

Camping Out

by Steven Wood

Bill Dolby, Superintendent of the Southern Counties Boys' Club, and one of the few paid staff, had the Napoleonic look about him when I called at his office one afternoon last May. Gusting with pride the worthy Dolby told me Judge Matthews' son was to be in my weekend camping party. "Take care, the utmost care of him," he said, beaming as if we'd won the Derby together. "I know I can trust you to look after the good name of the club, Steve."

This 'good name of the club' chimera was a recurring theme of Dolby's – meaning mainly that he reckoned on keeping his job. No shred of blame to him for that of course and, anyway, I kind of agreed with the argument, or wanted to agree.

I was and am a Camping Leader (unpaid), having offered myself partly because I could swim, sail, fish, snare, climb, pitch a tent, tie knots, upright a canoe, make wet wood burn – and put down the eleven- to fourteen- year-olds I was required to be in charge of on the rare occasions when they needed putting down. So aptitude was *one* reason. The other reason was the one you would expect. My guess is that out of the seven voluntary CIs on our strength, six showed the kind of interest in their lads we insiders can spot in a millisecond; and the seventh leader was playing out some militaristic fantasy which meant that you couldn't read him except in so far as to know he was a phoney.

"How old is the judge's kid," I asked Dolby warily.

"Ah, young. Nearly twelve."

"Eleven, yeah? You surprise me." The meaning there was that he didn't surprise me much at all because mine *was* the junior camp and, anyway, I'd heard of the old judge and the towering vanity that allowed him to believe in this unusually late conception. Still, the news could not be regarded as good. I had my wholly unwanted assistant leader, Barry Smith, to reckon with, and the younger any celebrity in my care might be the bigger my worries were. Barry, former boy-member, now twenty, was widely known as Stiff, or Stiffy Smith, and there's no prize for guessing why.

"What's the kid's name,?" I asked next.

Dolby looked to the side. "Don't laugh," he said. "It's Plantagenet. But he likes to be called Lant." The 'Lant', by the way, was pronounced with a short A, like ants in your pants.

Easy to imagine Judge Matthews going for a name like Plantagenet, The man had a clear-think capacity as low as his court-room temper was high: he was all cant, threat and reaction. It's a funny thing about Britain that we can't outgrow judges of his kind as wiser nations have done, but facts are facts. These creaking fossils litter and devalue our system of justice up and across the land.

Maybe you'll better understand the nature of Matthews, putative father of my charge, and so the scale of my responsibility, if you think of world-famous Judge Alan King-Hamilton: the mere mention of youthful sex In King-Hamilton's court sets his wattles rattling and the abuse flowing – a kind of geriatric expiation supposedly, and one that seems to depend on the public humiliation of a fellow human being. Or there's hate-thy-neighbour Judge Argyle who punished a boy for the heavy crime of fishing by throwing the child's bike (a new one) into the river. Men like these, mean and dangerous and admired by so many Brits, were the Matthews model exactly. To be kept away from.

Dolby told me to go to his office again next afternoon to pick up Lant and take him along to our pre-travel briefing. I arrived exactly at four-thirty, the appointed time. Even so, the kid was already there when I tapped on the door and walked in. And I knew the moment I saw the little yellow-topped wretch that I had a bomb-alert ahead of me.

In a word, Lant Matthews was beautiful. My God, but other words are required! He had all the endowment a million years of getting the genes right could give a boy- child poised on the sill of adolescence. Lant was exquisite, he was supreme, his loveliness glowed on a drab world that nature must pity now and again to have been moved to present so sweet a treasure. Yes, Lant was beautiful, and he was one-thousand percent boy. He impacted so hard somewhere in the center of my mind that if I live for ever I'll never forget the first sighting of that radiant child. But enough of this effusion.

Lant, it must be added, was provocative: beneath a face of angelic innocence he wore a blue, long-sleeved sweatshirt, harmless enough except for the word- 'Arsenal' printed on its front – not 'Spurs' or 'Rovers' – 'Arsenal'. But now look lower. *Outrageously* short blue shorts partly and casually *unzipped* with the zipper tab sticking conspicuously forward; short white socks topped in red and blue circles and *not* fully pulled up against the long slim legs – legs that were *sunbronzed* in England in *May*. Then, yellow and brown sports shoes on his feet. Can shoes be lascivious? *Lant's* can, and don't doubt it. *They* had flapping, loose laces which in the subtlest manner beckoned you closer to join hands with the devil and tie them up, kneeling to do it, your nose in danger from that zip.

“Come over here and meet Lant Matthews, Steve,” said Dolby in his best cocked hatted manner. “This is Mr. Wood,” he explained to the boy. “He'll be looking after you in camp. One of our most experienced leaders.”

I shook hands with the divine faunlet in shock, prolonging the event. Boy's slim hand, soft and bony; ink-blotched fingers, little nails. “I've heard a bit about you, Lant,” I murmured, forcing a smile. “It will be fun to have you with us. Call me Steve, please. Let's go straight down for briefing – just a word or two about plans.” Dolby waved us out, a happy man.

I hoped the troublesome Barry would miss the briefing which he sometimes did, but he was there checking talent when I walked in with my little protege. His eyebrows met somewhere high over the top of his head as he looked at the

two of us. Murderous thoughts sped through me. Lant's honor would be protected if it took a karate chop at Barry's neck to do it.

Fifteen boys were booked onto the trip and all but one were there, the room smelling of hot humanity and buzzing with young, excited voices. A handful of parents were present, too, which had the good effect of keeping Barry quiet. I clanked through the old routine. Be here sharp at noon on Thursday – *sharp*. Club bus to the station, train to Scarborough, the other club bus to our permanent camp site near the bracing breeziness of the Yorkshire coast. “Bring a sleeping bag if you can,” I said, “but we've got some spares for the ones who can't. And have lots of warm clothing to keep out the North Sea wind.” A few questions, quick answers and the briefing was done.

Thoughts of seeing Lant home ended when a portly lady in brown arrived to collect him.

I had leaden words with Barry before leaving. “If you so much as touch that new kid I'll shop you, Barry,” I said, “so help me I will. I'll have you out the same day – and that'll be you gone for keeps. Think about it, Dumbo.”

My strength here was that none of the other Camp Leaders would use Barry's ever-ready services although they'd been kind enough not to tell Dolby the real reason why. So I was his last chance.

“It gives me the horn just to look at him,” Barry said ruefully. I replied very slowly and in three words. “Barry” (pause) “shut” (pause) “up”.

And he did, which showed sense.

The train was bad, as it always is – try taking fifteen boisterous boys on a journey like this to know why. One of them unfixed a lightbulb and threw it onto the track. I saw the white blob whir past my window but, of course, never discovered who'd done this senseless thing although I suspected a handsome twelve-year-old called Luke. I'd rather forgo the finding out than risk a falling out with a boy like Luke.

Lant spent most of his time beside me and we talked erratically. He showed himself to be more sensitive than I'd thought at our first meeting and he didn't mix with the others, rough but good natured lads, as well as he should have done. Shyness, a need for affection, a touch of pride – all these were there. Not reassuring qualities for camp.

We left the train like the fleeing hordes of Babylon. I had to drive them all to the site, but in two lots, which meant leaving Barry in charge of the second party while I delivered the first. A case of set a thief to guard the bank. At least it gave me a chance to make arrangements for Lant.

The boys were to share, two to a tent, and the lad who seemed the most suitable to partner Lant was Graham, a plain but pleasant and hetero thirteen-year-old. Graham, of course, had other ideas, but a bribe effortlessly dealt with that. He even offered to thump anyone “interfering” with the smaller boy – whatever his interpretation of “interfering” might have been.

The usual squabbling took place as my campers paired off, but they sorted themselves out at last. Barry shared with young Luke as I thought he might

from the way they roughed about together on the journey – Barry was even close to the boy when the light bulb got thrown out, but, no, he hadn't seen anything, afflicted, it seemed, by a sudden attack of transient blindness. Our Assistant Leader had done well because, in addition to being so good looking, Luke was said to be willing and experienced; a happy union and relief for me. Barry understood that within limits I didn't mind what I didn't have to know about but that, by God, I could mind with venom if I did have to know.

I've already said I rather shared Dolby's unrealistic pride in the club's "good name". I was aware that these children were in my charge, and such awkward awareness gave me doubt, anxiety and an anchor chain of hang-ups. Hang-ups are conditioning for respectability as so many religions have gratefully understood.

The whole afternoon was spent getting the camp together. We lit a huge fire, barbecued chicken legs and spluttery sausages and sat around the flames talking and laughing. To groans and playful protests I told them of the program ahead – hiking on the moors, canoeing on the Derwent, climbing on the Cleveland Hills and sea sailing. Fine and manly stuff.

Deliberately, I cut an impressive figure seated on a folding camper's chair, the epitome of the Baden-Powell open air and fitness genre.

The kids soon became tired, as they always seemed to at the end of the first day. Not so Barry, who was being a nuisance, pawing at Luke and making dreary jokes, most of them vulgar, until Luke landed a brilliantly timed elbow jab to the stomach which had the older lad gasping and swearing.

"Serves you right, Barry," I announced from the grandeur of my chair, adding to his pain and humiliation. "Now behave – and leave Luke alone."

Barry glowered across at me. "Well, what the hell are you doing with *him*?" he yelled. An impertinence of the grossest kind, of course.

But what, indeed!

Lant had settled close up to my chair and leaned against me while I stroked the satin sheaves of hair against my trousered thigh and hip. I stroked with casualness; I stroked while speaking and nodding to the other boys; I stroked with playful flicks of my fingers; but I stroked. And it was Lant I stroked and could have stroked to eternity. The boy had me a prisoner of my thoughts. Those legs beside me in the unreal and fanciful light of the fire – those heart-stopping legs with their honorably earned little scars on sharp boy-knees, those sinewy hands so neatly clasped in front. And more, the unflawed wonder of that face – left eyelash sweeping up and down against the glowing background, the curving cheek, the tilted nose, the half mouth visible and looking grave. Helen, my dear, hear this: if your sweet face could launch a thousand ships try Lant's for competition – then creep away and sigh.

These soaring thoughts were brought now to an ignominious end. Damn Barry Smith! The youth would hear in private that this was his last camp with me. His last camp, finish.

I slid my hand slowly to the boy's shoulder and kept it there, motionless,

holding him lightly toward me.

“Don't push your luck too bloody far, Barry,” I said loudly in embarrassment though not quite shouting. “If you make a nuisance of yourself to Luke or *anyone* at this camp you'll regret it.”

He already was regretting. “I'm sorry, Steve,” he mumbled and gave a dried-up smile to Luke who threw a stick at the fire to send a multitude of sparks gyrating high over our heads, which ended that.

Soon after nine I told them to go to bed, and to use the camp facilities. We had a washroom with running water – tepid and cold. “Do your teeth,” I said. “Wash your hands a face – and knees if they need it.” They began to mill about, scuffling, splashing, clowning. Boys being boys.

Lant hung about close to me and I understood that he had something difficult to say. To help, I said softly,

“What's the problem, Lant?”

“I don't want to sleep with Graham,” he said. “Can I come in your tent instead?”

“No, Lant, I'm afraid you can't,” I answered very gently. “I'm sorry. It wouldn't be right at all.” Damn you, Dolby – what nonsense you make me talk! The child-lips down turned and the soft face shadowed. He could tell the forbidding was meant. “You'll be fine with Graham,” I went on encouragingly. “Truly. Off you go. Good night.”

But instead of going he tilted his head to look at me eye to eye. “I sleep walk, you know,” he whispered. “Honest.”

“Not here you don't” I whispered back, adding a whispery laugh.

“It's *true*,” he insisted. “They asked the doctor about it at home. It happens to boys more than to girls. It's the central nervous system doing something.”

“Don't try it, Lant,” I said, firmer now. “If you do I'll just carry you back. Now forget it and go to bed.” He went, and as he went I could have wept.

About ten I hollered for lights out, and sleeping theoretically began.

Sounds from Barry's tent told unequivocally that he'd patched things up with Luke. Grunts, giggles and half uttered words, and then more than that, made an orchestrated background to the night. The effect was erotically arousing – the working up, the moaning climax, the whisperings and laughter, and the working up again. Two hours after lights out I was still awake; so were Barry and young Luke. The rest of the camp had gone quiet.

I kept expecting Lant to appear in my tent hamming away at his sleep-walking act but fortunately (considering my condition) it didn't happen. So the good name of the club seemed as safe as it could ever be.

Luke woke me cruelly early in the morning crouched at my sleeping bag and naked from the navel down as I saw in the early dawn light. He was crying. I sat up abruptly and asked, “What the hell is wrong, Luke?”

“Barry won't leave me alone,” he sobbed. “He's been doing me all night. He forced me – and hurt me.” Luke pointed briefly towards his rear.

“Calm down,” I said, switching on my flashlight.

“Let's look at you. Go down on your hands and knees.” I spread the pert little buttocks and there was a redness there. Barry had obviously had it all ways that night including *the way* (rare piece of luck for Barry).

“Hold still,” I whispered. “I've got some salve – I'll put it on.” So I spread the cream gently into the pink- brown cleavage as Luke's sniveling subsided. I was angry with Barry again but, confronted by Luke's treasurers including tight little balls contracted in the early morning chill, felt a dash of sympathy for the youth and more than a dash of envy.

“I was on my back, nearly asleep,” whimpered Luke. “He pushed my knees up right to my ears, then he... then he screwed me. All his weight on top of me. It really hurt. I'm going to tell my Mum.”

Those last words gave me the kind of jolt a condemned man must feel in the electric chair as they close the switch. A whole ragbag of emotions took charge of me: new fury (at Barry), envy (Barry again), pity (poor sad little Luke), and fear (Luke, Luke's mum, Dolby, Judge Matthews – and Christ knows who else). Great heavens! Dolby and his good name – what of it now?

For seconds I was paralyzed to the extent of stopping the tender application of salve. I took control of myself and resumed, salve-laden fingers trailing downwards, a twist of the hand and trailing up, a healing search to center and sides.

“Does that feel better?” I asked encouragingly.

“Yes.”

“Good. Let's put some pants on you.” I dug out my spare pajama trousers (as Camp Leader I was meticulous about pajamas, the conspicuous display of virtue). He pulled on the trousers, touchingly too big, and we discussed retribution for Barry. I'm somewhat less than an Abe Lincoln when it comes to eloquence but I excelled myself right then persuading Luke out of telling his mother. It would be embarrassing for her and for him; they'd probably have him examined by a doctor – a horrible gloved finger rape; they might ask him about other sexual experiences he'd had – and they'd know if he lied. And there was the club – possible disaster for it; what would the kids all think of him for that?

He agreed not to tell in return for a three-point settlement: first, the gift of a huge bar of chocolate I carried for emergencies; second, a private telling off for Barry by me; third, Barry's confinement for the remaining three nights of the camp to the wooden store hut which he would be forbidden to leave until given my permission in the mornings – meaning when the boys were dressed.

Together we went to Barry's tent to find him lying on his back, eyes open, staring at the canvas overhead. A meek and apprehensive posture, or so it seemed. I did him over like a scene from *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. I called him a bully, a swine, a maniac, a disgrace to the club and a danger to young boys. It was only thanks to Luke's generosity, I stressed, that he was not in more serious trouble. And I passed sentence of nighttime incarceration.

“You bloody hypocrite,” Barry murmured, but blurred it enough through his forearm for me to pretend not to hear. Hardly the mood of meekness. And

Luke, chewing the chocolate, wasn't showing quite the open forgiveness I'd hoped for – over doing the injured party role a trifle in my opinion, bearing in mind the giggling acquiescence of earlier on. Anyway the boy seemed mollified more or less, and the tent was now entirely his as I pointed out. Barry, morosely, moved his gear and himself to the shed.

Later, breakfast. The usual porridge cooked on our gaz-fired range, or shreddiees for the fastidious, and rock-hard boiled eggs with bread chunks.

I worked the lads hard that day, no doubt seeking relief from my own tensions as much as their good. They hiked, ran, climbed and hopped about doing physical education, then finished with a swim in the anti-libidinal cold of the North Sea. Everything they did I made Barry and myself do. Little Lant performed well. I kept my distance from Luke, and Barry kept his distance from me. So.

The camp fire gathering was subdued that evening. Lant hardly spoke to me and I noticed with mixed feelings that he had struck up a light friendship with the fiercely hetero Graham. Safe hands to be in; be thankful for that.

Quietness fell over the camp quickly that night, Barry, of course, in the store shed, Luke reclining alone.

I fell asleep trying to think out for the millionth time how orthodox morality came about with all its cruelties, absurdities and rote reactions. I woke to see starlight coming through my tent flap and Lant coming slowly toward me, crouched and puppetish. He was wholly unclothed.

I unzipped my bag and rose to take him in my arms. He felt unnaturally cold. "Lant," I whispered, "Lant, wake up," and touched his face – more alarming coldness. His eyes were strangely fixed half open, the lids stiff and nearly motionless. By God, this couldn't be an act! Gently I slid him into bed with me and did the side zip up. I opened my pajamas to put as much of my naked warmth against him as I could. An exquisite combination of duty and pleasure. With this lovely child pressed against me the pleasure soon predominated.

Running my hand across his chest and stomach, then down the smoothness of his thighs, I felt the chill already giving way to warmth. The peculiar stiffness of his limbs went too and Lant was relaxed breathing with the slow rhythm of sleep. He lay on his left side, left leg straight and right knee flexed.

Like you, I am human. Knowing I should be carrying the boy back to Graham I instead reached for the lubricating salve and spread it between his upper thighs and along the sublime softness of his perineum. Another ecstatic exploration of curvatures and crevices revealed that my little partner was springily erect. New alarm – was he then awake? A further look by reflected rays from the flashlight, a further listen, and it seemed quite clearly not. I was reassured to think of wet dreams – since they occurred in sleep so, of course, did erections.

Gently, gently I went ahead with my own incalculable pleasure at the same time stroking the lively lever of his boyhood, now firmer than ever and

wonderfully full. To my delight I sensed Lant's climax coming and speeded up my own to keep in step. Tumultuous seconds followed, and through this crash of feeling a little wetness landed in my hand, a very small offering – perhaps his first? Pray that pleasure was sweeping through to dreamland. Evidence suggested that it was – the moment of release brought jerky pelvic thrusts, a moan, erratic breathing and then a rapid sliding back to peace and stillness. For a while I rested my face against the innocence of the slight neck in front of me, then I tidied up.

And afterwards, the inner argument with guilt. These moments could have done no harm (surely so true) and, anyway, the child asleep was, because of that, untouched by what had happened. The club's good name and mine and Lant's were safe. The task now was to ease him out of bed, slowly wake him up and lead him back to Graham.

At that moment the tent flap opened and another visitor appeared. Barry!

"I've got you know, Steve," he said in a pitch of voice I didn't like at all. "Yeah, I've got you by the short ones, now." He laughed. "And, Christ! The judge's kid. Oh, bloody hell, that's rich!"

"Lant's been sleep walking, you fool," I sputtered back. "I've got up to lead him back."

"Sleep walking, yeah? Right into your tent, undoes the zip, gets into your bed – your bed – and fastens up the zip again! Yeah? Don't give me crap like that, Steve." And he turned and called someone else. "Hey, look," he said. "See what we've got here."

Graham's face appeared, twitched and disappeared. Great Caesar's teeth, a witness!

The boy beside me stirred. "Are you waking, Lant?" I asked, trembling from shock.

"Yes," he murmured.

"You sleep walked in here," I said. "Now put these on." I threw him the spare pajama trousers of such extraordinary usefulness this camp. "Run back to your tent, there's no harm done. Explain to Graham."

Barry and I confronted each other in the shed the moment the boy had gone. I reckoned I won on points simply by stressing the positive evidence of interference with Luke against what I called his "dirty surmisings" about me. Someday, somehow I will have to atone for the use of that word "dirty". Right then it was survival alone that mattered. Barry resisted less than I would have expected but smiled in a troublesome way.

Canoeing was on the program for the morning but because of wet weather we hung about after breakfast doing chores. I managed a word with Graham on the side. "Don't listen to Barry about last night," I said.

"*I never* listen to Barry," he announced cheerfully. "Forget it, Steve."

Graham, the good heart – would there were more Grahams about in this dominantly hetero world.

I began to clean up the old cooker, helped, entirely voluntarily, by Lant.

Something had happened to his eyelids – they were red and strangely blotched. I threw him a coarse plastic scrubber.

“What’s the matter with your eyes?” I asked.

“That’s something I put on to keep my eyelids still,” he said. “It’s flour and water paste. I can’t get it off.” Then added quickly, “You were naughty with me last night. I know what you did.”

My heart took a pile-driving thump at my ribs. “Did you trick me, then, last night?” I asked. “Were you awake all the time?”

“You’ve gone ‘red.’”

Red is right. Not red for the love I had made to Lant but for the fact that the love was stolen.

“I’ve got you now,” the boy said, exactly repeating Barry’s cruel words, a huge grin on his lovely face. “I can make you do anything I want. Anything!”

I was no longer running this camp; it was running me, and, what’s more, it was rapidly running me into the ground.

“For God’s sake, Lant!” I said in despair. “Look, hop into the bus. I’ll follow you.”

I yelled to Barry that I was going shopping, sprinted to the bus before he could argue and started up. A mile or so down the lane I parked and switched the engine off. “Lant,” I said, “I got carried away last night. I’m sorry.”

“Why sorry?” he asked, kicking his right shoe off and twisting the bare heel of his foot into my crotch. With gentle reluctance I moved his leg back to its own side of the bus.

“Christ!” I said. “You’re a judge’s son – I daren’t have an affair with you.”

“Don’t worry about Father,” Lant replied blandly. “He’s done it too.”

That little bombshell took a moment or two to go off in my slower and slower moving mind. Then, “What the hell do you mean by that?” I asked. “And how the hell do you know?”

How he knew was simple – in a moment of pique his mother had told him. And in a later moment of remorse she’d tried to put this monstrous indiscretion right by showing him a letter from a school doctor written many years ago. The doctor wrote that Archibald Matthews was not to blame for some undescribed incident that had happened at school, and that in the doctor’s opinion ‘the boy’ (hard to think of Judge Matthews as ever being that) was ‘sexually normal’.

To blame or not his parents had been asked to remove him from the school – a disgrace just a whisper less than expulsion. I understood the judge better then, and his vengeful outbursts. Damn, but I even felt sorry for the poor old sod who must have suffered so massive a blow to his pride at the time. And I felt sorrier still for him when Lant cheerfully said he didn’t think he was his real father anyway. (Was there nothing this child didn’t know?)

Matthews, himself neglected no doubt when young, had neglected his wife who had flown into the arms of other men, and here was his “son” now flying to mine. So let it be.

We made a deal, Lant and I. He would come to my tent at night only when

Graham was deeply asleep and the camp quiet; and he would be back in his own bed when Graham awoke. Before we left the bus I asked if he'd had a sexual affair before. He had – with an older boy.

“But with a man?”

“No.”

“Ah.”

I fixed Barry with a promise that all would be forgiven by the next camp if he kept out of my hair now.

Lant and I spent two loving, fulfilling, enthralling part- nights together. The boy's need for love, spiritual and physical, and the joyous way he abandoned himself, giving and taking, chuckling and sighing, snuggling and nibbling, his every move and mood combined to carry me off to the limits of guiltless joy. He slept at unpredictable intervals and when he did I tried to remain awake for the pleasure of holding him to me in stillness. A pattern developed: I striving to stay awake to hold and adore him – and too soon failing; he waking and pinching me back to consciousness; the bliss and energy of making love; he drifting away to sleep; I holding him to me...

Lant could do this thing I had never seen before, the multiple orgasm, the exclusive pleasure of the very young. But the droplets of essence-of-boy he generously put on my tongue quickly ran out of stock. Time later for more of that.

During the day Lant slipped into the background to be one of the pack. I worked him as hard or harder than the rest – that, too, was part of our deal.

On Sunday morning we broke camp and headed south.

A much less troublesome journey, the boys relaxed from their stay in the open air. Barry, no doubt with the next expedition in mind, was extremely well-behaved.

Lant went off with the brown-clad portly lady and I faced three bleak weeks without him. Dolby was pleased that the four-night camp had gone so well.

Back in my flat at sixish I ran a hot bath and was stepping into it when the phone rang. I stepped out again and over to the thing. Barry's voice came through in faltering quavers. He begged my help and told me he was in the act of being arrested for sex assaults on Luke. Two policemen were standing beside him right then in his mother's house. He was clearly frantic.

“Admit nothing,” I said, “and try to keep calm. I might be able to help.”

As soon as I put the telephone down it rang again and, apprehensively, I put it to my ear. “Is that Steve?” said a young, excited voice.

“Yes, who's that?”

“It don't matter,” said the voice in hard, Londoner's cockney. “I'm speaking for Luke, see? He wants you to know he didn't mean to tell. Follow what I'm on about?”

“Yes.”

“Somebody, you know, like eavesdropped. He's my mate, see? He was just, like, telling me about the camp. Anyway he's sorry.” And the young owner of

the voice hung up.

Bless Luke.

I rang Judge Matthews' chambers next, sweating with strain. The old clown was there, which was a piece of good luck – an omen I hoped. I got straight down to it and told him I had a copy of the letter kicking him out of school. He went so quiet on me I thought he might have died from shock. The letter he'd tucked away so long ago to prove his innocence had looped the loop to prove a degree of guilt. *Sexual* guilt and, more, *homosexual* guilt – and no doubt somewhere in the ancient action a junior boy. The contrariness of life.

“Don't ask any questions, Judge,” I said, gaining strength. “Just get Barry Smith, of Ranulf Avenue, Poplar, off the hook. They've taken him in on sex charges. No one's been hurt so it's nothing serious...” (Oh, sure, nothing serious, not more than about five years serious by British unreasoning, five years and a ruined life.) “Get those charges dropped and I'll post you back the letter. Smith, Ranulf Avenue, Poplar – got it? If the charges go ahead I'll see you crucified.”

His grand courtroom manner was thundering through the earpiece as I cut him off. I knew he'd try to bluff. Even so. Christ! I poured myself the biggest Scotch of my life, downed it in one, then coughed enough to risk a rupture.

Barry was free within two hours, all charges dropped; some kind of speed record, I would guess, though speed in such matters must be essential to stop the paperwork reaching the point of no return. I didn't tell him how the trick had been pulled.

Now an awkward question: should I tell Lant? For one thing I really ought to get a copy of that letter to send to Matthews. Well, I've got three weeks, long, lonely weeks, to think that one out.

Then camp again with my little love, or so I hope. Barry, too, if he behaves himself.