whatever you want."

I crammed them into my two-seater and drove off like hell.

"Nice flat you have here," said Brian. I knew their names now.

"Why do you live here?" asked Danny, looking about.

"To make a fool ask and you are the first." Well (I shouldn't use that word too much unless I want to hear, *What's the good of a well without water in it?* But then I know a good answer: *To throw in rubbish like you.*), the ice was broken and they insisted on lighting the fire and making tea and toast. Nice to have some juniors around to tag. After twenty years.

"Are you both boarders?" I asked. "No," said Brian. "I am. Danny isn't."

"So you can't sneak into each other's bed in the dorm?"

"Sometimes I stay at Danny's for the weekend. We do sleep together then."

Danny gave Brian a dig in the ribs. "Our host isn't interested in *that!*"

"Well, I can imagine you two having some fun together. I've been young myself, you know. How old are you?"

"As old as my tongue and a little younger than my teeth," said Brian.

"Do you know the difference between a cat and a com- ma?" Danny asked. I had forgotten.

"A cat has claws at the end of its paws and a comma a pause at the end of its clause."

Boys will be boys indeed. It went on like that the whole afternoon – riddles, jokes. They were extraordinary company: alert, quick-witted, treating me like a school-mate, which in fact I was.

It was getting late.

"Sorry, fellows," I said, "I must drive you back to school. But come again to... er, well... you know, what you were doing in the bike-shed..."

"Dash it!" said Brian. "We completely forgot about that. You collect stamps, too?"

"Beg your pardon... stamps?"

"Yes. That's what we were doing in there. Swapping stamps."

"It would be nice if you had a collection, too," Danny said hopefully.

They never came back. I still wonder whether with today's schoolboys "stamps" are just postage stamps or the equivalent of our famous Japanese blockprints. It doesn't matter, though. I don't collect either of them.

7. The Treasure

Venice was what I gave my nephew Robin as a thirteenth birthday present. I had let him choose between the lagoon city and a miniature racing-bike. He chose Venice, knowing perfectly well that I would buy the motor-cycle anyway.

On Christmas Eve I took him to the midnight mass at San Marco's. We found a standing place in the side aisle.

Coming back from Holy Communion, Robin, to my amazement, gave way to sudden emotion and embraced me. There were tears in his eyes. Nestling in my arms, he sank his head in prayer against his folded hands. All about us Italian mammas beamed their approval at so much piety and filial love. Well, God-forsaken Robin's piety seemed genuine enough: only sinners are profoundly pious. Perhaps the scope of Robin's sinfulness was very limited, but to a thirteen-year-old the weaknesses of the flesh can easily take on the dimensions of the gates of Hell. Was Robin weeping for some thoughtlessly spilled seed?

I patted his back to comfort him. He looked up, tear-filled eyes faintly smiling.

"Damn it, Robin," I whispered, "don't make too much of a show. The whole church is watching."

"I know," Robin whispered back, a new wave of tears gathering, "and they love it."

Thank goodness I managed to restrain myself from slapping his angelic face.

"Wait till we are back in the hotel," I snapped.

"You dirty old man," murmured Robin, never in want of a telling come-back, and blew his nose.

We didn't speak all the way back to Danieli's. Robin, wrongly fearing my wrath, quickly withdrew to the bathroom and locked himself in. I frantically rattled the door handle.

"Robin, open up. I've got to pee!"

"You'll have to wait," he shouted back. "I'm sitting on it."

"Hurry up, then, or let me do it in the basin. I *really* have to go!"

The key turned. I rushed in. Robin was sitting where he said he had been sitting, trousers collapsed about his ankles, exerting himself to express in concrete form the reason for his present occupation. I stood at the basin attempting to do the same and, of course, making a fool of myself.

"Well?" said Robin, a naughty twinkle in his eye.

I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep a straight face much longer.

"You know I can't when somebody stares," I said.

"I wasn't staring. I was only *looking*. Would it help if I said *weewewee* or *psspsps*?" he asked, bursting into a fit of laughter which saved us both from further ridicule.

Later: "I'm sorry, Uncle Ian. I'm a nuisance; I know it." He snuggled up close to me in the big *letto matrimoniale* (There is no English word for that very special Italian commodity which means something like 'a bed for three'). "I promise I'll behave myself from now on."

"I'm afraid that would be very *boring*. Besides, you can't keep a promise, anyhow. That's *one* thing about you I can trust."

"I almost always keep my promises; you never!"

"No? May I politely request that my honorable nephew cite a recent example?"

"You promised never to write any stories about *me*."

"I didn't. In my stories I call you Robin."

"But it's me all the same. You change my name but the stories are truthful enough."

"That's because I have no imagination whatever."

"Couldn't you write stories about buccaneers?"

"I never tried. Shall I make one up for you right now? Once upon a time in the late eighteenth century there was a one-eyed Scottish buccaneer named Ian MacScullinbones and with his thirteen-year-old cabin-boy Robin he sailed...."

"But that's you and me again!"

"I'm definitely not one-eyed. Shut up, please, and listen. They sailed a black three-master, the *Anaemia*. Pirate captain Ian MacScullinbones loved his cabin-boy very, very much."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and with good reason: Robin had a map of a treasure island tattooed on his stomach. So every day at noon MacScullinbones stretched his cabin-boy, stark naked, out on the big table in the chart-room, measured the horizon with his good eye and his sextant, and marked their progress to the treasure island on Robin's stomach with an analine copying pencil. The cabin boy's stomach gently waved like a calm tropical sea under the pirate captain's fingers. The map was tattooed around the boy's navel, which marked the exact spot where the treasure lay."

"Why, would the buccaneer have the boy *completely* naked on the table then?" Robin wanted to know.

I had expected Robin to raise *that* question.

"Well," I explained, "the boy's own middle mast stood for the north pole, so the captain needed it as a point of reference."

"And what stood for the south pole?"

"They didn't need one: they were in the northern hemisphere and don't interrupt all the time. The voyage took them farther and farther into unknown

seas. They sailed on and on, and still the island didn't come into sight. Then one day the pirate captain suddenly realized what had gone wrong. The cabin-boy was growing up fast; the tattooing had stretched and the measurements, of course, were all askew. Mad with rage, the buccaneer drew his dagger and plunged it in the cabin-boy's heart. The boy didn't even scream; he looked with astonished eyes, deep with hurt, up to the pirate. '*You lost your treasure,*' he whispered, and then expired. Only now did the pirate captain understand that the real treasure wasn't buried on some far-away island but was that poor cabin-boy himself."

"PAN would never print a stupid story like that," Robin said.

"Beg your pardon? Since when have you started reading PAN?"

"Since the first day I discovered it in your book-case. I like to read that *Boy-Caught* stuff."

"I'm sure Dr. Brongersma would be pleased to know."

"Wow! Do you have his *number*? Shall we give him a buzz?" In his enthusiasm Robin had jumped out of bed.

"Call him at two o'clock in the morning? Come back to bed, Robin, before you catch cold."

Reluctantly, Robin slid back in.

"Damn it, you're cold already. If you intend to go on with this hopping in and out we'd better wear pajamas. You give me goose flesh."

"You're the one that convinced me wearing pajamas was old-fashioned. You better rub me or I'll get pneumonia."

"Such dramatics! You just want to be molly-coddled, and that's all!"

"Well, you *might* cuddle me a *little* on my birthday trip!"

"On your *thirteenth* birthday? You're not a baby any more, Robin."

But even as I protested I was massaging his chest, his stomach, gently gliding my hand lower and lower, until...

"Uncle Ian, not *that!* Today is *Christmas!* You shouldn't...."

"What?"

"Never mind. It's too late."

8. The Choir-Boy

The evening the *Petit Chanteurs a la Croix de Bois* gave a concert in Clapham Common I as a matter of course was sitting in the front row. There is nothing wrong with my hearing but I'm terribly near-sighted and it is unseemly to look at choir-boys through opera glasses. When choir-boys sing one is supposed to close one's eyes and elevate one's soul to heaven.

After the concert I lingered in the vestry where the boys were handed over in pairs to families that had the pleasure of hosting them for the night. But such favors are never bestowed on bachelors like me. Bachelors are not supposed to

have spare beds.

Suddenly the Dean, dragging a cherub behind him, came running towards me. "Good heavens, Ian, isn't this annoying? I have one too many. I regret ever so much the inconvenience, but couldn't you put this boy up for the night?"

The Dean misinterpreted my stammering and began to assure me that the child in hand was quiet and well-behaved and certainly wouldn't make a nuisance of himself.

"I'll pray for you," the Dean insisted. Well, under the circumstances I thought it fit that he do so.

"You have a smattering of French, haven't you?"

"Certainement I have, Monsieur le Doyen," I said. "Je le parle meme tres couramment."

The boy smiled happily. He knew of course that someone who spoke French as fluently as I had no intention of stuffing him with green peas and custard.

"His name is Stephane," said the Dean. "He is twelve and one of their best trebles." Turning to the boy: "Monsieur est un fin gentleman. Vous allez avec lui, il va prendre en charge de vous. Il est grand amoureux de musique." And turning to me again he whispered, "Don't let him have ice-cream. It's bad for his voice. And bring him back to the presbytery tomorrow afternoon, will you. God bless you, Ian."

And there I was with a ravishing French choir-boy all to myself.

"Pinch me," I said.

"Pardon, monsieur?" said Stephane,

"No, nothing," I said. "I was talking to myself. Let's go to my car."

I drove home by the longest way round to give myself time to plan how I was going to spend the evening with my unexpected celestial gift. I almost sent a thanksgiving prayer up to heaven, but since the Dean had promised to do the same I was afraid the Lord might judge that two men making such a fuss about one boy might be overdoing things a bit.

"Say, Stephane," I asked, "shall I take you to a restaurant or shall we have dinner at my place? But then I must warn you that I am a bachelor."

"If you don't mind I'd prefer to go to your place. I can help with the cooking."

"Never mind the cooking. I'll handle that while you have a bath. You will want to take a bath, won't you?"

"I'd love to. Do you want me to sing in the bath-room? Most bath-rooms have swell acoustics."

"Be my guest. But keep the door ajar so I can enjoy your singing. And call when you want me to soap your back."

That's exactly what he did and as he helpfully stood upright I took advantage of the opportunity to tend to his bottom, too. He broke off his singing when my hand shot forward between his thighs. My fingers nearly reached their object of desire when he firmly tightened his legs. I meekly retreated and went back to

my cooking.

“May I use the bath-robe hanging here?” Stephane shouted.

“Please do,” I shouted back. “And hurry up: dinner is ready.”

He looked very much a choir-boy with a white sponge surplice. Damp blond curls enmeshed in a gold neck-chain. It may be noted, incidentally, that he had admirable clavicles.

Stephane politely complimented me upon my cooking, with special emphasis on the dessert. I am exceptionally good at chocolate mousse. I myself had French coffee for the occasion.

Stephane did most of the talking. He was an animated *raconteur*; his voice was naturally melodious. I loved his Latin gesticulation, the way he flicked hair out of his eyes with a boyish toss of the head.

“Is that where I sleep?” Stephane asked, pointing to the narrow single bed beside the book-case.

“Yes, indeed,” I said; and after my blunder in the bath-room I thought it fit to add, “I will sleep on the couch.”

“That won't be very comfortable.”

“The two of us squeezed together on that narrow cot wouldn't be very comfortable either, I'm afraid.”

“Oh, well, I'm used to it, you know. They often put two of us choir-boys together in a single bed, or with one of the kids of the house. Once I even had to sleep with a *girl*.”

“I say, wasn't that exciting?”

“You bet! She was four. But one night I slept in the Vatican, with a cardinal of the Curia. He knew lots of Regensburger Domspatzen. I think he was German or something like that. Aren't *you* friends with any of the Domspatzen?”

“Unfortunately not, no. I'm not a cardinal. I'm not *that* specialized.”

“To tell the truth he wasn't much of a music-lover, either. He was a boy-lover. Like you.”

I'm sure I flushed as crimson as I'd ever flushed in my whole life.

Stephane grinned: “You fell into the bath-room trap. They always fall into the bath-room trap.”

“As I remember it was *I* who suggested you take a bath,” I mildly protested.

“And suggested I should call you to soap my back. Indeed!”

“And *did* you call me?”

It was Stephane's turn to blush. That made me feel a bit easier.

“You know what I think, Stephane? You swallowed the bait a tiny bit too greedily. I wonder how you're going to get out of the bed-or-couch trap now.”

“What side do you sleep on?”

“My left, I think.”

“I, too. We'll fit nicely together in bed, like a couple of stacked spoons. But on one condition: that we stay up late and talk. It's been a long time since I put up with a family that talks French so well.”

"I'm not a family. I am all the family there is."

"Same with me. There's only my mum: my parents are divorced."

"Poor boy," I said. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Got you there!" Stephane beamed at me. "You fell into the *other* trap!"

"Did I?"

"You fell into the my-parents-are-divorced trap. You *really* are a boy-lover, aren't you?"

"You must be the Davy Crockett of this kind of trapper."

"Oh, no. Some of those *petits chanteurs* are even more cunning at it. But to be honest I *am* a rather good shot. I can even spot them in the audience. I spotted you."

"Really? How did you do that?"

"First of all you were sitting in the front row, so you rushed to buy a ticket as soon as you knew the *petits chanteurs* were coming. If you'd been a true music lover you'd never sit so close; you don't hear the full sound there. Thirty-fifteen. You were alone. If you'd been wearing a wedding-ring it would have been conclusive. But there was still a chance that you were a deaf music-loving bachelor. Thirty-thirty. You didn't buy the program, though. Forty-thirty. You never closed your eyes, either. Music lovers mostly do. Forty-forty, advantage Stephane. Then I watched your eyes: when the soloist was singing you distinctly kept looking at *another* boy. Game and set for Stephane! Very easy. A child could have seen it."

"But Stephane, you *are* a child!" I laughed.

"Oh, yes, of course; but it's a good thing you like children or it would have been a boring evening for both of us."

He yawned. "I'm sorry. Shall we go to bed?" he asked, dropping the bathrobe.

"All right, boy; quick, crawl in between the sheets. I'll join you in a minute." When I did he had already fallen fast asleep.

9. Street-Arab

One very hot Sunday afternoon I was loitering in front of the show case of a pet shop.

"Do you like animals?"

It was Abdelaziz who asked me. I knew him to be of indifferent repute, but this question sounded. Good-natured enough.

"To be honest, no," I replied. "I'm bored, that's all."

"So am I," Abdelaziz sighed. His sigh had the familiar ring of temptation.

"What about going to a cinema?" I hinted.

"I've already seen all the films around here. Why not go to your place?"

"You'd be bored stiff at my place."

“If you take me to your place you may do it free for nothing.”

“Do *what*?”

“You *know* what,” Abdelaziz said, indignant. I obviously had offended his professional pride.

“And what makes you suppose I want to do *that*?”

“Every fellow that takes me to a cinema wants to do it afterwards.”

“Well, I don't.”

“Let me come all the same. Maybe you'll want to do it once we're there.”

“I'd be surprised. But if you feel like reading comics I have piles of them. Some in Arabic, even.”

“I don't read Arabic, only English. But I can speak it. Do you know what a *zob* is?”

“It so happens that I do, yes. That saves you the trouble of exposing the object concerned.”

But he had already undone his fly and was brazenly brandishing a circumcised scimitar. Thank goodness only I and the other simians in the shop window could see it. As quickly as possible I removed Abdelaziz to my flat – before he could land us in trouble or in jail.

“Will you do it right now?” Abdelaziz whispered as soon as the door swung shut behind us. His voice was hoarse with excitement.

“I have not the slightest intention of doing it, not now or ever, “ I declared loud and clear. “And there is no need to lower your voice. In here you can raise anything you want, even your lowest instincts, as long as you keep well away from the window.”

Abdelaziz looked crushed; it almost stirred my pity. I gave him some illustrated space invaders and a lemon squash.

He was not an ungracious lad: quite the contrary, with his spotless light chestnut complexion, narrowed eyes, pouting, greedy lips. I'd gladly have kissed him, but that was most assuredly not what he was after.

When both comic book and lemon squash were finished Abdelaziz returned to the charge: “It's a fine book. May I keep it? You may do it for nothing, then.”

“If you want the book, keep it – just like that!”

“No, no,” he protested. “I'll come back tomorrow. Maybe you'll want to do it tomorrow.”

“My dear Abdelaziz, I would consider it a kindness if you didn't reopen that question again, nor... Goddamnit, Abdelaziz, your fly! I'll lose my self-control!”

“See, what did I tell you?”

“Be a good boy and vanish. I promise I'll come tomorrow and pick you up after school.”

“I haven't told you which one I go to.”

“Dear boy, I *know* it – among other things.”

“Will you come in your yellow Triumph?”

“How do *you* know what I drive?”

“Every boy in Clapham knows you drive a yellow Triumph – among other

things.”

Since I like wit and repartee I kept my promise and in less than no time Abdelaziz became a regular guest. The idea of me doing it seemed to be abandoned. He evidently did it with others, cash on delivery, and it appeared, from the fact that he now and then presented me with comics and on one occasion, when we were driving to Brighton, insisted on paying at the petrol pump, it paid well.

I couldn't imagine him being unhappy about it until one day I again noticed some hoarseness in his voice:

“You're nice,” he stuttered. “You're not like the others. You don't want creepy things. They never care about *my* pleasure... er...make me... Aw, *you* know!”

“I suppose I do, yes.”

“It's nice to be with you. You certainly... I mean, it wouldn't be the same with you. Please,” he moaned, “just *one* time.”

“What makes you so certain it would be otherwise with me?”

“You're different. You're not queer.”

“God forbid! But you're sorely tempting me to change my mind about that.”

“And I'm not queer. I do it for money. And there's got to be nothing wrong with doing it for pleasure, once. You told me you'd never pay for it.”

“I didn't tell you I'd do it for pleasure, either.”

“And what if I pay you?”

“Come on, Abdelaziz, you're trying to buy something that's not for sale.”

“What do you mean?”

“Love.”

“Not for a million pounds?”

“Not for a million pounds. Love is free for nothing.”

“So we love each other?”

“One never knows. We surely like each other, don't we?”

“We sure do.” He smiled happily, hope elevating his lascivious horizon once more. “With you and me it's not the same. We give presents to each other. You can take from me all that you find in here...”

He grabbed my hand and shoved it in his trouser pocket.

“Please take it, please...” he panted.

The pocket was empty. And warm.

10. The Robin Version

“Uncle Ian, how would *you* translate μ exactly?”

Robin was fourteen now and battling his way through Greek grammar.

“ μ means *belonging to the boys* or *boylike*, substantive, plural,

genitive – you know that – but μ , let's see: – can mean anything from *proceeding from* to *sticking out from*, and...good Lord, Robin, what *are* you translating? Is this from a school book?"

"No. Why?"

"Because it says *the foundation piles sticking out from boys* and these are objects one doesn't usually come upon in a Patriarchal text, nor in Homer, for that matter."

"Who told you we translated nothing but Patriarchs and Homer?"

"That was so in my time,"

"Your time is a thing of the forgotten past now, Uncle."

"All right, Nephew, show me the text."

"Will you translate it for me?"

"Maybe, and adapt it *ad usum delphini*."

"What's that, *ad usum delphini*?"

"It means fit for the Dauphin to read, purified, all the naughty passages expurgated."

"I'm afraid nothing much would be left of *this* poem. And who's the Dauphin?"

"The King of France's eldest son. The Delphin classics were prepared for the son of Louis XIV."

"Louis XV?"

"An excellent guess."

"Louis XV had a very bad reputation. He kept lots of mistresses, and besides the queen played him false. I read all about it in *The Three Musketeers*."

"That was Louis XIII. I hope you are brighter in Greek. Who wrote the poem?"

"One Strato."

"I suspected as much. Do you have his collected works?"

"Is there a *whole book* of these poems? A boy in the top form gave me just this one."

"Well, if he's trying to corrupt you he's at least doing it in style. What did he say when he gave it to you?"

"He said if I had much trouble with it he could give me some practical hints."

"Then we'd better translate it before he does – although I think the poor fellow has grossly underestimated you!"

"My Greek is hardly A-1 yet."

"Perhaps'. But your μ surely is. And *that* is probably where he is hinting – if not hunting. O *tempora, mores!*"

"Cicero. Catilina."

"Now, show me the text – but you *have* a translation already."

"Maybe it's *ad usum delphini*."

"In other words not smutty enough for my dear nephew's taste?"

"Well, there *is* something wrong. I don't quite get the ending. Listen: *My*

dear Diodorus, the forepokers of boys fall into three shapes; learn their names. Now, name the one of still untouched maturity 'lalu'; 'coco' the one just beginning to swell out; but the one already heaving to your hand – speak of it as 'lizard'. As for the more perfect specimen, you know what you ought to call it. Well, what do you make of it?"

"Forepokers is rather nice, don't you think?"

"I'll say! We've adopted it in The Milk-Shakers."

"The *what*?"

"The Milk-Shakers is our dorm wanking club. You have to toss off five members in fifteen minutes to be admitted. But you may do two at a time."

"Two *members*? Shocking! I don't want to hear about it."

"There's something illogical in that procession of participles: *untouched*, *swelling*, *heaving to the hand*, all right. But then suddenly, *perfect*. It doesn't fit together."

"I see. You do have a point there."

Robin looked down at his fly and said, "I'm sorry. *That* point must be a *coco*. Shall I make it a *lizard*?"

"Got it, Robin; let's have the Greek text. You see μ should not be translated by *heaving*, but *being rocked*, yes, *being shaken by the hand*. So we first have the one that's hanging limp, next the hardon, and the one that's being tossed off, and what do we have then in Greek?"

"

"Aha. The himation is sometimes called χ : it is the Roman *toga virilis*, the mantle that you wear when coming of age. χ means *I'm coming!*"

"Of course, when you toss off you *come!* It's a play on words: Strato is not only describing the different *shapes* of boys' forepokers but also the successive stages of *wanking*."

"Hear, hear."

"Just think, 2,500 years ago Greek kids wanked like us – and when they came they cried χ ! Super! Do you have the other poems in your library?"

I smiled at him my most knowing smile. "The game's up, Robin. Of course the whole book's in my library – that's where you found it and copied the English rendering. But we two outdid that learned professor, didn't we?"

"Of course. We have a thorough knowledge of the subject. Why don't you write verse for me, Uncle Ian, like Strato did for Diodorus?"

"What would your headmaster say if he found such poems in your pocket?"

"The head doesn't search our pockets!"

"He did in *my* time, but then you'll tell me my time is the forgotten past. Still, we're not in ancient Greece."

"Wish we were."

"Alas, so do I."

11. Plaster of Paris

Patrick boarded at Louis-le-Grand. I knew his parents fairly well, so he was permitted to stay with me the odd weekend. Sometimes he brought his older brother Pierre. Of course, Pierre found out about us soon enough, but he didn't seem to mind: he read my books, he played my records, he slept on my couch in the living room. He never came into the bedroom: I suppose he used the kitchen sink for his morning pee.

Unlike his younger brother, Pierre dressed fully for breakfast. Not that nudity embarrassed him – the three of us frolicked shamelessly in the shower – although when it came to table manners Pierre turned out to be extremely conventional.

But one morning I emerged from the bedroom to find Pierre sitting there stark naked, although he had already been up and out and bought us some hot croissants. I wondered what he was up to.

With our second cup of coffee I began to find out.

Pierre said to Patrick and me, “You make a nice couple. I mean it.”

“Come on, Pierre,” I said, “you aren't jealous, are you? You're not going to start a scene or something of the sort?”

“No,” said Pierre, “there's no problem. I just want to stay here with you tonight, that's all.”

I looked at him for some moments. “What do you have in mind?”

“I want to sleep with you tonight,” he said simply. “You know that's out of the question, Pierre. You have to go back to school today.”

“I'm not going,” he said. “I'm staying here.”

“You're out of your young mind,” I told him. “What's really going on? Do you have some kind of problem at school? Maybe I can be of help.”

“No,” said Pierre, “there's no problem.. I just want to stay here with you tonight, that's all.”

I looked at his little brother Patrick. Patrick didn't say a word.

“What the hell is going on here?” I said. “If this is some kind of a joke I want both of you to know I don't think it's very funny.”

We left it at that. I began with the dishes. Patrick and Pierre took a shower together and dressed. We had planned to go to the Palais de la Decouverte, but I didn't feel like it any more. Patrick and Pierre went alone.

Around noon the phone rang. It was Patrick calling from the Palais to tell me Pierre had fallen down a stair- case, broken both his wrists, which were already in plaster casts, and that they were coming back by taxi. Before I had a chance to doubt the story Pierre was lying on my bed and Patrick was on the phone breaking the news to his parents. Pierre would have to stay with me for a

week at least. Patrick packed off to school three hours earlier than he really had to.

I went to bed soon after supper. Of course I had to help Pierre undress. There was a lot of giggling and teasing – and a lot of silence, too – before going off the sleep.

I was folding Pierre's shirt the next morning when the program of the Palais de la Decourverte fell out of the breast pocket. That Sunday there had been a demonstration of first aid by the Red Cross. So much for the broken arm! But it didn't explain why Patrick had left me alone with his brother. I rushed to the bedroom.

“Listen, you little faker,” I began to lecture him, “you know as well as I do you're completely helpless with those plaster casts; you can't even break out of them by yourself. I think I'll just leave you right there for a week, without even tossing you off once in a while. Man, are you going to suffer – unless you come clean with the whole truth!”

Pierre grinned. “First wank me and then I'll tell you.”

Well, it seemed a fair deal. And then he told me, “I volunteered for the plaster cast demonstration. They put one on my right arm covering my whole hand and wrist. When it was almost dry I told the man I had to go real bad and I couldn't manage all those buttons and zippers and would he please take the cast off. But he offered to go to the *toilet* with me and help. He was so helpful I threatened to give him away if he didn't put my *other* arm in cast and pay my cab fare home.”

“Good gracious, Pierre, that was quick thinking!”

“Well, not quite,” said Pierre. “I didn't really have to go, but last weekend Patrick went to the same demonstration, and when the Red Cross guy got through putting his foot in plaster, Patrick really did have to go. And the guy offered to carry him. Patrick told me afterwards what went on in there so I had a whole week to work this little idea up. It came off pretty well, don't you think?”

It had indeed, and I decided to let him stay.

In the evening Patrick called me from Louis-le-Grand. “How's Pierre?” he asked.

“I dare say you know very well how he is,” I growled. “He told me everything.”

“I just wanted to say I'm sorry. It was a dirty trick and I didn't really want to hurt him *that* bad.”

“What are you talking about, Patrick?”

“When I pushed him I didn't think he'd fall *all the way down* those stairs.”

“You *pushed* him? That's not quite the story I have from Pierre. Now, quit lying and tell me what really did happen.”

“We had a row over his wanting to sleep with you. I gave him a shove. Please, it was an accident. I didn't want him to break his hands. I'm sorry. I really am. Just...tell him he can sleep with you until his hands are healed.”

I could, of course, have taken Pierre to a radiologist to find out the truth. I

didn't.

Five weeks later Patrick was sleeping with me again and Pierre was back on my couch in the living room. He dressed for breakfast and the accident was never mentioned again.

12. The White Hunter

Leaving my yellow Triumph hard by the cemetery I set out on my usual Sunday walk through the Forest of the Flies. Now, you won't find that poetic name on any map, nor will you be bothered by many flies there, for that matter. The fauna is dominated by male youngsters, and it was they who, for reasons known only to themselves, invented the inscrutable name.

By urban standards it is a wood indeed: three miles long by two deep – six square silvan miles, enough wild darkness for children to imagine themselves cut off from civilization and all in it that irks; enough to turn them into a quite special tribe of savages. I am privileged to know some of the aboriginals personally. “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

Some of them, going in bands, don't socialize and their vocabulary seems to be restricted to shouting ****! whenever an adult goes by. These creatures cannot be domesticated with pocket mirrors and gewgaws: I frequently see them gnawing at apples, but one cannot be sure they are exclusively vegetarian, so I keep away.

More often I socialize with loners. When you spot a loner you must try as quickly as possible to guess the species he belongs to. (No, there are no good field guides for boy-watchers, alas.)

First we have *Puer silvanus stupidus*. The wood is not their normal habitat; they are mostly dumb and not comestible. To be ignored.

Then there are *Puer silvanus curiosus*. These are boys who roam the woods because their mothers told them not to. More often than not their speech is restricted to “I'm going to tell my father.” To be avoided, or to be approached very carefully. Unless he has no father.

Finally there are the real rangers, *Puer silvanus erectus*, which is the species of interest here.

The best places to meet loners are crossroads and clearings. You meet. You stand still. If he says, “Hi, there,” it's a stray cat – ignore. If he says, “Hi, there,” *and* jumps into the bushes, you have very likely happened upon a *curiosus* – follow him at your certain risk and probable peril. If he *very slowly* moves toward the bushes, looking back every five seconds, proceed. And beware of the stinging nettles.

So on that particular afternoon I set out on my dominical stroll in the Forest of the Flies. Nothing happened at the first crossroad. Nothing either at the second, so I decided to take the Kickshaw Trail that wound its way to The Big

Oak. And there, cross my heart, I saw a naked boy hugging that venerable tree.

I froze. What was this? Would I be witness to some age-old pagan rite?

“Hi, there,” the boy called. It was then I saw he was hardly hugging the tree out of adoration: he was tied up to it. Breaking my rule about *Hi, there* boys, I moved closer, dying of curiosity.

“Well, hello,” I said. “Just what do you think you're doing?”

“*Doing?*” the boy growled. “Don't you see I can't *move*? Untie me. It hurts.”

“Where are your clothes?”

“Never mind my clothes. Get these ropes off my wrists.”

“You're not going to walk out of the Forest of the Flies stark, raving naked, are you?”

“I'm not going to spend the rest of my life tied up to this tree, either. Are you going to set me loose or just stand there talking?”

I went to work on the knots, and he told me how he had come to find himself in such apparent *flagrante delicto* with The Big Oak.

“We were pretending we were savages in the jungle...”

“*Pretending?*” I interjected. “You boys *are* savages!”

“I wasn't a savage. I was the White Hunter who fell into their hands. They decided to have a feast and eat me.”

“A skinny little runt like you?” I teased. “Hardly an appetizer.”

“They took off my clothes and tied me to this tree and gathered wood to roast me proper, when suddenly we heard footsteps. So they ran away, the bastards, and left *me... like this!*”

“Good heavens! And who was it that happened along? A rival tribe passing through, or a good missionary?”

“A good missionary. You.” I had finally managed to free him. “Thanks,” he said, rubbing his wrists. “And, now, what have they done with my clothes?”

“I couldn't possibly guess. I'm not one of your cannibal friends. I see they at least let you keep your gun, although I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't point it in my direction – it makes me nervous.”

The boy's hands shot down to cover his weapon.

I wasn't at all happy about the situation. I knew we'd better get the hell out of there.

“Listen, er...”

“Brian,” he said. “I'm Brian.”

“All right, Brian, do you know the Fire Trail?”

“Of course I do. It comes out of the forest near...”

“Exactly. That's where I'll pick you up. You hide in the bushes, and as soon as you see a yellow sports car, dash out and hop in – but for heaven's sake be quick! I'll have some spare pants ready.”

“Very well.” Brian acted as though hopping naked into waiting sport cars with strange men was his daily exercise.

That's how I got the boy, oil-smearing jeans floating somewhere about his

hips, back to my flat. And there he looked enormously more seductive than he had in the Forest of the Flies.

Seduce? Why yes, that's what they did in Eden, didn't they? With apples. I took one from the fruit dish and tossed it to Brian. He instinctively caught it, leaving hold of the over-size pants: they came slowly down to his ankles.

"Traitor!" he yelled, and hurled the apple through a window that unfortunately was closed.

"*Wide!*" I observed drily. Brian was in a state of utter confusion, so mixed up he didn't even try to hide his shame.

"I'm *awful* sorry!" he stuttered. "I'll pay for the win- dow."

"Not to worry," I soothed. "It was an *old* window anyway, so used you could almost *see* through it. Let me put you in the shower. You look like a moss-green birch. You can't possibly go home like that."

"I can't go home without any clothes either," Brian kind of objected, but I was not about to let an opportunity to soap a boy escape me. I dragged him to the bath-room, turned on the jet and quickly got done with the rough work. Now, gently, I went to his tiny Smith & Wesson which under my expert hands grew into a .45 caliber.

"How old are you exactly, Brian?" I asked, quite astonished at the size of his sidearm.

"I'll be ten next month." he said. "It's not *that* big, is it?"

"It most certainly is. And it's got such a *lovely* pre-pace."

"What use?"

"A *pee-are-ee-pee-you-see-ee*, this thing. You can move it back and forth. See? Back. Forth. Back. Forth. Back..."

"Gee!" Then, "Look out, I'm going to fetch up!"

I tried to draw the narrow foreskin forward, but it appeared to be jammed. Niggling, squeezing, it all worsened the situation – and Brian's panic-stricken wailing didn't make matters any better.

"I'm going to be sick," said Brian, and then he was. I felt dreadfully sick myself, and frightened out of my wits.

"Steady, Brian! Hold on, boy," I stammered. "We'll call a doctor, I mean one who's a friend. He'll straighten this out."

"That's just the trouble!" Brian sobbed. "It's too straight already!" Poor Brian. Stiff upper lip was all I could counsel. The Spartan way.

"Since when," said Philip, flinging his tool-bag on my bed, "have you started running the urogenital department of a children's hospital? Who is this boy – all right, don't tell me!"

"I found him in the Forest of the Flies."

"Hello, then, Mowgli." They eyed one another suspiciously. "What's the matter with you?"

Brian pointed rather stiffly to his strangled strawberry.

"I see." Philip nodded. "You were being reckless, weren't you? A bit too

tight a foreskin for that kind of game. Didn't your school doctor warn you about this?"

Brian flushed piteously.

"I'm afraid I'm to blame," I hastened to say. "I was soaping it, and suddenly it snapped on like a spring bolt."

"Really. *You?* *Couldn't* the boy do it himself?"

"Well, Philip, it's all rather involved. Brian was tied up, you see..."

"*Tied up?* Now you *are* going too far. I'll have to make a report, you know..."

"Philip, this is no laughing matter. I simply found the boy lashed to a tree in the woods. Obviously I had to bring him here, and..."

"Yes, yes, I see." Philip didn't at all. "Dare I suppose you have a tube of KY secreted somewhere in this wolf-child nursery of yours?"

"Well, I don't know. Never use it myself, of course."

"You're not supposed to. It's meant for gynecologists. But in this particular situation, if you *could* lay your hand on some..."

I made a lot of noise in the bathroom, clattering jars and cups together and slamming medicine cabinet doors, until finally I felt it appropriate to shout in my best theatrical basso, "Aha, *here* it is!"

Philip spread the KY thick on the site of Brian's pinching problem, then said, "All right, my young Mowgli, set your teeth. This is maybe going to hurt a little, but only for a moment." And with a sudden sleight-of-hand all was back in place.

Brian gasped. Then, "Geel!" and his face broke into a smile of wonder as one hand went down to cradle gently the slowly deflating affair. "I mean, *thanks!*"

Philip asked me to come to the bathroom with him and, as he washed his hands, he told me, "One fine day you're going to find yourself in *real* trouble fooling around with kids this way. I'd better take Jungle Boy right back to his folks. I'll pretend he hitchhiked or something. I doubt they'll suspect a friendly doctor."

"And how will you explain the fact that he hasn't got any clothes?"

"No *clothes?* Don't tell me you smuggled the kid up here *naked?* You really ought to be taken away, you know – wait a minute! Let's call an ambulance!"

"Philip! I'm not *that* sick, surely! We first have to think about the boy."

"That's just what I'm doing," Philip said, reaching for the phone. "And we're going to have a little fun in the bargain."

An ambulance arrived, all sirens howling. A small crowd gathered at my door. Two men in white rolled a stretcher out. Philip carried Brian, wrapped in a blanket, downstairs. The siren went on howl again, and off we sped, Brian wild with excitement.

"Now listen carefully," Philip shouted in Brian's ear, "you tell your parents you were doing a bit of naked swimming in the Jack Hawkins Lake, or whatever you call it, and you got the cramps. Ian fished you out, applied some mouth-to-mouth respiration (I expect *that* part of the story will be true at least), took you

to his flat and in all the confusion forgot about your clothes. Okay, you got all that? Shall we go through it again?"

"No, no," Brian shouted, "I'm not *stupid!* *Gee!* They're driving real *fast!*"

"Indeed," Philip smiled. "And it's going to cost Ian quite a lot of money."

A month or so later I received a short note from Brian:

Dear Ian:

I am in the Brunswick Children's Hospital, room 323. I will get a sircomesision tomorrow. Won't you come and look me up? (He had first written, "look at it".)

Yours Faithfully, Brian.