



THE CHRONICLES OF GREEK STREET

A Shilling Life ...

PHIL LECOMBER

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A Shilling Life ...

Soho, London – 1963

For the third time that morning Benny returned to contemplate the photograph on the front page of the newspaper. Through the air vent above his head there wafted in a heady mix of piquant aromas and the industrious clamour of a Soho readying itself for another weekend's revelry—a task that, to the casual passerby, might seem daunting in the stark light of day, without the feverish neon to flatter its glamorous squalor.

Outside in the bright autumnal morning brooms were pushed, steps hosed and canopies raised; liveried Austin vans squeezed down the narrow backstreets to deliver the raw materials for the coming night's entertainment: livid cuts of meat and iced shoals of silver for the restaurants; crates of knocked-off spirits and wines of dubious provenance for the clip-joints; and stacks of Scandinavian delicacies (baled in brown paper wrapping) for the pornmongers.

In steamy coffee bars, slumped over sticky Formica, the victims of card sharks stared into the milky froth of their cups, numbed for the moment from the size of their losses by cheap whisky hangovers. And from anonymous-looking doorways furtive working girls slipped out into the streets to play at normal life for a few hours. All this to a soundtrack played out by the jangle of the Wurlitzer and the sigh of the Gaggia ... 1960s Soho in all its truculent glory.

But cosseted in the subterranean gloom of *Sammy's Cabaret Bar*, Benny Levine was lost in a different decade; transported back thirty years by a piercing stare which, although diminished somewhat by age, still held its aristocratic threat of superiority and entitlement.

He was finally awakened from his reverie by the clatter of heels on the club's metal stairs.

'Rita?'

'Morning, Benny! How's tricks?'

'*How's tricks?*' replied Benny, checking his watch. 'It's gone half-nine—you were supposed to be here an hour ago. We've got your new routine to go through, remember?'

'I know, I know ... and I *am* sorry, love,' said the diminutive blonde, pecking a kiss on Benny's cheek. 'But you see, I bumped into an old schoolmate and we got talking. She's just started at the salon around the corner ... Well, you know how it is: yackety-yak and before you know it—'

'You really should get a little more creative with your stories, you know, Rita. You've used that old school-friend excuse twice already this month.'

'Have I? Oh, well ... maybe I should get you to write me a few lines next time, eh? Still, no 'arm done—I'm here now, ain't I? Besides, we both know what brings the punters in—and it ain't the choreography.' To emphasise her point Rita removed her leopard skin coat to reveal a pneumatic bust squeezed into a tight cashmere sweater. 'I mean, no one ever really notices if we fluff our parts, do they? As long as we all get our tits out at the end.'

'*I notice!*' exclaimed Benny, raking his fingers through his hair. 'For the love of God! At least allow me the one small remaining pleasure—deluded though it might be—of kidding myself that my paltry theatrical outpourings might, every once in a while, bring a scintilla of variety, of entertainment ... of *class*, to this shabby excuse of a Greek Street meat market.'

Benny tugged his crippled arm from the table and struggled to his feet, hobbling over to the bar for his cigarettes. In his frustration he scattered the contents of the matchbox across the beer-sticky floor. Rita helped him gather them up and then offered him a light.

‘I’m sorry, Rita ...’ he said, blowing the first drag of his smoke to the ceiling. ‘You didn’t deserve that.’

‘That’s alright, love,’ she said, placing a hand on his arm. ‘Water off a duck’s back ... What is it—that old leg giving you gyp again?’

‘No ... no, it’s not that,’ said Benny, with a thin smile. ‘It was just something in the paper—a face from the past; it’s had me dwelling on things.’

‘Who’s that then?’ she asked, walking over to the table to read the caption beneath the black and white portrait on the front page. ‘What, this bloke? *Sir Pelham Saint Clair*? Who’s he when he’s at home? Looks like a right stuck up berk, if you ask me.’

‘*Saint Clair*?’ exclaimed Sammy Shapiro, appearing from the adjoining room. ‘Don’t get me started on that one ... So you’ve seen it then, Doc?’

As ever, Shapiro moved in a whirl of nervous energy; in a few nimble steps he’d swung by the bar to filch a smoke from Benny’s open packet, gathered up the newspaper from the table and playfully pinched Rita’s buttock.

‘Say! You putting on a few pounds there, kid? Something we should know? Been playing doctors and nurses with the punters again?’

‘Why, I never!’ said a startled Rita. ‘I’ll let you know I’m—’

‘Alright, alright—don’t flip your wig, I’m only joshing with you.’ He patted her powdered cheek. ‘Listen to this one—you’d think butter wouldn’t melt. She’ll be giving it the old pea-under-the-mattress schtick next. And by the way, young lady—don’t think I haven’t noticed that you’re late again. And as for you ...’ He pointed at Benny. ‘*Sammy’s* may well be a shabby excuse of a Greek Street meat market, but it happens to be a shabby excuse of a Greek Street meat market that you’ve got a thirty percent stake in. Let’s have a little more loyalty, already ... Now, Rita—pay attention while I give you a potted history of this schmuck Saint Clair.’ He folded the newspaper in half and pointed at the photograph. ‘You see, when Benny and I were teenagers—although, when I think about it, such a thing as a teenager hadn’t really been invented back then,

and of course you have to remember that Doc here is a little older than yours truly—anyway, when we were knocking around the East End in short trousers *Sir Pelham Devereux Saint Clair* was the scourge of all the little Yiddisher boys.’

‘Why?’

‘*Why?*’ mimicked Sammy, rooting through Rita’s handbag for a light. ‘Because—my little gum-chomping beauty—His Lordship was the *Blackshirt Baronet*; the leader of the BBF.’

‘The BBF?’

‘The British Brotherhood of Fascists,’ explained Benny, limping over to join them.

‘Fascists? But that’s Nazis, ain’t it?’

‘Yeah, but this was before that little swine Schicklgruber had perfected his act, kid,’ said Sammy, flitting over to the bar to help himself to a bottle of Coke.

‘Saint Clair’s Blackshirts were more like Mussolini’s *fascisti*,’ explained Benny. ‘And little surprise, really—it was discovered later that Il Duce was bankrolling the BBF for a while.’

‘Hold on,’ said Rita, scrunching up her face in confusion. ‘Slow down, won’tcha? What d’you mean, *Il Duce*? That’s that little bistro on the corner of Frith Street, ain’t it? What’s that gotta do with anything?’

‘Are you listening to this?’ asked Sammy, choking a little on his bottle of pop. ‘You couldn’t write this stuff. Ring Charlie and tell him he’s sacked—we’ve got ourselves a new compère ... The little bistro on the corner of Frith Street? That’s *La Dolce Vita*, you crazy mare; Il Duce was—’

‘Well, what about these fascists, then,’ continued Rita, ignoring her boss’s sarcasm, ‘... we didn’t have them over here, did we? That’s the lot we were fighting against during the war, weren’t it?’

Sammy looked over at Benny, held his arms up in despair and then slapped himself on the forehead.

‘Doc—help me out here.’

‘Unfortunately, Rita,’ explained Benny. ‘Not only did we have our own home-bred fascists, at one point in the thirties there was a real danger of Saint Clair’s party gaining significant power.’

‘Well, I’m sure they didn’t teach us that at school ...’ she said, pulling an emery board from her bag to attend to her crimson nails. ‘Still, the 1930s—that’s yonks ago, ain’t it? There’s been a lot of water under the bridge since then.’

‘But that’s just it,’ said Benny, tapping the newspaper. ‘Saint Clair’s in the news again because of the rise in popularity of these NSM thugs; you remember the trouble at that rally last year in Trafalgar Square? And the race riots a few years back in Notting Hill?’

‘But that was Teddy Boys, weren’t it?’

‘Yes, but Saint Clair was quick to jump on the bandwagon, leafleting the area and sending his thugs in to fan the flames. After what we saw in the thirties ... well, the genie is out of the bottle now. Those uniforms, the paramilitary thing, the jingoistic speeches ... you mark my words, we’re going to see people turning to this kind of idiocy again and again, especially when they’re feeling aggrieved, when they need someone to blame. You see—’

Benny was interrupted by a few chords being hammered out on a piano in the adjoining room.

‘Oh, I dunno,’ said Rita. ‘The coloureds and them Teddy Boys, and that punch-up in Trafalgar Square ... well, it all sounds like just a bit of roughhouse if you ask me. If my two brothers are anything to go by I reckon most geezers will find any excuse for a ruck ... I used to see it at the youth club every week.’ She snapped her handbag shut and slid off her bar stool. ‘Anyway, what about this new routine? Has ol’ Russ Conway through there got the music? What’s it called, anyway?’

Benny took a deep breath.

'Bananas in Havana.'

'Another one of your ideas, Sammy?' asked Rita, with an arched eyebrow.

'Yeah, it'll be a blast. Think Carmen Miranda—with added fruit.'

'Bananas in Havana ... that don't even rhyme.'

'It does if you say it in a snazzy accent,' said Sammy, clapping his hands. 'Now, the history lesson's over—kindly move your pretty tuckus onto that stage and make like a hooper. Janine's putting the finishing touches to the costume as we speak.'

'Yes, I can imagine. *Carmen Miranda with added fruit*—no doubt I'll end up looking like I've fallen arse-over-tit in Berwick Street Market,' said Rita, tottering off towards the sound of the piano.

'I'll tell you something, Doc—if our comics were as funny as our strip ... sorry, *artistes*, we'd all be laughing.' But Sammy's quip had fallen on deaf ears. 'Brings it all back, don't it?' he said, noticing that Benny was once more studying the picture of the old fascist leader.

'All too easily, Sammy ... all too easily.'

'And listening to this kid—it's as if it never happened. I mean, what are they teaching them at these schools?'

'Yeah, well; maybe we should be doing something about that,' said Benny, folding up the newspaper and limping over to the bar to drop it in the bin.

'I hate to be a damp squib, Benny, but I think our days of mixing it with Blackshirts are over, don't you?'

'There's more than one way to make a protest.'

'Interesting ... OK, Doc,' said Sammy, moving behind the counter to uncork a bottle of Scotch, 'as long as it doesn't hurt business, of course—I'm all ears.' He splashed a little whisky into two glasses. *'L'chaim ... So, come on then—tell your Uncle Sammy the big idea.'*

‘Well,’ said Benny, taking a moment to savour the taste of the Scotch. ‘You know I’ve been talking for years about writing some fiction? Well, I think I’ve just stumbled across the perfect subject.’

‘Oh, yeah? *And?*’

‘I think it should be about *us*, Sammy; about our journey from the East End to where we are now. The whole thing: Saint Clair and the Blackshirts, Mori Adler, all those characters that we used to—’

‘Say!’ said Sammy, suddenly becoming animated and pulling himself up onto the bar. ‘That ain’t such a bad idea ... Now, what was the name of that sherlock that used to work out of Romilly Street ... or was it Lisle Street? Somewhere round there. Come on—you remember ... he was a mate of Solly Rosen’s ... *George* something ... *George* ...’

‘George Harley.’

‘That’s the fella—George Harley; a real mensch that one. I can just see it now: you could make Harley your private eye hero ... have him getting into all kinds of scrapes, you know—the whole Philip Marlowe schtick. Only this fella’s a cockney, see, and—’

‘*Enough!* Just stop right there. I hate to tell you, but this isn’t going to be another Sammy Shapiro production. *My* ideas, Sam, *my* ideas ... Besides, I want this to be our story. We’ll be the heroes: the move to Soho; our first fleapit of a theatre; the war years ... But first I’m going right back to the start of it all ... back to 1932 ... back to those bastard Blackshirts.’

‘Well,’ said Sammy, emptying his glass. ‘Personally I think you’re missing a trick with the George Harley angle but, hey ... So—what are you gonna call it?’

‘Oh, here we go. Don’t tell me—Sammy’s got an idea for a title.’

‘Of course Sammy has an idea for a title. Sammy always has an idea for a title. Sammy wouldn’t be Sammy if he didn’t have an idea for a title—am I right?’

‘Come on then, let’s get it over with.’

Shapiro jumped down off the bar and played out his hand as though writing in the air with neon lights.

'The Chronicles of Greek Street ...'

'Right. Well, for a start it won't just be about Soho; as I've just said, the first story will be set in ...' Benny paused for a moment and then moved over to retrieve his cigarettes. 'Actually ...' A broad smile appeared on his face as he sparked up a smoke. 'That's not bad. *The Chronicles of Greek Street ...* no, that's not bad at all.'

'As I always say, Doc—you've either got it, or you haven't ... So, when you've got something in the shape of a draft worth looking at, let me know. I've got a couple of contacts in the publishing world.'

'Yeah, right; the thing is, I wasn't planning on illustrating it with pictures of naked pinups. Remember—I know all about your *contacts in the publishing world ...* as do most of the officers in the Clubs and Vice squad.'

'No, no, no—this character's a kosher publisher, over Bloomsbury way; he owes me a favour ... But you said it was a *protest*, a protest against these NSM idiots. How so?'

'Well, I'll write about how it affects people—all that poison, that hatred ... how it ruins lives. As Chekhov says: "*Man will become better when you show him what he is like*".'

'Well, I wish you luck with that, Doc. In my experience people spend most of their lives trying to avoid the fact that they're imbeciles; these Biff Boys won't thank you for pointing it out in black and white. But, hey—if you make a few shekels in the attempt, who's complaining, right? I expect to see the first scribblings within the month. But in the meantime we've got some fruit to choreograph. Come on, Shakespeare—Rita's melons will be getting cold.'

Over the next few weeks, spurred on by a flurry of memories from the early years, Benny took full advantage of every spare moment to work on the draft of his manuscript. He felt animated for the first time in years; sleeping hours were reduced to a bare minimum and most nights after the club's doors had closed he could be found pummelling away on the old Remington in the back office, fuelled by cold coffee, Kensitas and the odd dip into Sammy's secret stash of Dexamyl.

One night, following a particularly lack-lustre show, Sammy was seated at the club's baby grand, tinkering with a doleful melody, when Benny limped over to drop a wad of typed pages under his nose.

'So, here it is.'

'And within the month—I'm impressed.'

'Yeah, well ... it's just a first draft, you understand. It needs work. See, I've got to develop the—'

'*Schtum!*' said Sammy, placing his finger on his lips. 'Let me read it first, then we can talk about what it needs.' He propped the manuscript up on the piano's music stand and turned over the title page.

'You're gonna read it now?' asked Benny, a little nervously.

'Sure I'm gonna read it now, why not? What, you wrote this so it shouldn't be read?'

'No, no ... of course I want people to read it. It's just that it's a little ... Well, what I'm trying to say is that this is different to the skits and things I write for the girls—this is part of me. It *personal*, you know?'

'Benny—stop being such a kvetch. Go bring the bottle while I read your little story here ... So, *The Chronicles of Greek Street, by Benjamin Levine ...*'

The Chronicles of Greek Street

by Benjamin Levine

Whitechapel, London - 1932

By the time she had arrived at the newsagents Sally's hangover had diminished to a dull ache behind her eyes—easily remedied once she got to the club with a tug on the gin bottle that the girls kept in the dressing room. But it would be a couple of hours before she left for work and Vern had still failed to rematerialize. She'd managed to stave off her hunger with a cup of warm milk and half a bag of mint imperials, but she was now desperate for a cigarette; Vern had taken the last packet and she was loathe to part with any more cash for smokes when she could easily squirrel away another carton from the store room at Paladino's that evening. There was nothing else for it—she'd have to chance her arm at extending her credit at *Abrahams'*, the newsagents.

She made another pass by the window, glancing in to see if old man Abrahams was minding the shop; God only knew how much she owed on tick, but it was certainly more than the pound or so she had to last her to the end of the month (any tips she would pick up at the club were naturally ear-marked as drinking money). As it was, things looked to be in her favour: Elizabeth was behind the till—always good for tapping up, that one; just as long as Old Shylock wasn't hiding out back, of course.

Sally touched up her lipstick in her compact mirror, took a deep breath, set her mouth to a smile and plunged through the door, the sprung bell announcing her entrance as she tottered up to the counter in her battered heels.

'ello Liz. How are yer, ducks?'

'Fine thanks, Sally. How about you?'

‘Ooh, can’t complain. Well I could, but no one would bleedin’ listen, would they?’

‘Are you still at the club? How is it? Exciting, I bet.’

‘Oh yes, dear, it’s all very swanky. But you see, I’m on my feet all night, aren’t I? It’s hard graft really ... We had that Richard Cooper in the other night; least, I think it was ‘im. Rubbish tipper. But then all the famous ones are, of course.’

‘Are they?’

‘Ooh yes, dear; that’s well known, that is. Still, I won’t have to worry about all that when my Vern’s ship comes in. He’s working on some big deal—all very hush-hush you know—but I’m sure it won’t be long before we’re on velvet. He’s promised me a big place up West; with maybe a girl to come in and help out. You know—a domestic.’

‘But what would you do with yourself, Sal? Wouldn’t you be bored?’

‘*Bored?* I should cocoa. I’m not really cut out for all this work malarkey, if truth be told. I sometimes feel like I was born into the wrong family. D’you ever get that? I reckon I was meant to be one of them ladies of leisure—being pampered all day. Be nice, wouldn’t it? ... ‘Course, I might try my hand at modelling; a punter at the club reckons I’ve got the bone structure.’ She turned to show Elizabeth her profile. ‘*Classic*, he called it. High cheek bones—get them from me mum’s side. This punter’s offered to do me a set of mug shots at his studio—buckshee. But I’m sure if my Vern found out he’d murder the poor bugger ... so I can’t really take ‘im up on it, can I?’

Sally then remembered her mission and moved closer to the counter.

‘Ooh, Liz—you growing yer ‘air? It’s lovely and wavy, ain’t it? D’you do anything to it?’

‘No, not really. It’s always been a bit curly.’

‘Well, waves are all the rage, of course. You should make the most of it—tease it out a bit. The boyish look’s old hat now.’

‘Is it?’

‘Oh yes; everyone knows that, dear ... You know, you remind me a bit of Myrna Loy, with yer hair like that.’

‘No I don’t.’

‘You do, I swear ...’ Sally turned to the magazine rack. ‘Have you got a *Movie Classics*? I’ll show you.’

‘No, I think I sold the last one this morning; the delivery comes in on a Tuesday and they always go like hot cakes.’

‘Well, take my word for it—you do ... Now listen, I’d love to stop ’ere chewing the fat with you but I must be getting on. I just popped in for a packet of smokes.’

‘Of course. Player’s, isn’t it? ... There you are. That’ll be sixpence, please.’

‘Oh—will yer look at that. What an ’azy Daisy I am. I’ve only gone and come out without me purse again ... Oh, just stick it in the book will you, Liz? There’s a dear.’

‘Well, the thing is, Sal ...’

‘Yes dear?’

‘Well ...’

‘Come on then—spit it out.’

‘Well, it’s just that Mr. Abrahams did say you weren’t to have any more credit ... not until you’ve paid a bit off, that is.’

‘Oh, don’t be silly—it’s only a tanner.’

‘I know, but ... well, he was really quite clear about it.’

‘But you’ve known me for ages, Liz—surely I’m good for a tanner?’

‘Well, of course. But you see—it’s a bit more than that, Sal ... quite a lot more actually.’

‘Look—I get paid on Friday. Just put these down in the book and I’ll pop in on Saturday and pay it off. Will that do yer?’

‘I don’t know if I can ... Benjamin’s in the back room; I think I’d better just check with him first.’

‘Well, alright, ducks ... if you feel you must.’ Sally began to flick nonchalantly through one of the magazines in the rack. ‘Only don’t be too long, there’s a dear—I’ve got things to do before work.’

Elizabeth made her way through the beaded curtain into the back room where Benjamin Abrahams was sitting at a table piled high with medical text books, sucking on the end of a pencil.

‘Ben. Are you busy?’

‘Never too busy for Myrna Loy.’

‘Stop it! Were you eavesdropping?’

‘It would be difficult not to—she’s hardly *verecund* now, is she?’

‘What?’

‘*Verecund*: a rarely used base adjective of the adverb *verecundly*, meaning bashful or modest—’

‘*Shush!* She’ll hear you.’

‘Alright, alright ... So, Sal wants more credit—correct?’

‘Yes. That’s it.’

‘And what exactly did my dad say?’

‘He said that the next time she came in she was to pay off at least a crown before she could have any more.’

‘And how much does she owe in total?’

‘Just over a pound, I think.’

‘And she’s just after the cigarettes today?’

‘Yes, a packet of Players. I feel awful saying no, Ben. After all—it’s only sixpence. She says she’ll be in Saturday to pay some off—she gets paid on Friday, you see. She’s been coming in here for ages now; it’s not as if she’s a stranger, is it?’

‘Alright, let her have them. I’ll square it with my dad. But no more after that—clear? My bet is she doesn’t materialise on Saturday.’

‘Oh you, you’re such a cynic.’

‘No I’m not; it’s just that I understand human nature a little better than you.’

‘Is that right? Alright, Mr. Know-It-All, you’re on. What are your stakes?’

‘Oh, want to make it interesting, eh? Let’s see ... If she does come in on Saturday—and pays off some of her debt—I’ll cover one of your shifts for you.’

‘And if I lose?’

‘If you lose, then ... then you let me take you to the flicks one Sunday.’

‘Oh ... Yes, alright then—you’re on.’

Elizabeth quickly turned to make her way back into the shop, hoping that Ben hadn’t seen the colour that he’d raised in her cheeks at the long awaited proposal of a proper date.

‘It’s alright, Sal. Ben says that you can have the ... Oh ... *Ben, she’s gone!*’

‘And taken the cigarettes with her, no doubt?’ he shouted from the back room. ‘Bring the local through, would you, Liz? I might as well check the listings for the pictures now.’

‘Watch it, cocky—don’t count your chickens until they’re hatched.’

‘You know, Myrna, for a Hollywood starlet you’re something of a soft touch.’

Elizabeth grabbed the newspaper she’d been reading on the counter, rolled it into a baton, then ran into the back room with it held above her head.

‘Alright, alright ... *fainites!*’ shouted Ben, defending himself with a textbook.

Elizabeth thwacked the book’s cover and then shrieked as Ben began chasing her round the table. She shrieked even louder when he caught her around the waist. She grabbed at his wrists, twisting to find his face in close proximity.

They both stopped laughing, the room silent now apart from their quickened breathing.

‘You shouldn’t start things you can’t finish,’ said Ben, quietly—surprising himself with the boldness of the phrase. They parted a little, the flirting quenched for the moment by a mutual embarrassment.

Elizabeth busied herself with tidying her hair.

‘It’s a little slow today. I think I’ll make a cup of tea—do you want one?’

‘That’ll be lovely, thanks.’

She went to put the kettle on the hob. When she returned Ben was reassembling the pages of the paper. He pointed to a photograph of a Blackshirt in uniform, posed at a lectern, one fist raised theatrically above his head.

‘Look at this idiot; Sir Pelham Saint Clair—the *Mayfair Mussolini* ... I’ve been trying to persuade Dad to board the windows up on Saturday. They’ll pass right by here on that march, you know; just a couple of streets away.’

‘But they won’t actually come down here, though—will they?’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised. They’ve been complaining again about Jewish shops being allowed to trade on Sundays, haven’t they—saying it’s an unfair advantage.’

‘But if they’re open on the Sunday ... well, they wouldn’t then be open on the Saturday, would they?’

‘Closed from sundown on Friday night, which in the winter—when the clocks have gone back—loses them a good three hours on the Friday as well.’

‘So where’s the advantage in that?’

‘There isn’t one, of course. But these idiots don’t live in the world of reason, Liz—they just want a scapegoat; an easy target to blame for all the woes in the world. To them it’s just more proof of the immoral, money-grabbing Jew.’

‘But you and your dad don’t go to synagogue, do you? We’re closed on Sundays, like everyone else.’

‘The name on the sign will be enough for them to put the windows in.’

‘But surely the police won’t allow that, will they?’

‘You sound just like the old man. Have you listened to our Home Secretary recently? Besides, I’m not so sure they could stop these idiots even if they wanted to.’

‘Oh, it’s not got that bad, Ben, surely?’

‘*Not got that bad?* Look at this—I found this stuck to our front door the other morning. I’ve not shown Dad because I didn’t want to upset him—he’s still not fully recovered.’

He pulled a torn sticker from between the pages of his textbook and handed it to Elizabeth.

“*“Money spent with Jews never returns to Gentiles pockets.”* ... well, that’s rubbish for a start—what about my wages?’

‘*Oh, Liz!* This isn’t the school debating society. They’re not looking for a balanced argument. It’s a *hatred* ... a poison that’s ingrained in European society and has been for centuries. After all, we sacrifice babies, don’t we? Poison wells—we’re dirty, money-grabbing Christ-killers.’

‘Oh, don’t be so melodramatic.’

‘*Melodramatic?* What would you know about it, anyway?’

She shot him a fiery look.

The kettle on the hob began to whistle.

‘Well, I haven’t got time to stand here and be insulted, thank you very much. Some of us have got work to do.’

Ben sat for a moment with his head in his hands, the shriek of the kettle becoming increasingly insistent. Finally he got up and removed it from the heat, then sighed deeply and went through into the shop. He found Elizabeth bent down behind the counter, cutting the string on the bales of magazines.

‘Listen, Liz, I—’

Just then the entry bell announced the arrival of a small, barrel-shaped woman in a green headscarf, wrapped up tight in an old overcoat that looked fit to burst.

She placed her two bulging shopping bags on the floor and stood at the counter catching her breath.

‘Afternoon, Mrs. Evans,’ said Ben. ‘And how are you today?’

‘Oh, Benjamin—me bunions are playing me up summit rotten, I don’t mind tellin’ yer. I’m a martyr to ’em, you know—must’ve done summit terrible in me previous life to deserve such torture.’

‘Ah—hallux valgus.’

‘Havoc’s what, dear?’

‘Hallux valgus.’

‘Come again, dear?’

‘*Hallux valgus*: the common bunion—’

‘Ignore him, Mrs. Evans—he’s just showing off as usual ... Now, what can I get you?’

‘Let’s see now ... *The Oracle* ... a quarter of crystallized ginger ... and a packet of Honey Cut for His Nibs.’

Ben put a hand to the small wooden ladder used to reach the higher shelves.

‘It’s alright, thank you—I can manage,’ said Elizabeth, yanking the ladder away from his grasp.

Mrs. Evans raised her eyebrows at Ben and then produced a grubby-looking handkerchief from her coat pocket and blew her nose.

‘How’s yer father, Benjamin? I heard he was poorly; nothing too serious I ’ope.’

‘Pneumonia—we were very worried for a while, Mrs. Evans. But thankfully he’s on the mend now. Although getting him to rest up in bed is a challenge, I must say.’

‘Pneumonia? Coo, lor’ ... he was lucky then.’

‘He was that.’

‘Yus—lucky, alright ... Billy Mulligan at number twenty-two was taken off with pneumonia last November, you know; always suffered in the smog, did poor Billy. Well, give him my best—he’s one of the good ’uns, that one.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Evans, I will.’

Mrs. Evans blew her nose once more, paid for her things and then waddled out of the door.

Elizabeth climbed up the ladder to replace the jar of crystallized ginger.

‘I suppose that’s evidence of the ... what was it now? Oh yes—*the hatred and poison ingrained in our society.*’

‘Let’s just forget that conversation, shall we? ... I really don’t want to fight with you, Liz.’

‘Well, you’ve got a strange way of showing it, Benjamin Abrahams.’

Ben grabbed hold of the ladder and began to wobble it.

‘Hey! Stop it, you idiot—I’ll fall ... *Don’t!*’

Elizabeth jumped from the ladder, straightened her skirt and then bent down once more to tend to the piles of magazines, trying to suppress a laugh.

Ben paced a hand on her shoulder.

‘Listen—I really am sorry.’

‘Well, don’t think you’re getting off the hook that easily,’ she said, but allowed her smile to break out a little. ‘Here—you can help me with this lot.’

‘But I’ve got studying to do.’

‘Well you should have thought of that before you started bullying me.’

‘*Bullying* you? But I—’

‘*Shush!*’ she said, dropping a bale of *Radio Times* on his foot.

‘Ow!’

‘Baby.’

They both worked in silence for a while, allowing the mood to soften again.

‘Oh, I meant to tell you—Nigel’s been offered a full-time place at the office.’

‘That’s brilliant news, Liz. I bet your mum’s chuffed.’

‘She’s as proud as Punch ... Of course, she thinks it’s all down to your tutoring.’

‘Oh, I didn’t do much really—just helped him a bit with his maths; built his confidence a little.’

‘Nonsense. Now you’re being modest—which makes a change ... Seriously though, you really have been such a help, both you and your father. I don’t know what we’d have done without you ... You know, it hit us all pretty hard when Dad passed away. At times I wondered whether we’d lose Nigel as well.’

‘What do you mean, ‘lose’ him?’

‘Oh, it sounds silly now, but he withdrew into himself. We couldn’t seem to get through at all. I dreaded how it would end, what with this Depression ... You read all those awful stories in the paper; in some families there are three generations of men out of work—the whole family on the dole. It’s been so important for him to have some male influence around the house. And your dad has been brilliant with the flat, of course—we couldn’t have done it without him. God! Just imagine what might have happened if we’d been renting from one of those horrid landlords you hear about. And with you coaching Nigel through his exams ... and now he’s got this place in the drawing office ... It is a real opportunity, isn’t it, Ben? This position?’

‘Yes, of course it is—as long as he works hard at it.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he will. You should see him getting ready for work—he looks so smart in his suit. And when he brought his first pay packet home to Mum ... I wish you’d seen it.’

‘Well, he’s the man of the house now, with responsibilities.’

‘Yes, I suppose he is ... Seems funny to think of little Nigel like that.’

‘Right Miss. I’ve finished my chores—can I return to my studies now?’

‘Only if you promise to be a good boy.’

‘I promise.’

‘Off you go then—and don’t do it again.’

‘No, Miss Cooper, sorry Miss Cooper.’ Ben scampered back to his studying, tugging his forelock.

Smiling, Elizabeth returned to the counter and gazed out of the window as the outline of a policeman’s helmet bobbed past above the display. She shouted out to Ben in the back room: ‘Do you really think there’s a chance those Blackshirts will put the windows in?’

‘Honestly? I don’t really know—maybe I’m just over-reacting.’

‘*God! I do hope so,*’ said Elizabeth, under her breath.

A few weeks later Elizabeth looked up from unpacking the cigarette cartons as the doorbell jangled, announcing the arrival of her younger brother.

‘Gosh, Nigel, you’re keen—half-past-eight on a Saturday?’

‘I’m going into the office, aren’t I—got some overtime on an important project.’

The teenager wandered up to the counter with his hands in his pockets, trying to look nonchalant in his first ever suit.

‘Important project, eh? Look at my little brother, all grown up ... Oh, but come here; your collar’s all rucked up at the back.’

Nigel squirmed as Elizabeth began to fuss with his jacket.

‘Leave off, Sis! I’m not a kid anymore.’

‘There you are, that’s better—very smart. Now, what time have you got to be there?’

‘Nine. I’m on my way to the bus. Mum asked me to drop in to remind you to bring home a *Radio Times*.’

‘I’ve already got it on my list. Anything else?’

‘Yes. I’ll, erm ... I’ll have a packet of Weights.’

‘Oh yes? And since when do you smoke, young man?’

‘I’ve been smoking for ages now—’

‘You haven’t!’

‘I have! You don’t know everything about me, you know.’

‘Alright, shrimp—keep your hair on. It’s an expensive habit, you know ...’

Elizabeth walked back behind the counter. ‘Does Mum know?’

‘Stop lecturing me, Liz. It’s my money, ain’t it?’

She looked at him with raised eyebrows for a moment, then relented and handed him the cigarettes.

‘Please yourself. There you are—that’ll be fourpence.’

‘Don’t you get anything off for working ’ere?’

‘Not on cigarettes, no. I don’t think the profit is big enough.’

‘Yeah, I bet ... Typical Yids. They must be raking it in.’

‘*Shush!* Ben’s out the back.’ Elizabeth looked at her brother, a little shocked at his comment. ‘Nigel, how can you say that; after all they’ve done for us?’

‘I was just saying ...’

‘Yes, well—*don’t.*’

He made a face, then handed over the money and pocketed his cigarettes.

‘Hadn’t you best be off?’ asked Elizabeth, ringing it up on the till.

‘I’ve got a few minutes yet. I don’t wanna be hanging around the bus stop kicking my heels for ages.’

‘Well, you don’t want to be late, either.’

‘I won’t be late—*stop nagging me!*’

‘Alright, alright. Here ...’ She unfolded a scrunched-up paper bag on the counter. ‘Have a sherbet lemon.’

Nigel popped a sweet into his mouth and pulled one of the newspapers off the pile on the counter.

‘This is a rum old do, ain’t it?’ he said, pointing to the front page of the *Daily Oracle*.

‘Isn’t it, not *ain’t it* ... What is?’

‘These bombings. This last one, on that tram; killed twelve people, you know. They had to fish the bodies out of the river ... bits of ’em floating around in the water.’

‘Oh, stop it, Nigel. It’s too beastly to think about ... Those poor people, just going about their business.’

‘One of them was expecting, an’ all ... You think they’d have caught them by now ... Commie scum. Should be hunted down like animals.’

Elizabeth studied her brother’s face, surprised once more by his tone.

‘But it says in the paper that the bombers are *anarchists*, not communists.’

‘Same thing, ain’t it? All foreign ideas ...’ Nigel crunched down on his boiled sweet and then moved over to peer out of the window. ‘You know, Mr. Jenkins reckons the Bolshies have infiltrated the government somehow—that’s why things have gotten so bad. Makes sense when you think about it: they want everything to fall apart so’s they can take over here, just like in Russia.’

‘Oh yes? And this is your Mr. Jenkins at the office, is it?’

Nigel spun around and glared at her for a moment, before approaching the counter.

‘Yeah, that’s right ... Mr. Jenkins at the office. See, he reckons Sir Pelham Saint Clair’s got the right idea—says he’s the only politician around that’s intelligent enough to deal with the threat. Here you go, listen to this ...’ Nigel pulled the newspaper closer towards him and began to read from the article below the photograph of the Blackshirt leader. “*The dreadful and costly sacrifice in the trenches robbed this country of the cream of a future generation, leaving it to choose its leaders from an anaemic and degenerate stock. This weakened control has left it woefully exposed to undesirable alien influence; an influence that has already shown its hand in the chaotic scenes of The General Strike. But now—with these heinous and murderous acts—we see a more pernicious and deadly foe raise its head ready to strike.*” ... How d’you like

that? *Pernicious and deadly foe*. Got a way with words, ain't he? Mr. Jenkins reckons it's thrilling to see him in real life—says you can feel the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.'

'I'm pleased to see you taking such an interest in current affairs, Nigel,' said Ben, appearing through the beaded curtain from the back room. 'But you shouldn't just swallow this stuff hook, line and sinker, you know. Oh, I'll admit that Saint Clair has a certain theatrical style of delivery, and, of course, he's a wizard at pulling all those patriotic heartstrings; but just look at the content of what he's actually saying. I mean—no one can honestly compare the General Strike with this campaign of terrorist bombings, can they?'

'Why not? The Russkies were behind it, weren't they?'

'I think we're getting a little confused. For a start—as Liz said—these bombings are being attributed to an anarchist brigade ... and who on earth told you that Bolsheviks were behind the General Strike? It was called by the TUC over proposed reductions in the miners' wages. Don't you think that workers should have representation, Nigel? After all, you're an employee now. Don't you think that you should have a say in your—'

'*And who made you such an expert?*' shouted Nigel, his face colouring as he pointed to the picture of Saint Clair. '*This man*, he ... he was a bloody officer in the bloody war! Awarded a medal for bravery. He's a baronet ... a *gentleman*. And who are you? What have you done, eh? Apart from read a few stupid ruddy books ...'

'*Nigel!*' said Elizabeth, coming out from behind the counter. 'That's enough!'

'No—it's alright, Liz,' said Ben, laying a hand on her arm. 'Listen, Nigel—you talk about alien ideas threatening Britain? Well, Sir Pelham Saint Clair's ideas are some of the worst. He's being courted by Benito Mussolini for goodness sake.'

'And what's so bad about that? Mussolini's sorted them wops out by all accounts; a lot of people reckon he's doing a good job.'

‘And that’s your Mr. Jenkins talking again, is it? Well, I wonder what Mr. Jenkins would have to say if Saint Clair’s Blackshirts were to just march in and take control by force, like Mussolini did in Rome. Because if that does happen, Nigel, you can kiss goodbye any form of democracy—the government will be appointed by the fascists and the fascists alone. We’ll lose our freedom of speech, our liberty ... No, I’m sorry to tell you, Nigel, that despite what he might promise in his speeches, your precious Sir Pelham Saint Clair’s grand scheme isn’t designed for the likes of you and me at all.’

‘Well, definitely not for the likes of your lot, anyway ...’ mumbled Nigel as he turned to walk to the door.

‘What did you say? Why, you little—’

‘Oh please, Ben, just let him go,’ said Elizabeth, tears welling in her eyes.

Ben followed Nigel to the door, grabbing him by the elbow.

‘Seriously, Nigel, I’m warning you—don’t get mixed up with this poison; you’re better than that.’

‘Too late,’ said Nigel, pulling himself free and yanking open the door. ‘See, I’m off to a BBF meeting after work ... Don’t worry though—I’ll be sure to pick you both up some leaflets.’

Elizabeth made a note on the back of a sweet bag of where she’d got to in the stocktaking before looking up to see Nigel walking through the shop door.

‘Watcha, Sis!’ he said, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he approached the counter with his hands in his pockets. He was closely followed by a skinny individual with a wispy pencil moustache and far too much Brilliantine in his hair.

‘Nigel? Shouldn’t you be at work? Is everything alright at the office?’

‘Yeah, ’course. Old Jenkins let us out early—on account of the meeting this evening.’

The friend now stepped forward.

‘Me and Coop ’ere get special dispensation, see—on account of us being party members. Jenkins tells the other lads it’s to allow us time to help him prepare the hall for the meet; but that’s a load of old gammon really. It’s more of a perk, see—he’s just looking after his own.’

‘Oh, I see. So you’re in this BBF thing as well, are you?’

‘Course he is,’ said Nigel. ‘This is Joycey—I told you about him, don’t you remember?’

‘Oh, yes, *Joycey* ... How do you do?’

‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ said Joycey, laughing and giving a mock curtsy. ‘Proper posh your sister, ain’t she, Coop?’

‘Nah—she just thinks she is.’

‘I dunno,’ he said, leaning across the counter and gazing intently at Elizabeth, who had begun to blush slightly. ‘I reckon she’s a bit of class ... ’Ere doll—how’s about you and me mooching along to the Pally one Friday night? You know—a spot of something to eat, bit of dancing; my treat.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so ... that’s not really my kind of thing.’

‘How do you know, unless you try?’

‘Oh, let’s just say I’ve got a good imagination.’ Elizabeth looked past Joycey to her brother. ‘Now, did you want anything in particular, Nigel?’

‘Oh, yeah. The old girl sent me in to pick up some parcel that you’ve collected for her.’

‘Don’t call her that. It’s disrespectful ... Ben picked the parcel up earlier; I think it’s upstairs.’

Elizabeth glanced at the rebuffed Joycey, who had moved over to the magazine rack and was now making a show of flicking through a comic.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ said Nigel. ‘Go and get it, then. We haven’t got all day.’

‘I can’t—I’m not supposed to leave the shop unattended.’

‘We’re here, ain’t we? What’s gonna happen?’

‘Well, alright ... but if anyone comes in you will shout up, won’t you?’

‘Course we will.’

When Elizabeth had disappeared through the beaded curtain, Joyce turned to Nigel with a scowl.

‘Snobby mare, ain’t she?’

‘Oh, she’s alright really. Just likes putting on the airs and graces a bit.’

Nigel watched the older boy’s eyes, desperate to play it the right way and not lose too much face from his sister’s snub.

‘Well, I can’t see what the silly cow’s got to be all high and mighty about—working in here for them Yids ... Just reeks of ’em, don’t it?’

Nigel gave a little nervous laugh.

‘Is that right you told me she was sweet on the son? S’pose that’s the Ben she was banging on about, is it? Ben ... Benjamin ... *Benjamin Abrahams*. Bet he’s got a face like the map of Jerusalem, that one.’

‘I dunno ... don’t think there’s really anything in it. It’s not like they’re walking out. He’s studying to be a doctor—birds are impressed by stuff like that, ain’t they?’

‘Well, doctor or no doctor, I’d put a stop to it if I were you. I wouldn’t want a dirty sheeny messing around with my sister; and I’d hate to think what the boys in the troop would say if they found out, Coop ... Mind you,’ continued Joyce, moving back to the counter and running his hand over the display of chocolate bars. ‘I s’pose it does have its advantages—her working here.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, plenty of opportunity to pinch stuff, right? After all, it’s only nicking from Yids, ain’t it?’

In a silent panic Nigel's mind raced for a way out of the dead-end that he could see the conversation heading to.

'Yeah ... they've probably got so much gelt they wouldn't notice, right?' he said, forcing a little laugh. 'So, d'you reckon there'll be a good turnout tonight, Joycey—at the meeting?'

'Nah—that ain't right about the gelt, Coop. See, yer Yid knows every penny he's got; stands to reason. Hoards it, don't he? Counting and recounting it, over and over again. Then when he does finally spend it he buys stuff from some other sheenies, or sends it abroad. And that spells trouble for us mugs back here, who, after all, took 'em all in and gave them a home in the first place. Jenkins was explaining it to me the other day—the capital leaks out of the British system, you see.'

'Right, yeah ... I see.'

'So, you could say—with us being tax payers and all—that they kind of owe it to us.'

'Well, yeah, but—'

'So, come on then—let's 'ave some fags away, shall we?'

'What, *now*?'

'Yeah, quick—before your stroppy mare of a sister comes back. Weights for me.'

'But, Joycey, she's only nipped upstairs. I'm not sure there's time to—'

The older boy took a step towards Nigel, staring into his eyes.

'Not milky are yer, Coop?'

'What, me? 'Course not.'

'Come on then, let's see what you're made of. Chop chop!'

Nigel glanced nervously at the beaded curtain that led to the back room ... then ducked under the counter flap and reached up to take the cigarettes, stuffing four packets into his pocket.

Laughing, Joycey approached the counter again.

‘That’s the spirit. Now, what about some of that chocolate, the Fruit and Nut ... and the Fry’s Turkish Delight. Come on, give it ’ere ...’

They both filled their jacket pockets with the stolen sweets.

‘Ere Coop ... how’s about the till? Can you open it?’

Nigel stared at Joycey, his heart thumping in his chest, on the cusp of excitement and terror. Just then he heard a creak from the stairs in the back of the shop.

‘*Quick!*’ he whispered, launching himself back through the gap under the flap and joining Joycey by the magazine stand where they both grabbed a comic and pretended to read.

‘Here you go, Nigel,’ said Elizabeth, holding out a parcel wrapped in brown paper and string. ‘I couldn’t find it at first—it was under Ben’s coat ... Hey, careful you don’t crease those comics.’

‘Alright, Sis—keep your hair on.’

‘It’s fine for you to be so casual with other people’s things. But it’s a big responsibility looking after this lot.’

Joycey looked at Nigel and they both began to snigger.

‘Right, well—some of us have got work to do,’ said Elizabeth, returning to her stocktaking. ‘Enjoy your little boy scout meeting, won’t you.’

Joycey stopped sniggering at this and took a step towards the counter, but Nigel grabbed his arm, discreetly flashing him the top of the chocolate bar peeking out of his pocket. Joycey grinned and began to holler out the BBF anthem, soon joined by Nigel as they strode out of the door:

*‘Brother Blackshirts fall in step, march on now with all the heroes,
The Battalions of the mighty dead, who defended Britain from her fears, so,
Lend your voices to the call that they again might fight for freedom,
And march with us in spirit all, drenched in blood towards the new dawn ...’*

Evron Abrahams looked up from his ledger as his son walked through the beaded curtain, closely followed by Elizabeth.

‘Alright, Papa—we’re off now. Don’t work too late; you haven’t fully recovered yet, you need your rest.’

‘Nonsense, Benjamin. It’s hardly a strenuous occupation, is it? I’m just going over the books for the month; I could do this with my eyes closed ... which is the method that you appear to have employed whilst I was indisposed.’ He eased back in his chair with a smile and pushed his spectacles to the top of his head. ‘Elizabeth, my dear, so radiant you’re looking this evening.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Abrahams,’ said Elizabeth, succumbing a little to her customary blushing.

‘It’s a pity my scarecrow of a son won’t make such an effort.’

Ben raised his eyebrows at this, shook his head and began to button up his overcoat.

His father smiled warmly.

‘You know, it’s food for my old heart to see you young people going out and enjoying yourself like this. Of course, when your dear mother and I were your age there was no such thing as the moving picture show ...’

‘Oh, here we go—get out the violins, Liz.’

‘Stop it, Ben!’ said Elizabeth, slapping her gloves against his shoulder. ‘I love hearing about the old days. I used to get Mum to do it all the time when I was little. Go on, Mr. Abrahams—what would you do then, when you were sweethearts?’

‘*Sweethearts?* ... Ah, yes, well, of course, it was much stricter then, my dear. Four brothers she had, my Rifka, and each watched us like the hawk. But when you are in love you find a way ... a glance here, a stolen moment alone at the water pump, an exchange of notes via confederates; such things are fuel to keep

the embers alight, you understand. And when we managed to fix it so that we had a little time together ... well, then, of course, I would recite her poetry.'

'Poetry? You?' asked Ben, incredulously.

'Yes, and why not? Such poetry ... I tell you, it was like *Mesmerism*—there was no escape for her, the poor thing.'

The old man started a laugh which soon deteriorated into a coughing fit.

'Get some water, Liz,' said Ben, rushing over to his father to place a hand on his back. 'It's alright, Papa—just try to resist that reflex.'

'Stop fussing so,' said the old man, the coughing easing a little. 'I'm alright ... just a little coughing ...' He took a sip of water and waved them away. 'Come now, it's nothing, really.'

'*Nothing?* You had pneumonia, Papa. You know how serious that can be—people are dying from it everyday.'

'Ben, don't say that,' said Elizabeth, placing a hand to her mouth.

'Well, it's true, I'm afraid.'

'And if it is my time, well—so be it,' said Evron. 'I have nothing to fear from death ... after death one becomes important.' He smiled at Elizabeth as he handed her back the glass of water. 'And, who knows? Maybe I'd get to charm my Rifka with my poetry again, eh? Now, come on you two—stop fussing around this old bag of bones, you'll be late for your cinema.' He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. 'What is it that you're off to see, anyhow?'

'*Frankenstein*,' said Elizabeth, raising her eyebrows.

'Boris Karloff,' added Ben, with schoolboy enthusiasm.

'But this one you've seen already, Benjamin, no?'

'Yes, but Liz hasn't.' He turned to Elizabeth with a grin. 'It's a corker—you'll be petrified.'

'Charming. And this is supposed to be a treat.'

‘Oh, I’m only pulling your leg—you’ll love it. After all, you liked the book, didn’t you?’

‘Mostly, yes ... but I still find it odd that such an idea came from the mind of a woman. I mean, *horror stories*—it’s boys’ stuff if you ask me.’

‘Ah, this one,’ said the old man, pulling his glasses back on his nose so that he could peer over them at his son. ‘From since he was a boy he’s been fascinated by such dark things—dybbuks, ghouls and the like ...’ He struggled to his feet and carried the kettle over to the sink. ‘Personally, I can’t see the fascination. There’s not enough horror already in this world for you? That you should want to *pay* to be frightened out of your skin ...’

‘Oh, come on, Papa. Cavemen were sitting around campfires telling each other scary stories eons before the first written word. It’s innate, a part of being human. Just look at all those old fairy tales: *Bluebeard’s Castle*, *Hansel and Gretel*—they’re full of horror and gore; they’re a way for us to feel such emotions in a safe, controlled environment. It’s educational ... What better way to teach your teenage daughter about the dangers of predatory men than by scaring her with Little Red Riding Hood’s wolf? So, you see, my fascination with dybbuks and ghouls is all perfectly normal.’

‘Listen to this one, Elizabeth—as long as you understand your foolishness, you are smart, no?’

Warming to the subject, Evron now put the kettle aside and turned to regard his son.

‘I’ll grant you there’s some truth in this, my boy—the ancient history, the *value* of storytelling. But when you listen to a tale, or read a book, you use your *own* imagination to illustrate the violence and horror such as the story demands ... But these talking pictures, this is a different thing altogether. There you go and pay your money to sit in the dark and be exposed to the illustrations of someone else’s imagination—scenes over which you have no control. And, of course, as they perfect the craft these scenes of violence can only get more

lifelike, more explicit ... I can't help but wonder what effect this will have on the young people exposed to it. Especially the adolescent boys—after all, scratch the surface of some of these youths and you'll find that caveman of yours grinning back at you, waving a bone. Just look at these Blackshirt thugs—most of them are only just out of short trousers.'

Elizabeth looked at her watch, knowing from experience that this kind of discussion between Benjamin and his father could easily develop into a long and protracted debate.

'Speaking of Blackshirts,' she said, attempting to change the subject. 'Wasn't it a relief that they called off the march, Mr. Abrahams?'

'Indeed it was, my dear ... indeed it was. Although, of course, I had faith in the authorities all along; it was obvious they wouldn't let such a risk to public safety go ahead.'

'Well, I wouldn't go counting your chickens just yet,' said Ben. 'If you believe what the papers say the BBF's ranks are growing everyday. I think it's just a matter of time before they come marching through these streets; and when they do there's bound to be trouble—just look at what happened at that rally at the Albert Hall.'

'But that was completely different, Benjamin. The violence there was the result of communist agitators, infiltrating the rally to foment a riot.'

'That's how *The Oracle* painted it, Dad, but there are other reports from independent eye-witnesses of the Blackshirt stewards pulling out hecklers from the crowd and beating them up to cheers from the audience. And the clashes outside involved delegations from Trade Unions and other valid organizations; these weren't just groups of street thugs showing up for a fight. They're people that can see the very real threat posed by these fascists—and there are many Jews among them Papa. I only wish more people round here would show such spirit in standing up to their hate and lies.'

‘You’d do better to concentrate on your studies, my boy—let the relevant authorities deal with the Blackshirts. After all, England is a very different place to Italy—they won’t be goose-stepping into Westminster any time soon.’

‘I’m sorry to interrupt,’ said Elizabeth, making a show of looking at her watch. ‘But, Ben—shouldn’t we be going?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, my dear,’ said Evron, ‘Of course, come on now—out you go. Oh, wait a moment ...’ He walked back to the table and handed her a small paper bag. ‘Peppermint creams, my dear—for the show.’

‘That’s very kind of you, thank you.’

‘Now, Benjamin—don’t keep her out too late, will you? And Elizabeth—your mother knows you’re going, of course?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Good, good, fine, fine ... so now go—enjoy.’ He pulled his glasses back down and returned to his accounts.

‘Don’t work on those for too long, Papa—remember you need your rest.’

Evron replied with a dismissive wave of his hand as he licked the end of his pencil and began reckoning a column of figures.

Outside in the street Ben turned to lock the shop door.

‘I hope he doesn’t stay up too late with those accounts.’

‘He’ll be fine—your father’s a sensible man, he won’t overdo it I’m sure. He is going to find it difficult though, taking orders from you; even if you do actually know what you’re talking about—for once.’

‘Oi! Cheeky.’

Ben turned his collar up against the damp chill.

‘Right, let’s not hang around—it’s freezing.’

‘Yes, and this blessed smog’s coming down again. Awful stuff—it gets everywhere. I detest it. It took me the best part of an hour wiping down the inside of our windows the other day. And the way it lingers on your clothes ...’

Ben smiled and offered her the crook of his elbow. Elizabeth placed her arm in his and they began to walk along the pavement. After a few steps he started to chuckle.

‘Private joke?’

‘Oh, it’s just the thought of Papa, down on bended knee, reciting poetry.’

‘Oh don’t be mean. I think it’s sweet; it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if you were a little more romantic.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Uh, huh.’

‘Well then, what’s it to be? Do you want a little poetry? I know lots.’

‘No, you don’t.’

‘I do! Do you want to hear some?’

Elizabeth stopped and pulled Ben around to face her.

‘Yes, but you’ve got to do it properly.’

‘Well, I’m not getting down on bended knee—I’ll get my trousers wet.’

‘Oh, don’t be silly. What I mean is, well, make sure you put *feeling* into it.’

‘Of course ... So, you ready?’

‘*Yes!* Come on, get on with—it’s freezing.’

‘Here goes ...’

He paused, closed his eyes and cleared his throat.

‘*Ben!*’

‘I’m just summoning the correct mood—you said you wanted feeling ...’

Elizabeth turned and began to walk away.

‘No, wait. I’m ready—are you listening?’

‘Go on then.’

Ben clasped a hand to his chest, closed his eyes again and began to recite: ‘The boy stood on the burning deck, playing a game of cricket. The ball went up his trouser leg and—’

‘I knew it,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You’re an idiot, Benjamin Abrahams.’

Laughing, Ben ran to catch up with her and put his arm around her shoulders.

‘I’m only playing with you ...’

‘You may know about all that medical stuff, and books and things, but you’ve got a lot to learn about girls, I can tell you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Well ... just that we like a little romance now and again, that’s all.’

‘But what’s this then? We’re out together, on a date, aren’t we?’

Elizabeth glanced at his face, to see if he were pulling her leg.

‘Surely, that’s romantic, isn’t it?’

‘Oh yes—*Frankenstein*; you’re a regular Casanova, you are.’

‘Well, what would you prefer? Douglas Fairbanks, perhaps? You know ...’
He mimed some improvised swordplay. ‘Señor Zorro, defending your honour?’

She shook her head.

‘Oh come on, Liz ...’ He put his hand to the side of her face and for a moment she was certain he would kiss her. But instead he raised his arms straight out ahead of him and gave a monstrous roar.

‘You really are an idiot,’ she said, unable to suppress her laughter. ‘Come on, we’re going to be late.’

They continued on and after a little while she slipped her arm through his again.

Fifty yards or so up the road a furtive-looking Joyce stepped back into the shadows of the railway arch to join the other six uniformed Blackshirts.

‘Well?’ said the largest of the group, an athletic-looking character with steely blue eyes who had a few years on the rest of them.

‘I reckon that’s them, Latham. I mean, it ain’t all that clear, what with this pea-souper coming down ... but they came out of the shop, didn’t they?’

Latham turned to peer into the gloom of the arch.

‘What d’you reckon, Cooper? Is that your sister and her sheeny?’

Nigel was jostled to the front. He placed his hand on the cold slime of the brickwork to peer around the corner and then pulled his head back to nod silently.

‘What’s the matter, kid? Not getting cold feet, I hope? You can’t just stand back and let that happen now, can you? Your own sister, knocking about with a Yid? I mean—that ain’t right, is it?’

‘No, course it ain’t, Latham.’

‘That’s the spirit. Remember what Sir Pelham said at the rally—*fortitude and courage*, that’s what it takes to make a good fascist.’

‘What will you ... what will happen to her?’

‘Oh, she’ll be alright. We’re just gonna give ’em both a little fright, is all. Show them the error of their ways. See, you can’t really blame her—women are weak, ain’t they. And what with your old man not being around ... well, she ain’t had the proper training, has she? When you think about it, we’re doing her a favour really.’ He looked over Nigel’s head to address the rest of the gang. ‘I mean, accidents happen, don’t they lads? If she’s letting this sheeny fuck her then sooner or later she’s gonna be dropping another dirty Jew-brat who’ll grow up to bleed some poor bugger dry.’

A round of sniggering echoed about the small tunnel.

Latham now bent down so that he could whisper in Nigel’s ear.

‘*Is she letting him fuck her, Cooper?*’

‘*No!* Least ... I don’t think so, Latham,’ said Nigel, the nausea beginning to flutter in his gut. He’d long forgotten the taste of revengeful spite that had led to this situation—a situation that was quickly spiralling out of control before his eyes. ‘I mean—they’ve only just started walking out.’

‘Well, that never stopped me,’ piped up Joycey, feeling particularly emboldened by his share of the crate of light ale they’d all guzzled after the BBF meeting.

‘Oh, come off it, Joycey,’ said Latham. ‘You’ve been seeing that right hand of yours for years now—you’re practically engaged. Besides—it ain’t called fucking when you do it to yourself.’

This was met with a roar of laughter from the gang.

Latham pinched Joycey’s cheek.

‘Oh, cheer up, sweetheart—I’m only pulling your leg.’

‘It’s ... it’s miscegenation, ain’t it?’ said Joycey, an oily flap of hair falling across his face as he pulled away.

‘Come again?’

‘If Coop’s sister and the sheeny had a sprog it’d be *miscegenation*—mixing races. It’s in the BBF handbook. Sir Pelham’s dead against it: weakens the nation’s lifeblood, he reckons.’

‘Well put, my son. There you are boys—that’s why this one’s being put forward for senior cadet. Remember—it’s not just about all the parade ground drilling; it’s also the Leader’s teachings, the code of conduct, the *message* that’s important ... And that’s why we’ve got to show this Yid that if his sort interferes with one of our white girls ... well—there’s gonna be consequences.’

Latham pulled a comb from his back pocket and attended to his hair. Then he hawked up a gobbet of phlegm into the gutter, cracked his knuckles and stepped out into the street.

‘Right. Come on then. After all—someone’s got to look after the lifeblood of the nation.’

The ashen-faced Nigel straggled along nervously at the back of the group for a few yards ... but as they reached a gloomy patch between the street lamps he took the opportunity to drop back, pushing himself tight against the wall. He stood watching the troop march off into the smog, his heart thumping furiously

in his chest. As soon as they were far enough away he slunk back to the cover of the railway arch.

To Ben and Elizabeth it was as if the Blackshirts had materialised from nowhere.

‘Well, well, well ... What have we got here, then?’ said Latham, blocking the pavement, his arms folded across the chest of his tunic, which bore the embroidered image of a fist clutching a lightning bolt—the symbol of the British Brotherhood of Fascists.

Although taken by surprise Ben immediately pulled Elizabeth into the road to try to skirt around the gang; but the Blackshirts quickly fanned out to bar their way.

‘You shouldn’t drag the lady into the road like that, you know,’ said Latham, holding up an admonishing finger. ‘That’s dangerous that is. What if there’d been a car coming? People can get hurt doing things like that. Whatever were you thinking of, Hymie?’

‘My name’s not Hymie,’ said Ben, anger and fear flushing his cheeks red.

‘You are a Jew boy though, ain’t yer? I can smell it a mile off.’

Elizabeth pulled at Ben’s arm. ‘Come on, Ben—let’s just go back to the shop.’

‘No, why should we? We’re doing nothing wrong.’ He stood straight and lifted his chin, trying to stave off the slight quaver in his voice. ‘Step aside, let us pass.’

‘I asked you a question, sunshine—are you, or are you not, a *Jew boy*?’

‘Ben, *please!*’ Elizabeth tugged on Ben’s arm again, but he pulled free of her.

‘Yes, I’m Jewish—is that a problem?’

‘Not for me, Hymie—that’s something you’ll just have to come to terms with yourself. After all, we’ve all got our cross to bear, ain’t we?’ He turned to grin at the rest of the gang. ‘Although, I’m not too sure you can say that about a Yid.’

There was a smattering of nervous laughter from behind him.

‘Here, Joycey—where did Cooper go?’

‘He’s bottled it, Latham; told yer he was milky, didn’t I?’

Elizabeth exchanged a nervous glance with Ben at hearing mention of her brother.

‘Oh well—we’ll just have to do his dirty work for him, won’t we?’

Latham now dropped his arms to his side and took a step closer to Ben.

‘You see, I’ve got no problem with you being a Yid, my friend; you had no choice in the matter, after all. No, the problem I’ve got is with you and *her*. You see, we can’t have you Jew boys messing with our women, it just ain’t right. You need to learn to stick to your own kind.’

‘Your women?’ repeated Elizabeth, her voice breaking a little. ‘*Your* women? I’ll have you know I’ve got nothing in common with you or your kind; nor would I want to have.’

Latham turned to Joycey with raised eyebrows. ‘Ark at this one laying down the law.’

‘Yeah; told you it was feisty, didn’t I?’

‘Alright, alright—stow it, sister! I’m talking to the Ikey Mo here. We’ll get to you all in good time.’

‘That’s it. I’m off to call for a constable,’ said Elizabeth, on the verge of tears. ‘Come on, Ben—you won’t get any sense out of these idiots.’

But as she turned to walk away the wiry Joycey pounced, grabbing her by the elbow and spinning her around violently. Elizabeth let out a yelp of surprise and dropped her handbag, spilling its contents into the gutter.

‘That’s enough!’ roared Ben, shocking a couple of the younger Blackshirts into taking a step back. ‘Get your dirty hands off her, *now!*’

‘Oh, shut yer bone-box, you lanky streak of piss. What are you gonna do about it anyway?’

There was a moment of tense silence, broken only by the heavy breathing that gathered in smoggy clouds above their heads.

Ben glanced over at Elizabeth, who was now shielding her eyes, her cheeks wet with tears.

There was a detached part of his brain that now pictured the illustration in his text book of the adrenal medulla, that he knew from his studies was responsible for the violent shake that had overtaken his hands and for the manic racing of his heart ... But this was no time for books.

Joycey’s question was answered by Ben’s flailing haymaker which caught him square on the mouth, cutting the lip and spilling blood down his chin and onto his black tunic. But this was the only punch he got to throw ... as he rounded on the rest of the group the strapping Latham step forward to drive a large fist hard into his stomach, forcing the air from his lungs and sending him gasping to the ground. The Blackshirt then bent to deliver a blow to the side of the head, rebounding Ben’s skull off the wet cobbles.

Now they were upon him like a pack of jackals, lashing out with their boots and fists as they whooped and screeched their bloodlust, goading each other on, pummelling the soon inert body as though it were a punchbag.

After less than a minute of violent mayhem it was over. The fascists withdrew to regard their handiwork.

Elizabeth—who had been staring, transfixed by the horror of the attack—now ran to the motionless Ben, kneeling on the damp road to cradle his head.

‘He’s dead, *he’s dead* ... You’ll hang, you bastards.’ She began to scream out at the top of her voice: ‘Murder! *Help! Murder!*’

One of the younger Blackshirts, a blond lad with a constellation of acne across his face, sidled up to Latham.

‘Christ, Latham. He ain’t really snuffed it, has he?’

‘Course he ain’t. Look—he’s still breathing, see? Besides, it was self-defence: he threw the first punch, didn’t he?’

He pointed to Elizabeth, who was still screaming at the top of her voice. ‘For fuck’s sake, Joycey—deal with that, will yer?’

‘With pleasure,’ said Joycey, his face made bestial by the bleeding.

He clawed his hand over Elizabeth’s mouth to gag her screams, pulling her roughly down and onto her back. She struggled for a moment and then stiffened, her eyes searching frantically amongst the mob, desperately seeking out anyone that might put a stop to the nightmare.

‘Sit on her feet, Brooks ... that’s it ... Now, my little snobby mare, what was it you called the BBF?’ His face was in close. She caught the reek of stale beer and tobacco. ‘Oh yeah, that’s right—our *little boy scout meeting*. Well, I’m gonna show you what us little boy scouts can do ...’

With a leering grin he grabbed her face viciously and held it firm. ‘So, how far have you let the Yid go, eh? This far?’

He kissed her roughly, leaving a smudge of blood on her cheek.

‘Or maybe this far?’

His free hand pushed up under her sweater, reaching up to grab at her breast.

‘Yeah, you like that, don’t yer?’

Elizabeth began to struggle violently, wrestling against the onslaught of the little thug’s groping; but with his accomplice pinning her legs to the ground she was soon exhausted.

‘... Or perhaps you’ve let him go all the way, eh?’

She clenched her eyes tight as Joycey’s hand thrust up under her skirt, tearing at her underwear.

A low moan now emanated from Ben’s inert body.

‘Oi, Joycey! Don’t get carried away, alright?’ said Latham, pulling the comb from his trousers to tidy his hair. ‘Remember what we came here for.’

‘Ellsway! I’m just teaching her a lesson, ain’t I,’ said Joycey, rubbing himself eagerly against Elizabeth’s thigh as his fingers raked the thatch of her pubic hair.

‘Alright, suit yerself ... Come on then lads, while these boys have their bit of fun we’ll go and pay a visit to the Yid’s shop; put the windows in—spread the message, like.’

‘You sure you don’t want a go on this?’ said Joycey, pulling his hand out to smell his fingers.

‘What, after you? No thanks—I ain’t too partial to buttered buns ... Come on then cadets, here we go!’

In the shadows of the railway arch Nigel Cooper held his breath against the sobbing and listened ... There it was again—another piercing scream from his sister, the only thing now audible in the fog-muffled night.

He bent double and emptied the contents of his stomach onto the ground, splashing the high polish on his Blackshirt boots. Then he straightened again, wiped the snot and vomit from his mouth onto the sleeve of his uniform and started to run ... and kept on running ... on and on, away from it all ... into the sickly green of the smog-filled night.

And as he ran through the gloom the first line of the Party anthem repeated over and again in his head:

‘Brother Blackshirts fall in step ... march on now with all the heroes ...’

‘Blimey ...’ said Sammy, standing up and dropping the manuscript on the piano. ‘It’s a bit strong, ain’t it, Doc?’

Benny shrugged and took a slug of whisky.

‘So was the real thing.’

‘Is that how it was, *really?*’

‘Oh, I dunno ... it’s not meant to be a history book, is it—it’s fiction. But the bits I’m in ... yeah, that’s pretty much how I remember it. Although, of course,

we adapt our memories, don't we? Honing them each time we retell them—to ourselves, to others—till it's difficult to tell what's fact and what's fiction.'

'You changed the names I see—to *protect the innocent*; that's what they say, right?'

'Only the surnames,' said Benny, reaching for the bottle to refill their glasses.

'*Abrahams*—that could be improved on, maybe ... I guess you've gotta keep it obvious for the yoks, right?'

'Something like that ... So—what do you think?'

'Honestly?'

'*Honestly?* Sammy, I've known you for almost thirty years now—I don't think you've got that particular tie in your wardrobe. Just put me out of my misery here.'

'Well, my friend—for what it's worth—I think it's a story that needs telling, and clearly you're the man to do it.'

'Really?'

'Would I lie to you? I'll get it to the fella in Bloomsbury on Monday.'

'No, no. Let me make a few corrections first. I just need to—'

'Schtum! It's fine as it is. Let's strike while the iron's hot. Besides, there'll be other changes they'll want, no doubt. Alright? ... It's *good*, Benny—believe me,' said Sammy, holding up his drink with a smile.

'Thank you,' said Benny, clinking his glass against his friend's.

'So—do you know what happened to her?'

'Hmm? ... What, Elizabeth? No, not really ... Apparently she visited me in hospital once or twice in that first week—when it was touch and go. But then Dad closed the shop, sold up; Elizabeth and her family had to move out of the flat ... all the anger, the guilt ... we were just kids—where was it gonna go, after all? I heard a few years back that she'd married some stockbroker type out in leafy suburbia; don't know whether it's true.'

‘You know Mori had him tracked down—the leader, the one you call Latham. Had Benny Whelks introduce him to the wrong end of a cutthroat razor, apparently ...’

‘Listen—I didn’t want to know then, and I don’t want to know now. I told you, Sammy—the day you stopped hanging around with those hoodlums was the best thing you ever did.’

‘Yeah, well—you can never really sever the ties, can you; not if you wanna run a business in Soho.’

Sammy loosened his collar and sat back down at the keyboard.

‘Of course,’ he said, beginning to vamp around a few jazzy chords. ‘There is one obvious flaw in your masterpiece.’

‘Oh, yes—and what’s that?’

‘Well, you’ve left out one of the major characters—a certain Mr. Shapiro.’

‘Don’t worry—you’ll be in the next one.’

‘Promise?’

‘Definitely ... I mean, how could I possibly tell the story of Benny Levine—’

‘Abrahams.’

‘Abrahams—without including the great Sammy Shapiro, right?’

‘The Great Shapiro ...’ repeated Sammy, with a flourish on the keyboard. ‘I like the sound of that, my friend. Yes indeed—*The Great Shapiro ...*’

THE END

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